

# Social Comparison and Well-being under Social Media Influence

Qiuyu Han<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of art and social science, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada, Simon Fraser University, V5A 1S6

\*Corresponding author. Email: [qiuyuh@sfu.ca](mailto:qiuyuh@sfu.ca)

## ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) are now essential in daily life. Especially during COVID-19, people are more engaged in social media life. However, studies show that social comparisons arise from the use of social media. Many potential questions arise from the social comparison theory and its effect on an individual's psychological well-being. This paper mainly focuses on discussing 1) social media use, upward social comparison, and well-being. 2) The positive effects of people on social networking sites. By connecting upward social comparison and social media use, A large number of studies have found that time spent on social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) is negatively related to self-esteem. Lower body image and body satisfaction were also shown among young women. However, social comparison through social media can result in benign envy and motivate people by filling in the blanks of their needs. Implications for this research question and limitations are discussed, and suggestions are made for future research.

Note: the social networking sites in this paper refer to smartphone use social media.

**Keywords:** social comparison, self-esteem, well-being, Mobile SNS, social media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

People constantly evaluate themselves and others in terms of intelligence, achievement, wealth, social standing, and appearance. Social networking sites (SNSs) may enhance this social comparison process by continuously providing users with information about others. With the rapid advancement of technology and the effect of the coronavirus disease 2019, social networking sites (social media) are becoming increasingly significant in people's daily lives worldwide. Recent data [8] shows that close to 70% of the population in developed economies and more than 50% in developing countries are active SNS users. SNSs like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram continue to dominate the online landscape, with 81%, 69%, and 40% of the world's users[8]. Normally, social comparisons occur offline, and individuals compare them during in-person social interactions with others. However, with social media platforms, people are allowed to edit their profiles selectively. They can upload photos and describe themselves in ways that best reflect their ideal self-images. All of the personal characteristics (personalities, emotions, and lifestyle) displayed in posts and photos can cause individuals to be an upward or downward

comparison target to other users. Researchers distinguish between downward and upward social comparisons based on the concept of social comparison theory [1]. And there is always an ongoing debate regarding the use of social media and an individual's happiness and well-being. Some studies point out that there is a positive result of the use of social media in general[4]. However, many studies claimed that the use of different types of SNS can result in negative emotions like depression or envy[11]. This current paper explains the use of various social networking sites on personal well-being by linking different research. In doing so, this paper discussed the impact of social comparisons (upward and downward) under the influence of social media use (mainly on mobile phone use SNS). Hopefully, this paper can provide more ideas for future study.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL COMPARISONS AFFECTING INDIVIDUALS THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

### 2.1 How Upward Social Comparisons Affect Individuals through Social Networking Sites

In order to determine their advancement and place in life, people frequently seek standards against which to compare themselves, according to social comparison theory [3]. This theory distinguishes between two types of social comparison: upward social comparisons and downward comparisons. Upper social comparison occurs when people compare with someone better off than themselves. And downward social comparisons occur when people compare themselves to someone they believe is in a worse situation than they are. Upward comparisons are more likely to result in negative outcomes [3] such as lower self-esteem, whereas downward comparisons are more likely to result in positive outcomes, such as increased self-esteem and happiness.

Social comparison is often related to self-esteem issues such as self-improvement or self-enhancement. Individuals engage in upward social comparison by comparing themselves with superior others who have positive characteristics. People may gain from this if it motivates them to become more similar to their comparison goals [11]. Individuals are more likely to present the positive side of their true selves online when they have access to a wealth of personal information from others [9]. This kind of positive bias can lead to negative outcomes.

Individuals are different when it comes to making a comparison with others. Buunk and Gibbons [1] point out that people who have a strong social orientation for social comparison have 3 factors. Higher self-consciousness in both public and private; socially oriented and tend to have a passive emotion and self-doubt. Under the influence of social media, social comparison can harm an individual's psychological well-being. Based on previous research from Chou and Edge [3], individuals tend to believe that other social media

users have a better life than they do (or that other social media users have the life that they posted). Furthermore, people who use social media to make social comparisons report more depressive symptoms. The experiment conducted by Vogel and colleagues [11] hypothesis that people who used Facebook the most have lower self-esteem. Because they are the ones most exposed to the concept of upward social comparisons. Two studies were imposed (correlational approach and experimental approach). As expected, both studies indicated a negative correlation between the use of Facebook and self-esteem. Lower self-esteem was reported when people spent more time on Facebook. Vogel and colleagues[11] point out that when people meet targets with high social activity networks, both their self-esteem and self-evaluation will drop. The perfect photos and happy life on Facebook are exaggerated by users, individuals who view such information may make poor self-evaluation.

Researchers also found the phenomenon of upward social comparison existing on Instagram. Unlike Facebook, Instagram is a social media platform dedicated purely to the posting and sharing of photos. The perfect photos can have a potential negative impact on the body image of younger users. Many studies have found that Instagram use is associated with both body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction in women [10][5]. Young girls look up to them as role models, comparing themselves to celebrities in perfect photos and admiring them. According to the study, females who are exposed to idealized media images have a greater focus on the body and more uncertainty, resulting in lower self-satisfaction and self-esteem [5]. And this lower level of self-satisfaction and self-esteem can lead to a lower level of happiness.

In both adolescence and adulthood, self-esteem has been found to have a positive relationship with well-being. Individuals who have a higher social comparison orientation are more likely to make upward social comparisons, which may be related to low self-esteem and subjective well-being (see figure 1). According to the effect of social comparison, Wang and colleagues [12] point out that diminished self-esteem might, in turn, affect individuals' overall well-being.

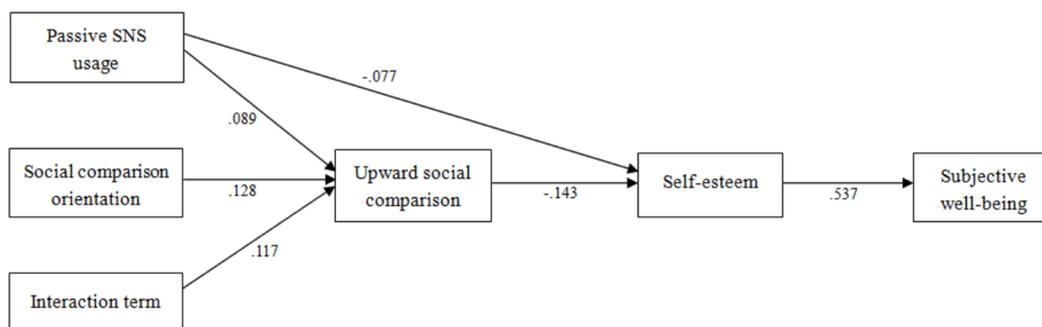
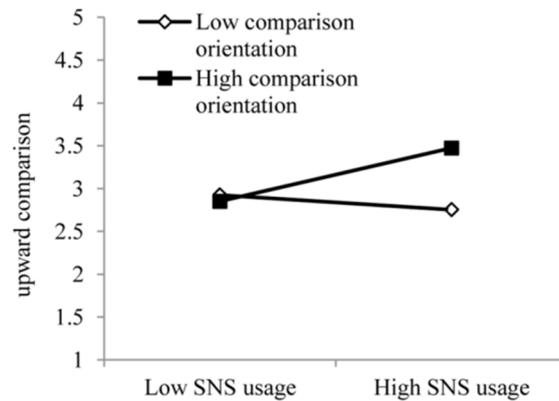


Figure 1. Final structural model on the associations among passive social networking site (SNS) usage, social comparison orientation, upward social comparison, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. [12]



**Figure 2.** The two-way interaction effect of passive SNS usage and upward social comparison

Note. The tables were from The Mediating Roles of Upward Social Comparison and Self-esteem and the Moderating Role of Social Comparison Orientation in the Association between Social Networking Site Usage and Subjective Well-Being by Wang, Wang, H.-Z., Gaskin, J., & Hawk, S. (2017). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 771–771. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00771>

Wang’s study indicated that passive social media (looking at other people’s posts or information rather than sharing self-related photos) is positively correlated with upward social comparison (see figure1). Individuals reported higher levels of negative emotions and lower levels of well-being. Sharing and receiving compliments from others helps people develop their self-esteem and self-evaluation. Passive social media users, on the other hand, are less likely to receive feedback, which may harm their self-esteem. In addition, Park and Baek [7] present a different viewpoint. Individuals with a higher opinion-based social comparison orientation had better psychological well-being. They claimed that users were evaluating their ideas based on the opinions of others. The action may produce a pleasant feeling and lead to improved psychological well-being.

**2.2 Beneficial Effects of Social Networking Sites on Individuals .**

According to the social comparison theory, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram can increase users’ negative emotions (jealousy or sadness). A greater body of research literature discusses the negative effects of social media use on a user’s well-being. The positive effects, on the other hand, have received less attention. Meier and Scha [6] demonstrate that social comparison via social media can result in benign envy (a positive reaction toward others) as well as motivate people by filling in the blanks. According to the findings, there is a positive correlation between social comparison and inspiration on Instagram, and it is completely mediated by benign envy [6]. Individuals are motivated to become more like their superior targets when they are under the influence of benign envy. Aside from that, Meir and Scha’s [6] study found a link between inspiration and positive emotions. Inspiration is defined as a multifaceted motivational state that can be felt in a

variety of situations. The experience of inspiration can be seen in three ways: 1) the awareness of new or improved possibilities; 2) a passive and stimulus-evoked experience; and 3) an individual’s motivation to act and bring a new and feasible idea to fruition. In other words, inspiration would lead to approach motivation if a person saw a new sport or activity on a friend’s Instagram page. As a result, People are more likely to develop and pursue new interests and activities as their levels of inspiration rise.

**3. CONCLUSION**

This paper mainly discussed how social comparison effect individual through social networking sites. Many research shows that visual content posted on Facebook or Instagram is normally exaggerated, it can lead to a negative impact on an individual due to the consequences of upward social comparison, including lower self-esteem and a decline in self-evaluation [4][10]. Furthermore, in young women, it is negatively related to body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction[10]. However, some existing studies have found that social media use has a positive impact [6]. They argue that benign envy, as a result of upward social comparison, can increase self-esteem and serve as a motivator for people to strive for higher goals. Future research will benefit from investigating both the negative and positive aspects of social comparisons on social media platforms such as YouTube and others.

While comparing and contrasting the positive and negative effects of social comparison, there are still limitations regarding this current research. First, most of the samples are focused on a fixed group of people. In Vogel and colleagues ’study [11], 145 participants were undergraduates from Midwestern universities, with a median age of 19 years old. In addition, convenience

samples (N=385, young, highly educated and female participants) were conducted for the study of positive social comparison in Instagram[6]. However, social networking sites (social media) are no longer limited to young people. The increase in SNS use among all age groups has been fueled by the sharp increase in smartphones[9]. Therefore, there may be some bias or limited interpretations of the results. Consideration should be given to the gender, race, and age of the participants in future studies.

Second, the study's findings cannot be applied to all social networking sites. Many of the studies focus on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, and WeChat, on the other hand, serve as communication tools [9]. In contrast to Facebook and Instagram, WhatsApp and Snapchat are designed for communication and interaction. These two social media platforms are used for relationship maintenance, which is unrelated to social comparison.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Buunk, A. P., Gibbons, F.X., 2005. Social comparison orientation: A new perspective on those who do and those who don't compare with others, in: Guimond, S. (Ed.) *Social Comparison and Social Psychology: Understanding Cognition, Intergroup Relations and Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 15-32.
- [2]. Chou, H.-T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15, 117–121. doi:10.1089/cyber.2011.0324
- [3]. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison process. *Human Relations*, 7, 117–140.
- [4]. Huang. (2016). Examining the beneficial effects of individual's self-disclosure on the social network site. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 57, 122–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.030>
- [5]. Kleemans, M., Daalmans, S., Carbaat, I., Anschutz, D. 2016. Picture Perfect: The Direct Effect of Manipulated Instagram Photos on Body Image in Adolescent Girls. *Media Psychol.*, 21, 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2016.1257392>
- [6]. Meier, & Schäfer, S. (2018). The Positive Side of Social Comparison on Social Network Sites: How Envy Can Drive Inspiration on Instagram. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 21(7), 411–417. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2017.0708>
- [7]. Park, & Baek, Y. M. (2018). Two faces of social comparison on Facebook: The interplay between social comparison orientation, emotions, and psychological well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 79, 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.028>
- [8]. Pew Research Center 2018b. Social media use in 2021. Retrieved on Nov 10, 2021 from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>
- [9]. Schmuck, Karsay, K., Matthes, J., & Stevic, A. (2019). "Looking Up and Feeling Down". The influence of mobile social networking site use on upward social comparison, self-esteem, and well-being of adult smartphone users. *Telematics and Informatics*, 42, 101240. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2019.101240>
- [10]. Tiggemann, & Anderberg, I. (2020). Social media is not real: The effect of 'Instagram vs reality' images on women's social comparison and body image. *New Media & Society*, 22(12), 2183–2199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819888720>
- [11]. Vogel, Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
- [12]. Wang, Wang, H.-Z., Gaskin, J., & Hawk, S. (2017). The Mediating Roles of Upward Social Comparison and Self-esteem and the Moderating Role of Social Comparison Orientation in the Association between Social Networking Site Usage and Subjective Well-Being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 771–771. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00771>