



## **SOCIAL COMPARISON PHENOMENON ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMOTIONAL INSTABILITY**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the phenomenon of social comparison on social media and its impact on emotional instability from a psychological perspective. In the context of digital communication, mechanisms of self-evaluation and identity construction have undergone significant transformation. Social media platforms intensify upward and downward comparison processes, influencing affective reactivity, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and self-esteem. The study integrates theoretical analysis with empirical data obtained from young adult participants to explore the relationship between social comparison tendencies and emotional instability indicators. The findings suggest that upward comparison is significantly associated with higher levels of anxiety, dissatisfaction, and affective volatility, while downward comparison provides only temporary emotional compensation. Preventive and corrective psychological implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Social comparison, emotional instability, affective reactivity, social media, self-esteem, upward comparison, downward comparison, digital identity, psychological well-being, media literacy.

### **Introduction**

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally reshaped the structure of human social interaction. Social media platforms have evolved from simple communication tools into complex psychological



environments where individuals construct identities, seek validation, and evaluate themselves in relation to others. Within this digital ecosystem, social comparison has become more frequent, immediate, and visually intensified. According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate their abilities, achievements, and personal attributes by comparing themselves with others. While this mechanism is natural and adaptive in offline contexts, its dynamics change significantly in digital spaces where self-presentation is often curated, filtered, and idealized.

On social media, users are exposed primarily to selective portrayals of success, beauty, wealth, and happiness. These representations rarely reflect everyday struggles or ordinary experiences. Consequently, individuals may internalize unrealistic standards and engage in upward comparison, evaluating themselves against those perceived as more successful or attractive. This process frequently leads to decreased self-esteem, increased dissatisfaction, and emotional tension. The discrepancy between one's lived reality and the idealized digital narratives can generate cognitive dissonance, intensifying feelings of inadequacy.

Emotional instability, characterized by heightened affective reactivity, mood fluctuations, impulsivity, and vulnerability to stress, appears to be closely linked to repetitive upward comparison. When self-worth becomes externally anchored in digital validation metrics—such as likes, comments, and followers—individuals may experience emotional volatility depending on the feedback received. Positive feedback can temporarily elevate mood through dopaminergic reward mechanisms, whereas perceived neglect or comparison with superior profiles may trigger anxiety or depressive affect.

Adolescents and young adults represent a particularly vulnerable group in this context. During identity formation stages, self-concept remains fluid and highly responsive to external evaluation. Social media interactions often function as implicit indicators of social acceptance. The quantification of approval through algorithm-driven engagement metrics transforms social comparison into a measurable and persistent psychological process. Over time, such externalized self-evaluation may weaken internal emotional regulation capacities.

Although downward comparison—comparing oneself with individuals perceived as less successful—may temporarily enhance self-perception, it does not contribute to stable psychological well-being. Rather, it operates as a defensive

strategy that protects self-esteem without fostering authentic self-development. Continuous comparison, regardless of direction, may distort identity coherence by creating a discrepancy between the “real self” and the “digital self.”

From a neuropsychological perspective, social media engagement activates reward pathways associated with intermittent reinforcement. The unpredictability of social feedback enhances compulsive checking behaviors, increasing exposure to comparison triggers. Prolonged exposure may contribute to emotional dysregulation, particularly among individuals high in neuroticism, perfectionism, or social anxiety. Conversely, individuals with strong internal locus of control and reflective capacities demonstrate greater resilience against negative comparison effects.

To empirically examine these relationships, a cross-sectional study was conducted with 240 participants aged 18–30. Standardized measures of social comparison orientation and emotional instability were administered.

**Table 1. Correlation Between Social Media Comparison and Emotional Instability Indicators**

Variables	Anxiety (r)	Depressive Symptoms (r)	Self-Dissatisfaction (r)
Upward Comparison	0.62	0.58	0.71
Downward Comparison	-0.18	-0.12	-0.09
Neutral Browsing	0.05	0.03	0.08

The data demonstrate a strong positive correlation between upward comparison and anxiety ( $r = 0.62$ ) as well as self-dissatisfaction ( $r = 0.71$ ). These findings indicate that frequent exposure to idealized profiles intensifies emotional instability. Downward comparison shows weak negative correlations, suggesting limited and temporary emotional buffering effects. Neutral browsing displays negligible associations, reinforcing the central role of comparative cognition in emotional outcomes.

Usage intensity was also analyzed to determine its relationship with emotional instability.

**Table 2. Daily Social Media Usage and Levels of Emotional Instability**

Daily Usage Duration	Low Instability (%)	Moderate (%)	High Instability (%)
Up to 1 hour	48	39	13
1–3 hours	29	44	27
More than 3 hours	12	33	55



The results reveal a clear pattern: participants who used social media for more than three hours daily demonstrated significantly higher levels of emotional instability (55%). Increased exposure appears to amplify comparison processes and affective overload. Extended engagement may contribute to cognitive fatigue and diminished emotional regulation capacity.

These findings confirm that social comparison on digital platforms operates as a powerful psychological determinant of emotional instability. The impact is not uniform but moderated by personality traits, coping strategies, and self-regulatory capacities. Media literacy education, cognitive restructuring techniques, and interventions aimed at strengthening intrinsic self-worth may serve as effective preventive strategies. Encouraging mindful usage patterns and promoting awareness of curated online realities can reduce maladaptive comparison cycles.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of social comparison on social media represents a complex interaction between cognitive evaluation mechanisms and affective regulation systems. Upward comparison significantly increases anxiety, depressive symptoms, and dissatisfaction, particularly among heavy users. Without adequate psychological resilience and reflective awareness, prolonged exposure to idealized digital content may destabilize emotional balance. Therefore, integrating psychological education into digital culture is essential for promoting sustainable mental well-being.

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