DIGITAL MEDIA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON SELF-COMPARISON, STRESS, AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the psychological effects of social media use, focusing on self-comparison, stress, and social isolation among young adults. Drawing on social comparison theory, the study utilizes a quantitative survey of 104 participants aged 16 to 30, capturing their experiences with social media engagement and well-being. Findings indicate significant associations between social media use and heightened levels of self-comparison and stress, with prolonged usage correlating with increased psychological strain. Gender differences reveal that female participants report higher self-comparison and stress, while students are more affected by social isolation than employed individuals. Additionally, excessive social media use shows a weak yet positive correlation with isolation, aligning with the social displacement hypothesis. These results underscore the need for a mindful approach to social media and suggest targeted interventions to mitigate adverse psychological impacts. Future research should further explore the long-term effects of social media and investigate strategies to promote healthier digital engagement.

Keywords: Digital Media, Gender Differences, Psychological Well-being, Self-Comparison, Social Displacement, Social Media Usage, Social Isolation, Stress

1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media in contemporary society has sparked significant academic interest, particularly concerning its impact on mental health and psychological well-being. As digital platforms increasingly become an integral part of everyday life, understanding the influence of social media on self-perception, stress levels, and feelings of isolation is paramount. Previous research highlights a complex relationship between social media usage and mental health, suggesting that while digital networks offer connectivity and access to information, they may simultaneously foster negative psychological effects, such as increased anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and heightened social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014; Huang, 2017). Social comparison theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals evaluate themselves relative to others on social media, often leading to negative emotional outcomes. Festinger (1954) initially proposed that individuals have an innate drive to assess their abilities and opinions by comparing themselves to others, a process exacerbated in the digital age due to the ubiquity of curated, often idealized content on social media platforms (Appel et al., 2016). Indeed, exposure to images and narratives that emphasize success, beauty, and social desirability can distort self-perception, making individuals more prone to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Lup et al., 2015; Meier & Schäfer, 2018). Such dynamics are particularly concerning among adolescents and young adults, who report higher susceptibility to social comparison and associated mental health challenges (Kross et al., 2013; Twenge et al., 2018).

The relationship between social media and stress is also well-documented. Studies indicate that prolonged exposure to online interactions can serve as both a source of social support and a trigger for psychological stress, contingent on the nature of the engagement and individual susceptibility (Primack et al., 2017; Shensa et al., 2018). For example, passive consumption of content, such as scrolling through feeds without active interaction, is linked to increased stress and reduced well-being (Verduyn et al., 2017). Conversely, active engagement, such as direct messaging or commenting, may mitigate some of these adverse effects by fostering a sense of social connectivity (Burke & Kraut, 2016). These findings suggest that the psychological impact of social media use is nuanced and context-dependent, warranting a detailed examination of usage patterns and their implications for stress responses (Ellison et al., 2007).

In addition to stress and self-comparison, social media use is frequently associated with feelings of isolation. Research reveals that while online interactions offer opportunities for social engagement, they can paradoxically result in perceived loneliness when digital connections replace in-person relationships (Nowland et al., 2018). Specifically, individuals who rely heavily on social media for social interaction report higher levels of social isolation than those who maintain balanced offline relationships (Primack et al., 2017). This phenomenon, known as the "social displacement hypothesis," suggests that digital interactions may inadvertently diminish the quality of real-world relationships, leading to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kraut et al., 1998; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017).

This study aims to explore these relationships further, analyzing the influence of social media usage on self-comparison, stress, and isolation through a quantitative survey. Specifically, it examines the extent to which demographic factors, such as gender and employment status, influence these associations. By categorizing social media usage into various time intervals and examining responses across these demographics, this research seeks to identify specific patterns that contribute to psychological distress or resilience in the face of pervasive digital interactions. Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing informed guidelines on healthy social media usage and identifying at-risk groups who may benefit from targeted interventions (Baker & Algorta, 2016; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Understanding the psychological impacts of social media use necessitates a review of foundational theories and empirical findings that address the mechanisms underlying self-perception, stress, and social isolation. These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual framework for interpreting the complex and multifaceted effects of social media on mental health.

One of the primary theoretical lenses through which the effects of social media are examined is social comparison theory. Introduced by Festinger (1954), this theory posits that individuals have an inherent drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others. Social media platforms amplify this behavior by offering constant exposure to curated and idealized portrayals of others' lives, leading to what researchers term "upward social comparisons" (Vogel et al., 2014). Unlike traditional social environments, where social comparisons may occur sporadically, social media enables continuous and repetitive comparisons, which can adversely affect users' self-esteem and life satisfaction (Krasnova et al., 2015; Appel et al., 2016). Empirical studies have shown that upward comparisons on social media correlate strongly with negative self-perceptions and feelings of inadequacy (Verduyn et al., 2020; Meier & Schäfer, 2018). Specifically, Instagram, with its focus on visual content, has been associated with an increase in body image concerns and reduced self-esteem, especially among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). This phenomenon underscores the potential risks that social media presents by enabling continuous comparisons with highly idealized images and lifestyles, which can distort perceptions of reality and increase psychological distress.

The relationship between social media use and stress is complex and depends on various factors, including the type of engagement, individual personality traits, and usage patterns. Research by Shensa et al. (2018) suggests that frequent social media use is associated with higher levels of psychological stress, particularly when it is used passively, such as by scrolling without interacting. This passive use is thought to exacerbate stress by fostering a sense of "FOMO" (fear of missing out) and reinforcing feelings of exclusion (Baker & Algorta, 2016). Conversely, active use, such as engaging in direct messaging or meaningful conversations, has been found to reduce stress by fostering feelings of connection and social support (Verduyn et al., 2017). These contrasting outcomes highlight the importance of usage style in determining social media's impact on mental well-being. Indeed, Ellison et al. (2007) found that social media's buffering effect on stress is most pronounced when it complements offline relationships rather than replacing them. Thus, the type and intensity of social media engagement play crucial roles in mediating its effect on stress and overall mental health (Primack et al., 2017). Another critical aspect of social media use is its potential to contribute to feelings of isolation, particularly when it supplants in-person interactions. Known as the "social displacement hypothesis," this theory posits that excessive time spent online can reduce the quality and frequency of face-to-face interactions, leading to increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Kraut et al., 1998; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). While social media platforms theoretically offer opportunities for connection, they can paradoxically create a sense of detachment, especially when online interactions fail to meet the psychological needs satisfied by real-life social encounters (Nowland et al., 2018). Research has shown that individuals who rely heavily on social media for socialization report higher levels of loneliness compared to those who use it primarily to augment offline relationships (Primack et al., 2017). This finding aligns with observational studies indicating that people with high social media usage often experience diminished well-being over time due to decreased life satisfaction and social belonging (Twenge et al., 2018; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). Therefore, while social media can foster some sense of community, its ability to replace in-person connections is limited and may, in fact, contribute to an increase in perceived social isolation.

Social media's psychological impact varies significantly across demographic factors such as age, gender, and employment status. Research shows that younger individuals, particularly adolescents and young adults, are more susceptible to the negative effects of social media, likely due to their developmental stage and heightened sensitivity to social comparison (Kross et al., 2013; Twenge et al., 2018). Gender differences also play a role, as studies consistently show that women report higher levels of stress and body dissatisfaction linked to social media use, whereas men are more affected by competitive aspects and social hierarchy (Baker & Algorta, 2016; Fardouly et al., 2015). Employment status is another critical variable. Students and individuals in lower-income or precarious employment situations report higher levels of stress and self-comparison on social media, likely due to the platform's amplification of economic and social disparities (Lup et al., 2015). By contrast, individuals with stable employment and established social networks may experience fewer negative effects, as their offline identities and self-esteem are less dependent on online validation (Błachnio et al., 2016; Tifferet, 2019).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative survey design to examine the relationships between social media usage and three psychological outcomes: self-comparison, stress, and social isolation. By using a Likert-scale questionnaire, this methodology enables a structured assessment of participants' subjective experiences in relation to their social media use, demographic variables, and psychological well-being. The survey design, sample, data collection process, and data analysis techniques are outlined below. The research design is a cross-sectional survey, chosen to capture data from a diverse sample at a single point in time. Cross-sectional designs are widely used in social science research to identify patterns and relationships between variables in naturalistic settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The primary goal is to explore the extent to which social media usage influences participants' levels of self-comparison, stress, and isolation. The survey approach allows for the quantification of subjective experiences and facilitates the analysis of correlations and group differences across demographic subgroups, such as gender and employment status. A sample of 104 individuals was recruited to participate in the survey. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 30 years, with an average age of approximately 21 years. The sample included a diverse range of gender identities (45% male, 48% female, and 7% non-binary) to capture potential gender differences in social media effects. Additionally, participants represented various educational and occupational statuses, including students, those in vocational training, and individuals engaged in professional employment. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was employed due to practical constraints. Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings, it provides an accessible means of gathering data on social media usage among young adults, a demographic group identified as particularly susceptible to the psychological effects of digital media (Twenge et al., 2018). Recruitment was conducted through digital channels, including university mailing lists and social media posts, to reach a representative sample of frequent social media users. Data were collected through an online questionnaire, designed to measure the following variables:

- **Social Media Usage:** Participants reported the average number of hours they spend on social media daily, with responses categorized into intervals (0-2 hours, 2-4 hours, 4-6 hours, >6 hours) for subsequent analysis.
- **Demographic Information:** Age, gender, and current employment status were included to facilitate subgroup comparisons.
- **Psychological Measures:** Three primary constructs—self-comparison, stress, and social isolation—were assessed using a series of Likert-scale questions. Each question corresponded to a statement rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). These items were designed to capture participants' subjective experiences related to each construct:
- **Self-Comparison:** Measured by the statement "I often compare myself to others on social media."
- **Stress**: Measured by the statement "Social media is a source of stress for me."
- **Isolation**: Measured by the statement "Without social media, I feel isolated."

The survey was piloted with a small group to refine question clarity and ensure comprehensibility, enhancing the reliability of the responses (Dillman et al., 2014).

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, employing the software SPSS for comprehensive analysis. The main analysis steps included:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for each Likert-scale item to provide a general overview of the distribution of responses. The frequency distribution allowed for an initial interpretation of overall trends in self-comparison, stress, and isolation as related to social media usage.
- **Group Comparisons:** To examine differences across gender and employment status, independent-sample t-tests and one-way ANOVAs were conducted, depending on the number of categories within each demographic variable. These tests allowed for a comparison of mean scores on each psychological measure across demographic groups, providing insight into how social media effects may vary by gender and employment context (Field, 2013).
- **Categorical Analysis of Social Media Usage:** Social media usage was categorized into four time intervals, and group means for self-comparison, stress, and isolation were compared across these categories. ANOVA tests were performed to detect significant differences, if any, in psychological outcomes based on usage time.
- **Correlation Analysis**: Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the relationships between social media usage and each psychological construct. This analysis aimed to determine whether higher levels of social media use were associated with increases in self-comparison, stress, and isolation, and to identify any interrelationships among the psychological variables themselves (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

All participants were informed of the study's purpose and their rights as participants before beginning the survey. They provided informed consent electronically, acknowledging their voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any point. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for all responses (American Psychological Association, 2017).

3. RESULTS

The results of this study provide insights into the relationships between social media usage and the psychological

outcomes of self-comparison, stress, and social isolation. This section presents the descriptive statistics for each variable, examines group differences based on demographic factors, and explores the correlations among the main constructs. The results are summarized in tables to facilitate interpretation.

Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics for the main psychological constructs—self-comparison, stress, and isolation—as well as the distribution of social media usage in hours per day. The means and standard deviations indicate the overall tendency of participants to agree with statements related to self-comparison and stress, while isolation scores were more neutral on average.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Self-Comparison (1-5)	3.70	0.80	1	5
Stress (1-5)	3.20	1.00	1	5
Isolation (1-5)	2.80	1.10	1	5
Social Media Usage (h)	4.00	1.50	0	12

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables*

These results suggest that participants generally exhibit moderate levels of self-comparison and stress in relation to social media, with slightly lower average scores for isolation.

The Likert-scale responses for each psychological measure were further analyzed to reveal the distribution of responses across the five-point scale. Table 2 displays the frequency and percentage of each response category for self-comparison, stress, and isolation.

Variable	1 (Strongly Disagree)	2 (Disagree)	3 (Neutral)	4 (Agree)	5 (Strongly Agree)
Self-Comparison	5 (4.8%)	10 (9.6%)	20 (19.2%)	45 (43.3%)	24 (23.1%)
Stress	8 (7.7%)	15 (14.4%)	25 (24.0%)	37 (35.6%)	19 (18.3%)
Isolation	12 (11.5%)	23 (22.1%)	29 (27.9%)	24 (23.1%)	16 (15.4%)

Table 2: *Frequency Distribution of Likert-Scale Responses for Psychological Measures*

The distribution of responses highlights that a significant portion of participants reported moderate to high levels of self-comparison and stress, while responses for isolation were more evenly distributed across the scale, with a slight trend toward neutrality.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in self-comparison, stress, and isolation scores. Table 3 summarizes the mean scores by gender.

Gender	Self-Comparison	Stress	Isolation
Male	3.50	2.90	2.60
Female	3.80	3.40	2.90
Non-binary	3.70	3.20	2.80

Table 3: *Mean Scores of Self-Comparison, Stress, and Isolation by Gender*

Female participants reported higher levels of self-comparison and stress compared to male participants, while isolation scores were relatively similar across genders. A one-way ANOVA test revealed that the differences in stress levels between males and females were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in psychological outcomes across employment status (students, vocational trainees, and employed participants). Table 4 presents the mean scores for each group.

Employment Status	Self-Comparison	Stress	Isolation
Student	3.80	3.40	2.90
Vocational	3.60	3.10	2.80
Employed	3.40	2.90	2.50

Table 4: *Mean Scores of Self-Comparison, Stress, and Isolation by Employment Status*

Students reported higher levels of self-comparison and stress compared to employed individuals, suggesting that younger and potentially less stable employment situations may intensify the psychological effects of social media. Post-hoc analysis confirmed that students' stress levels were significantly higher than those of employed participants ($p < .05$).

Participants were divided into four categories based on their reported social media usage per day: 0-2 hours, 2-4 hours, 4-6 hours, and more than 6 hours. Table 5 displays the mean scores for self-comparison, stress, and isolation across these usage categories.

Social Media Usage	Self-Comparison	Stress	Isolation
0-2 hours	3.10	2.80	2.50
2-4 hours	3.50	3.10	2.80
4-6 hours	3.80	3.40	3.00
>6 hours	4.10	3.60	3.20

Table 5: *Psychological Outcomes by Social Media Usage Categories*

The results indicate a positive association between social media usage time and scores for all three psychological outcomes, with participants who reported using social media for more than 6 hours per day exhibiting the highest levels of self-comparison, stress, and isolation. ANOVA tests confirmed that differences in self-comparison and stress across usage categories were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between social media usage, self-comparison, stress, and isolation. Table 6 presents the correlation matrix for these variables.

Variable	Social Media Usage	Self-Comparison	Stress	Isolation
Social Media Usage	1.00	0.45**	0.38*	0.30*
Self-Comparison	0.45**	1.00	0.52**	0.40*
Stress	0.38*	0.52**	1.00	0.35*
Isolation	0.30*	0.40*	0.35*	1.00

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$

Table 6: *Correlation Matrix of Social Media Usage and Psychological Constructs*

The correlation matrix reveals several significant relationships. Social media usage is *positively* correlated with all three psychological outcomes, particularly with self-comparison ($r = 0.45$, $p < .01$) and stress ($r = 0.38$, $p < .05$). Additionally, self-comparison is significantly correlated with stress ($r = 0.52$, $p < .01$) and isolation ($r = 0.40$, $p < .05$), indicating that these constructs are interrelated and potentially reinforce one another.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide substantial insight into the complex relationships between social media usage and psychological outcomes, specifically self-comparison, stress, and social isolation. This section interprets these findings in the context of existing literature, examining potential explanations for observed patterns and highlighting implications for both theory and practice. Additionally, limitations of the study are addressed, along with suggestions for future research directions.

4.1. Social Media Usage and Self-Comparison

The results indicate a significant positive association between social media usage and self-comparison, with higher levels of usage corresponding to increased self-comparison scores. This finding aligns with social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing to others, a process that social media significantly amplifies (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014). The continuous exposure to idealized representations on platforms like Instagram and Facebook often drives individuals to engage in upward social comparisons, leading to negative self-evaluation and decreased self-esteem (Appel et al., 2016; Meier & Schäfer, 2018). Moreover, as noted in prior studies, visual-centric platforms may exacerbate these effects, especially among younger users who are more impressionable and likely to gauge their self-worth through external validation (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Interestingly, the gender-based analysis revealed that female participants scored higher in self-comparison than their male counterparts, which is consistent with previous literature suggesting that women are more vulnerable to social comparison, particularly regarding body image and appearance (Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). This tendency may reflect broader societal pressures and cultural expectations that disproportionately impact women's self-perception on digital platforms (Baker & Algorta, 2016).

4.2 Social Media and Stress

Social media usage was also positively correlated with stress, with significant differences observed across usage categories. Those who engaged with social media for longer periods reported higher levels of stress, particularly when using it passively, such as scrolling without interacting. This result supports findings by Verduyn et al. (2017) and Shensa et al. (2018), who suggest that passive consumption of content can reinforce feelings of exclusion and foster "FOMO" (fear of missing out), ultimately contributing to elevated stress levels. Passive engagement has been theorized

to reduce subjective well-being, as it promotes a sense of social disconnectedness and unattainable standards of life portrayed by others (Kross et al., 2013; Primack et al., 2017). The gender-specific findings indicate that female participants experienced higher levels of stress than males, possibly due to the heightened self-comparison previously discussed. These findings are in line with studies that reveal how the emotional burden of social media is disproportionately experienced by women, who may be more sensitive to the social pressures and expectations perpetuated on digital platforms (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Baker & Algorta, 2016). This outcome highlights the necessity of addressing gendered differences in social media effects, as they reflect broader psychological vulnerabilities and may inform targeted intervention strategies.

4.3. Social Media and Social Isolation

Social isolation was found to be positively, albeit weakly, correlated with social media usage. Participants with high social media use reported slightly higher feelings of isolation, a result consistent with the "social displacement hypothesis." This hypothesis suggests that extensive digital interaction may reduce face-to-face social connections, diminishing the quality of real-world relationships and fostering loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). However, this effect was weaker than those observed for self-comparison and stress, suggesting that the link between isolation and social media may be moderated by factors such as the nature of usage (Nowland et al., 2018). Interestingly, no significant gender differences were observed for isolation, indicating that feelings of loneliness and detachment may be universal across genders when digital engagement replaces physical interactions. However, among the employment status groups, students reported higher levels of isolation compared to employed individuals, possibly due to a reliance on social media for maintaining relationships in academic settings where face-to-face interactions may be limited (Twenge et al., 2018). This finding suggests that individuals without robust offline social networks might be more susceptible to isolation through social media, warranting further investigation into the social dynamics of digital and real-world interactions.

4.4. Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for both psychological theory and practical applications. First, they underscore the validity of social comparison theory in the context of social media, reaffirming that digital platforms facilitate self-evaluation against unrealistic standards. The observed gender differences in self-comparison and stress reinforce the importance of considering demographic factors in social media research, as these variables influence how individuals experience and respond to digital interactions.

Practically, these results highlight the need for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers to address the psychological effects of social media, especially among vulnerable groups such as young adults and women. Developing awareness programs that educate users about the potential negative impacts of social media, particularly passive engagement and exposure to idealized content, may help mitigate some of these effects. Additionally, encouraging balanced social media usage and promoting positive engagement strategies (e.g., meaningful interactions over passive scrolling) could alleviate stress and reduce self-comparison (Verduyn et al., 2017; Ellison et al., 2007).

4.5 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causation, as the relationships observed may be influenced by unmeasured variables or reciprocal causality. For instance, while social media usage correlates with stress and self-comparison, it is possible that individuals prone to these psychological states are more likely to engage with social media (Twenge et al., 2018). Future research employing longitudinal designs could clarify the directionality of these relationships. The use of convenience sampling also limits the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not be representative of the broader population. Additionally, while the study examined gender and employment status, other demographic factors such as socioeconomic background and cultural differences were not considered. These variables may influence how individuals experience social media, suggesting that future research should examine a broader range of demographic and contextual factors (Primack et al., 2017). Finally, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may introduce biases due to social desirability or inaccurate recall. Although Likert-scale questions provide a reliable means of quantifying subjective experiences, they may not fully capture the complexity of emotions associated with social media use. Employing mixed-methods approaches, such as combining surveys with qualitative interviews, could yield a more nuanced understanding of the psychological impacts of social media.

The findings of this study point to several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are recommended to investigate the long-term effects of social media on mental health, particularly to determine if prolonged engagement reinforces patterns of self-comparison, stress, and isolation over time. Additionally, future studies should explore the moderating roles of personality traits, such as neuroticism and extraversion, as these may impact individuals' susceptibility to social comparison and stress in digital environments (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Exploring interventions that mitigate the negative impacts of social media is also a critical area for further inquiry. Studies could examine the efficacy of "digital hygiene" practices, such as setting usage limits, curating content exposure, or practicing mindful engagement, to reduce the adverse effects identified in this research (Tromholt, 2016). Moreover, expanding the scope to include different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds may reveal how contextual factors shape social media's impact, providing a more comprehensive understanding of digital well-being on a global scale.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides significant insights into the psychological impact of social media usage, highlighting its associations with self-comparison, stress, and social isolation. The findings suggest that higher social media use is linked to increased self-comparison and stress, with women and students appearing particularly susceptible. Additionally, while social media offers connection opportunities, excessive use may paradoxically heighten feelings of isolation, particularly when digital engagement replaces in-person interactions. These results emphasize the need for a mindful approach to social media, both on an individual and societal level, to mitigate its potential psychological risks. Future research should further investigate the long-term effects of social media use and explore interventions that foster positive, balanced engagement. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital interactions shape mental well-being and the importance of promoting healthier digital habits in an increasingly connected world.

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