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## Social Media Scrolling and Psychological Well-being of Students: The Moderating Role of Social Comparison

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The current research aims to examine social comparison role as a moderator in the association between social media use and psychological well-being of students.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The research design based on cross-sectional study and convenience sampling was used to select the participants. The sample size was (n=241) people aged between 18 and 29 years. The standardized measures were used: The Social Comparison Scale (SCS), the Social Media Use Questionnaire (SMUQ), and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB).

**Findings:** Moderation analysis revealed that social comparison had a significant impact on the relationship between social media use and well-being, where students with higher levels of comparison had more adverse psychological outcomes. On the other hand, individuals who had lower comparison orientation were found to have comparatively better well-being even when they had comparable levels of social media use.

**Implications:** The moderating effect of social comparison on the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being is important. The use of interventions targeting the decrease of maladaptive comparison tendencies and encouraging healthy use of social media can enhance the mental health outcomes of students.



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### 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, social media has been a key part of the everyday life of students, which has greatly influenced their communication patterns, identity formation, and psychological experiences. As digital platforms continue to grow, students are more and more using social media to interact, entertain, and express themselves. Nevertheless, new findings indicate that the correlation between social media use and psychological well-being is not simple and is frequently not consistent, and both positive and negative results have been reported in the

literature. Although social connectivity and support may be beneficial to some users, overuse or maladaptive use has been associated with psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression, and diminished life satisfaction (Ansari et al 2024). Despite the opportunities of social media to communicate and express oneself, concerns have been raised regarding the possible psychological impacts (Azhar et al., 2025). Over the last ten years, social media has been so ingrained in the daily lives of students that it has affected their communication, relationship-building, and self-perception. University students are one of the most prolific users of digital platforms, as they tend to use social media both academically and personally. Although these platforms present a chance to connect and share information, there have been concerns regarding the effect they may have on the psychological well-being. According to recent studies, high or uncontrolled use of social media is linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and decreased life satisfaction among students (Keles et al., 2020; Verduyn et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the connection between psychological well-being and the use of social media is not direct. Other students have positive experiences, including feeling more socially supported and feeling a sense of belonging, which implies that the impact of social media varies depending on its use. Social comparison is one of the factors that can be attributed to these varying results. Social media sites often subject the user to highly edited and otherwise idealized images of the lives of others, which can lead to the user comparing themselves to others. Comparisons, especially upward comparisons, have been associated with negative affective states, such as feelings of inadequacy, envy, and low self-esteem (Jiang and Ngien, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). The role of social comparison as a psychological mechanism underlying the effects of social media use has become the subject of more and more studies in recent years. Instead of being a direct predictor, social comparison can contribute to the effects of social media on the well-being of individuals. Students with a greater propensity to compare themselves with others might be more susceptible to the adverse impact of social media, and those with a lesser propensity might be less impacted or even positively influenced by online interactions (Verduyn et al., 2021). This implies that social comparison can be a moderating variable, which determines the nature and the strength of the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being.

The psychological impact of social media is multifaceted and intricate, but social media is now deeply ingrained in the everyday life of young adults. Even though past studies have investigated the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being, little focus has been on the moderating role of social comparison in this relationship. Although international research in this field is increasing, the evidence in developing countries is still scarce especially among students. The cultural aspects, academic stress, and social media usage patterns can vary greatly depending on the context, and it is significant to investigate these relations at the local level. The current research aims to fill this gap by evaluating the effects of social comparison tendencies on the relationship between social media use and mental health among university students. In particular, the study will examine the association between social media use and psychological well-being, the moderating effect of social comparison on this association, and the differences in social media use, social comparison, and psychological well-being between sociodemographic variables. Based on these objectives, it is hypothesized that there will be a significant association between social media usage and psychological well-being among students; that social comparison will moderate the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being; and that social comparison, social media usage, and psychological well-being will differ across sociodemographic variables. The knowledge of these dynamics will be crucial in creating a more in-depth view of the psychological impacts of digital interaction, and the results are likely to be used to create evidence-based interventions that will foster healthier digital habits and improve the mental health outcomes of university students.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

Present study based on quantitative, cross-sectional method. Convenience sampling technique was used to approach participants from various academic programs of two universities, Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology (KFUEIT) and The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan

Campus. The study involved university students in total (n=241). Of all participants, 25% were male and 75% were female students to guarantee representation and diversity of genders.

### **2.1.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

For eligibility to participate, participants were enrolled in a university and active social media users (i.e they used at least one social media platform for more than half an hour per day). Those with mental health disorders that might significantly affect psychological well-being in addition to social media use, were excluded to minimize the number of confounding variables. Furthermore, no attempt is made to scrutinize those who do not use social media indiscriminately.

## **2.2 Instruments**

### **2.2.1 Social comparison scale**

The Social Comparison Scale is used to gauge one's perceived social position and rank compared to others. There are 11 bipolar conceptions on the semantic differential scale. By comparing themselves to others, participants assign themselves a rating on a ten-point scale. Ranking, attractiveness, and the sensation of how they "fit in" with others in society are all evaluated on the scale. While low scores suggest feelings of inferiority and generally poor self-esteem, higher scores reflect a more favorable self-evaluation in comparison to others. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .90, indicating strong reliability (Allan & Gilbert, 1995).

### **2.2.2 Social Media Use Questionnaire**

The Social Media Use Questionnaire consisted on 9-item measure used to measure how frequently a person utilizes social media. A 5-point Likert scale is used to assess participants' agreement with each statement, with 0 representing 'never' and 4 representing 'always'. In this study, Cronbach's alpha, which was used to evaluate the Social Media Use Questionnaire's reliability, is .86 (Xanidis & Brignell, 2016).

### **2.2.3 Psychological Well-being Scale**

Psychological Wellbeing (PWB) Scale is the 18-item. Consisted on subscales included autonomy, environmental mastery, personal development, healthy interpersonal relationships, life purpose, and self-acceptance are the six elements of psychological well-being. Participant's rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The most favorable reaction receives a score of 1, while the most negative response receives a score of 7. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.81 (Ryff, 1989).

## **2.3 Procedure**

Participants were first briefed about the purpose and scope of the study and were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to administering the instruments. A questionnaire packet, including detailed instructions, an informed consent form, a demographic information sheet, the Social Comparison Scale (SCS), and the Social Media Use Questionnaire (SMUQ), was hand-distributed to university students. The questionnaire took between 10 and 30 minutes to complete. To make the instructions clear and comfortable, the researcher re-read the instructions aloud and answered any questions about the process of responding, underlining the importance of confidentiality and the lack of right and wrong answers. The data collected were then analyzed with the help of IBM SPSS (Version 22.0), Statistical Package of the Social Sciences, on completion.

## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were followed before the collection of data. Informed consent was given to the participants, which means that they were free to participate in the study. The anonymity and confidentiality were ensured and the participants were assured that their personal information and identities would not be revealed. All ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process.

## 3. Tables and Figures

Table 1

*Descriptive statistics for study variables*

Variables	Category	Frequency (%) / Mean $\pm$ SD
Gender	Male	61 (25.3)
	Female	180 (74.7)
Age Group (Years)	$\leq 20$ Years	96 (39.8)
	< 20 Years	145 (60.2)
Education	BS	191 (79.3)
	M.Phil	50 (20.7)
Marital Status	Single	199 (82.6)
	Married	42 (17.4)
Income	$\leq 40000$	5 (2.1)
	40001-80000	95 (16.6)
	80001-120000	116 (5.8)
	$\geq 120001$	25 (10.4)
Social Media Applications	Facebook	23 (9.5)
	Instagram	91 (37.8)
	WhatsApp	64 (26.6)
	Snapchat	16 (6.6)
	Other	47 (19.5)
Social Comparison	-	67.25 $\pm$ 17.53
Social Media Use	-	17.29 $\pm$ 3.41
Psychological Well-Being	-	52.57 $\pm$ 11.85

Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of the demographic variable as well as the mean and standard deviation of the main study variables.

Table 2

*Correlation between social comparison, social media use, and psychological well-being*

Variables	M $\pm$ SD	1	2	3
Social Comparison	67.25 $\pm$ 17.53	1		
Social Media Use	17.29 $\pm$ 3.41	.778**		
Psychological Well-Being	52.57 $\pm$ 11.85	-.951**	-.891**	1

\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 indicates the correlations between social comparison, social media use and psychological well-being. The findings reveal that social comparison significantly and positively correlated with social media use, while significantly and negatively correlated with psychological well-being. Similarly, social media use and psychological well-being were significantly and negatively correlated with each other.

Table 3

*Moderation analysis, using social comparison as a moderator, social media use as independent variable and psychological well-being as an outcome*

Variables	B	SE( $\beta$ )	T	P	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F	P
Constant	85.169	1.200	70.997	.000			
BSMAS	-.179	.077	-2.322	.000	.022	338.86	.000
SCS	-.082	.021	-3.817	.000			

**Figure 1**

Moderation Graph by using Social Comparison as Moderator Variable, Social Media use as Independent variable while Psychological Well-being as Outcome Variable

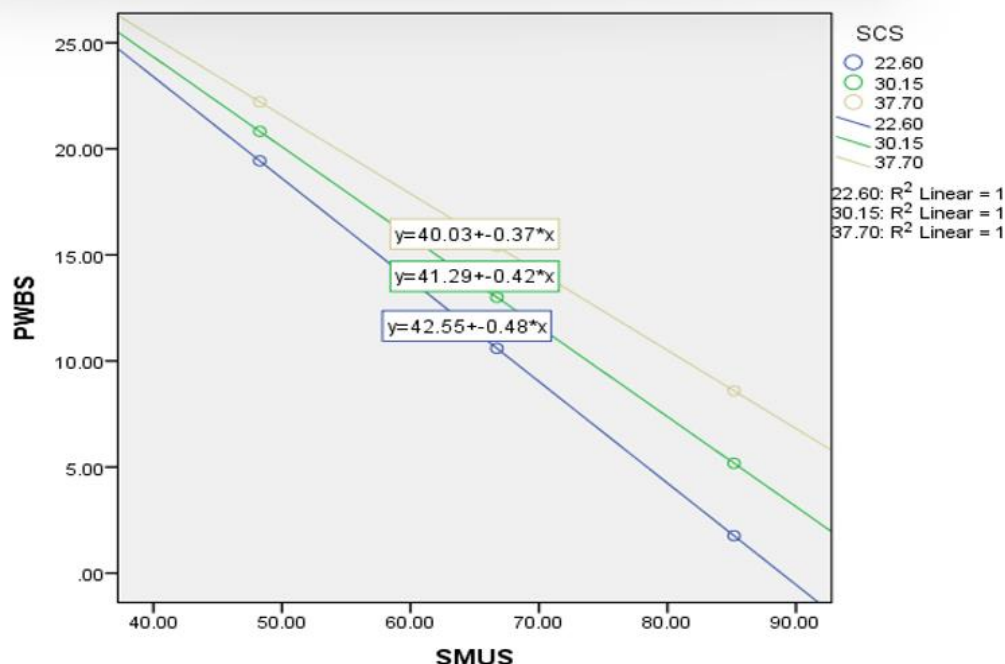


Table 3 and the graph show the results of the moderation analysis, using social comparison as a moderator, social media use as an independent variable, and psychological well-being as an outcome. From the results, we see social media use significantly and negatively predicting psychological well-being. Similarly, social comparison significantly and negatively predicts psychological well-being. Furthermore, interaction between social media use and social comparison significantly and positively predicts psychological well-being, which shows that social comparison moderates the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being.

**Table 4**

The comparison of social comparison, social media use, and psychological well-being between male and female students

Variables	M ± SD		T	P	95% CI	
	Male (n=61)	Female (n=180)			LL	UL
Social Comparison	59.10±19.42	70.01±15.97	-4.356	.000	-15.85	-5.98
Social Media Use	15.62±3.52	417.86±3.19	-4.609	.000	-3.19	-1.28
Psychological Well-Being	57.77±10.67	50.81±11.74	4.091	.000	3.61	10.31

Table 4 highlights the gender differences in social comparison, social media use, and psychological well-being, with results compared between male and female respondents. According to the findings, female students utilize social media and engage in social comparison at considerably higher levels than male students, whereas male students have significantly higher levels of psychological well-being.

**Table 5**

*The comparison of social comparison, social media use, and psychological well-being between single and married students*

Variables	<i>M ± SD</i>		T	P	95% CI	
	Single (n=199)	Married (n=42)			LL	UL
Social Comparison	68.58±16.56	60.95±20.64	2.592	.010	1.83	13.42
Social Media Use	17.63±3.28	15.71±3.60	3.373	.001	.80	3.03
Psychological Well-Being	51.69±11.77	56.76±11.45	-2.549	.011	-8.99	-1.15

Table 5 represents the findings for the comparison of social comparison, social media usage, and psychological well-being between respondents who were married and those who were single. Based on the findings, we draw the conclusion that single students utilize social media and engage in social comparison at far greater rates than married students. Similarly, the level of psychological well-being is significantly higher in married students than in single students.

#### 4. Discussion

It is revealed that social comparison moderates the influence of social media use on the psychological well-being of students. Therefore, a positive association between students using social media and the decline of their psychological well-being is reported. Globally, billions of social media users frequent platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and a multitude of other social applications daily. It is here we come to communicate with others, relatives, peruse and buy things, and exchange thoughts, new information, and so forth. In contemporary life, social media has found its way into every part of it. According to previous studies, SNSs have an advantage as well as a disadvantage, which is pointed out by (Campbell et al., 2006). With human beings increasingly dependent on digital platforms to find and create sociality, it is especially necessary to study the psychological consequences for a species whose biological nature is irredeemably social. The intricate association between the utilization of social media and psychological well-being is examined and clarified, especially in light of the blended outcomes seen from preceding investigations.

The results showed that social comparison has a significant and positive relation with social media use and a negative relation with psychological well-being. Psychological well-being also had a strong negative correlation with social media use. They suggest that people with an inclination to make social comparisons are the ones most likely to have an unfavorable relationship between social media use and psychological well-being. Hence, it seems that the detrimental effects and undesirable social comparison of social media are not limited to depression only and would rather affect other aspects of psychological well-being as well. Numerous studies have been conducted in the past and shows consistency with current findings that the effect of social media use on psychological well-being using one-time colonoscopy retroactive report measures (Faelens et al., 2019; Liang, 2024). However, it was noteworthy that social media's correlation with psychological well-being was considerably reduced if social comparison to others on social media and negative social comparison to others were highlighted. Therefore, these findings suggest that spending too much time on social media may result in poorer psychological well-being since it makes people who engage in more social media use more likely to draw unfavorable comparisons with others and develop a poor self-image. This result corresponds to the previous results that people who make social comparisons feel worse since they compare themselves to those who are perceived to be better. The extent to which social media use impaired or improved psychological well-being was shown to be moderated by social comparison, such that those for whom using social media is more likely to invoke social comparison will experience more negative consequences. Psychological well-being is negatively and significantly predicted by social comparison. Moreover, social comparison gives a significant and positive prediction for psychological well-being and significantly moderates the findings demonstrated a clear association between social media use and psychological well-being. The results indicating a significant negative correlation between the two variables higher psychological

well-being was linked to lower levels of social media use. Nevertheless, in line with past work, using social comparison may help people feel similar to the target (Collins, 1996). The findings are in line with the larger discussion regarding the psychological effects of social media use and show that more use is associated with less psychological well-being, especially if students find themselves in comparison with others. (Liu & Xiao, 2024).

Based on the results, social comparison explaining the association between social media use and psychological well-being is also supported, as suggested by earlier studies. Excessive use of social media has previously been correlated with having unpleasant emotions due to social comparisons (Fardouly et al., 2018). Unlike many other studies that found small moderation effects, this study demonstrates sufficiently strong evidence of the moderation effects of social comparison. According to the findings, male and female differed significantly in their social media use, psychological well-being, and social comparison. Male students reported a lower degree of social comparison, whereas female students reported a higher level. Additionally, males reported using social media less than women. The psychological well-being of male students is also greater than that of female students. We conclude from the results that while male students had much higher psychological well-being than female students, female students utilize social media and engage in social comparison at significantly higher levels. Women are more prone to compare themselves to others on social media based on attractiveness, according to (Ozimek et al, 2023; Beyari, 2023). Furthermore, the findings reveal a significant difference in psychological well-being based on marital status, with married students demonstrating higher levels of psychological well-being compared to single students. Single students also reported greater social media use and higher engagement in social comparison than married students. These results carry important implications for students, educators, and mental health professionals. Students should be made aware of the psychological risks associated with excessive social comparison on social media in order to reduce unhealthy digital behaviors. Educators and mental health practitioners are encouraged to incorporate social media literacy and critical thinking skills into academic and counseling programs to safeguard students from the potential adverse effects of social media use.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research paper gives an in-depth analysis of the relationship between social comparison, social media use by university students and psychological well-being. Present study shows that use of social media has an undesirable effect on psychological well-being, but this negative effect is significantly reduced by social comparison. Social comparison adds to the harm of social media, which requires awareness-raising and intervention measures. However, in line with social media's continued intrusion into people's everyday lives, this study advocates for positive digital habits, seeing that negative habits will result in negative consequences. With such a need for a change apparent, policymakers, educators, and even mental health experts should join together to make digital literacy programs about enjoyable online engagements, against harmful comparison behavior, and social media networking.

## **6. Limitations and Future recommendation**

Self-reported measures can bring in bias in the responses because the responses of the participants cannot be verified independently. Also, the cross-sectional design does not allow concluding on the causal relationships between the use of social media, social comparison, and psychological well-being. Longitudinal or experimental designs should be considered in future studies to more firmly determine causality. The results of this research are limited to university students and might not be applicable to other age groups and populations; hence, it is advisable to extend the sample to cover various demographic groups. This research has only investigated a single moderating variable, future studies should investigate other moderators and mediators like coping strategies and personality traits. In addition, interventions like mindfulness-based programs, social media literacy training, and cognitive-behavioral methods need to be developed and assessed to decrease the harmful social comparison and encourage healthier and more beneficial use of social media.

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### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution.

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