

## **The Influence of Social Media Usage on the Well-Being Evidence from Pakistani University Students**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined the influence of social media usage among young Pakistani university students, focusing on self-construal, the creation of false identities, life dissatisfaction, and reduced self-esteem. The findings, derived from data collected from students representing various universities in Islamabad, unveiled several noteworthy trends. The female students exhibited a higher degree of social media engagement compared to their male counterparts. This heightened engagement was often associated with more frequent social comparisons, decreasing life satisfaction among female students. Additionally, female students reported experiencing elevated levels of depression and reduced self-esteem. Furthermore, the study shed light on the common practice among both male and female students of engaging in social comparisons. This behavior often led to a cycle of self-construal, wherein individuals posted edited photos on social media platforms to enhance their physical attractiveness, appeal to the opposite sex, conceal imperfections, eliminate wrinkles, appear slimmer, and seek validation. This ongoing cycle of self-construal, lurking behavior, and a disposition for social comparison appeared to have detrimental effects on young adults in Pakistan, contributing to life dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, University Students, Social Comparison, Psychological and Emotional Motivations

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### **1. Brief of the Study**

In the past decade, the internet has profoundly impacted our lives, with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allowing global connectivity and sharing of thoughts and experiences. However, this surge in social media use, particularly among young adults aged 16 to 35, has positive and negative consequences. These platforms have become integral to daily life. In Pakistan, university students are no exception. They rely heavily on social media to stay informed and express their opinions. Social media serves various purposes, from information and entertainment to connecting with friends and sharing content.

This study, rooted in social comparison theory, examines how university students in Pakistan use social media, their tendencies to compare themselves with others, and the development of false identities, all of which can impact life satisfaction. Data was collected via a Google survey questionnaire distributed

among students in Islamabad. Out of 198 responses, 150 were chosen for analysis after excluding non-serious responses. The study explores social media use, lurking behavior, false identity creation, social comparison, and their effects on self-perception and life satisfaction, drawing on relevant literature to build its framework.

## **2. Introduction**

Social media is a versatile asynchronous communication platform that facilitates global sharing and informal discussions. It can be likened to a bustling party, drawing people in to share, interact, learn, and enjoy. Its impact on individuals varies, with social media being both persuasive and infuriating, sometimes a time-waster and other times a time-efficient tool, occasionally helpful, yet occasionally perceived as useless. Notable social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace offer various features for instant messaging, photo and video sharing, access to websites/apps, blogs, and more. Users access these platforms through various devices, including desktop computers, laptops, mobile phones, and tablets, transforming the world into a more interconnected place.

Cunningham et al. (2019) highlight the role of entertainment in social media and its disruptive influence on traditional industries, particularly the advertising sector. Social media has prompted a reevaluation of marketing and communication strategies. The growing dependency on social media has also led to changes in people's daily routines and behaviors.

Social media is a powerful medium for exchanging and disseminating information on a grand scale. Young adults extensively utilize social media for activities such as chatting, photo uploads, and commenting, with daily usage averaging between 40 to 60 minutes. In this context, Facebook and Instagram emerged as the most frequently utilized social platforms.

However, the increased use of social media has given rise to various challenges, particularly among young individuals. Jan et al. (2017) point out that while social media can help alleviate loneliness, it can sometimes lead to lower life satisfaction. Numerous studies highlight the adverse effects of excessive social media use, including anxiety, depression, psychotic disorders, and diminished self-esteem.

Furthermore, the habit of "lurking" in the lives of others on social media and making constant comparisons with them has given rise to severe psychological issues. These issues include a distorted sense of identity and a denial of one's true self, resulting in life dissatisfaction, diminished self-esteem, a sense of emptiness, complexity, and even narcissism. Platforms like Snapchat and Facebook have been singled out as having detrimental effects on mental health, impacting sleep, emotional well-being, and self-identity. Hussain and Riaz (2020) explore how social media can damage user relationships and negatively impact their identities and personalities. These researchers suggest that social media users may sometimes construct and perpetuate an illusory or fictitious life through photo apps, leading them to believe in a reality that diverges significantly from the actual world.

## **3. Social Media Landscape in Pakistan**

Social media usage in Pakistan has significantly increased, especially among young individuals. However, this surge in usage sometimes has negative effects on their lives. The relationship between social media and the emotional well-being of young people in Pakistan is quite complex. They

primarily use social media for instant messaging, sharing photos, blogging, and interacting with others (Aziz et al., 2012; Hussain, S, 2017). Many users in Pakistan share photos of their personal activities on social media platforms to impress their friends and relatives. Additionally, it is common to observe a lurking attitude during social media use, which can lead to self-esteem fluctuations, causing high and low self-esteem issues (Hussain, 2020, pp. 55-67).

While internet connectivity is improving, Pakistan has significantly increased mobile broadband access in recent years (Iftikhar Ayesha, 2020). Social media users comprise about 40% of the population, with 5.7% active users (Annual et al., 2019). Internet penetration is 22% of the total population, and 3G/4G mobile connections cover 76% of Pakistan (Iftikhar Ayesha, 2020). Many people still need access to internet-enabled phones.

Competitive mobile service providers like Zong, iPhone, Warid, Jazz, and Mobilink offer affordable rates, making mobile services and internet connectivity more accessible than in developed countries (Hussain Riaz, 2020). Pakistan can potentially leverage the Internet for education and business growth (British Council report, 2019-20).

#### **4. Literature Review**

In the last decade, social media usage has surged among young people, bringing them closer through virtual connections. Young individuals often share selfies with friends, while some adults aim for viral content. Young adults and university students heavily use social media to connect with peers, and it aids academic and current affairs awareness (Rabia et al., 2020). It can be said that social media has without any doubt created so many opportunities but on the same hand it is the reason behind the creation of such tensions which were not even imagined by the previous generations (Raza et al., 2021). Social media fights social isolation by keeping people connected (Twenge & Campbell, 2019; Chen & Li, 2017), and fostering belonging and identity (Roberts & David, 2020; Carlson et al., 2016). However, it can be intrusive, time-consuming, and harm mental health (Appel et al., 2016; Kircaburun et al., 2020), increasing risks of depression and anxiety (Karikari et al., 2017; Jiao et al., 2017; Rana, 2022).

On the psychological front, social media fosters social comparison and lurking behaviors, pressuring individuals to project a perfect image and leading to dissatisfaction (Kross et al., 2013). Social comparison involves evaluating oneself against others, often resulting in negative emotions (Cheung et al., 2011; Sheldon et al., 2011; Jan et al., 2017). Comparisons on social media can lead to decreased life satisfaction, depression, and lower self-esteem (Kross et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014).

Festinger (1954) contends that humans critically judge through social comparison. Initially, individuals assess themselves based on the opinions of those in their social circle and subsequently compare themselves to a standard or benchmark (Kendra Cherry, 2017). When it comes to lurking attitudes on social media platforms, young users often self-evaluate and self-enhancement by comparing themselves to others (Primak et al., 2017, pp. 34-45). The concept of "self-evaluation" hinges on whether these individuals make biased or unbiased social comparisons. On the other hand, during "self-enhancement," individuals strive to either engage in upward comparisons with those perceived as superior or downward comparisons with those they consider inferior (Primak et al., 2017, pp. 34-45).

Social comparison manifests in both upward and downward forms. In upward social comparison, users

assess themselves relative to those who appear more accomplished or superior. In downward social comparison, they gauge themselves against individuals they perceive as less accomplished or inferior (Jan et al., 2017). The choice between upward and downward comparisons depends on factors like attitude, motivation, confidence, and self-belief. Social comparison also triggers a range of emotions, leading individuals to experience positive and negative fluctuations in self-esteem (Kendra Cherry, 2017; Cheung et al., 2011; Festinger, 1954; Chou, Edge, 2012). Feelings of inadequacy may intensify when individuals grapple with issues such as insecurity, self-esteem, and witnessing the happiness and success of others (Kross et al., 2013).

According to Pew Research (2018), 45% of young individuals often or occasionally share selfies on social media to document their activities. The study also highlights a gender difference, indicating that girls are more inclined than boys to post photos reflecting their emotions and feelings. Shirley Cramer (2017) reveals that many women on social media take numerous photos in pursuit of the perfect shot. She notes that only 10 percent of girls find satisfaction after taking as many as ten photos. Furthermore, the study uncovers a concerning statistic, with 75% of the 500 women surveyed expressing concerns about their body image, feeling that they are too overweight, unattractive, or ugly. Shirley Cramer's research delves deeper into the emotional impact, with 80 percent of girls admitting to feeling anxious when taking and posting photos on social media platforms.

Jiao et al. (2017) argue that selfies have played a pivotal role in transforming the psychology of self-portraiture and our relationship with our own image. Kendra C. (2020) reports that female social media users frequently employ photo editing techniques to enhance their appearance and gain appreciation. In their quest for recognition for their attractive looks, female users sometimes share edited selfies exclusively with their closest friends, contributing to a cycle of regularly uploading altered images. This habitual behavior often leads to dissatisfaction with their lives (Watts, A. 2015; Welch, A. 2017; Ellison et al., 2011; Pempek et al., 2009).

Having comprehensively reviewed the literature on Social Comparison and its relationship with life satisfaction, we formulated our study's research question and hypothesis.

## **5. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ1: To what extent do University students in Pakistan use social media, and what are the psychological and emotional implications of sharing personal photos on social media?

H 1: There is a likelihood that both males and females will upload personal photos to look fair and attractive as compared to the other psychological and emotional factors.

RQ2: To what extent do university students make a social comparison while using social media, and how far are they satisfied with their lives?

RQ3 What is the relationship between social comparison and life satisfaction?

H2: The more social comparisons by the users, the less they are satisfied with life.

## **6. Methodology**

This quantitative research study investigates the patterns of social media utilization among students

enrolled at universities in Islamabad. The study specifically focuses on the associations between social media usage, lurking behaviors, social comparison tendencies, and self-construal patterns among these students. Grounded in Social Comparison theory, the research explores the interplay between social media habits, self-construal orientations, and life satisfaction levels among Islamabad University attendees.

Data for this study were collected through a structured Google survey distributed across 15 universities in Islamabad. These institutions typically boast an average enrollment of approximately six thousand students, primarily from middle to lower-middle-class backgrounds, with some representation from higher-income and elite families. Notably, all selected universities provide internet connectivity, and the students possess smartphones with internet access. After excluding incomplete or inconsistent responses, 150 out of 198 completed questionnaires were considered suitable for analysis. The survey questionnaire encompassed critical constructs, including sample demographics, Social Comparison tendencies, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. After an exhaustive review of relevant literature, these constructs were meticulously operationalized into a final questionnaire of 39 items. A Likert scale with five response options, ranging from "not at all" to "vary greatly" and from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," was employed. Data was collected among university students in Islamabad through personal surveys employing probability sampling techniques. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to address the research questions. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistics, including the chi-square test, t-tests, ANOVA, and correlation, was utilized to generalize the results to the broader population.

The Cronbach alpha Half Split method was employed to assess the questionnaire's reliability to ensure internal validity and reliability. This analysis yielded reliability scores ranging from 69 to 80 for the concept items featured in the questionnaire. The reliability scores for each concept were as follows: Social Demography: 80, Self-construal: 73, Social Comparison: 70, and Life Satisfaction: 69. Additionally, senior faculty members in media studies were engaged to assess the conceptualization and operationalization validity. Furthermore, a pilot study assessed respondents' comprehension and linguistic grasp of the questionnaire's concepts.

## 7. Results

### *Use of social media and uploading Photos*

**Research Question 1:** To what extent do University students in Pakistan use social media, and what are the psychological and emotional implications of sharing personal photos on social media?

**Hypothesis 1:** More males and females will likely upload personal photos to look fair and attractive compared to the other psychological and emotional factors.

**Table 1:** Use of social media by Males and Females

- The table presents the frequency of social media usage among male and female university students.
- Females appear to use social media more frequently, but this difference is not statistically significant (chi-square test;  $p = .491$ ).
- This suggests no significant gender-based difference in overall social media usage among university students.

**Table 2:** Picture-Loading Behavior by Gender

- This table shows the picture-loading behavior of male and female university students.
- While female students uploaded slightly more pictures on average, this difference is not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney U test).
- This indicates no significant gender-based difference in the number of pictures uploaded by university students.

**Table 3:** Psychological and Emotional Factors for Uploading Photos by Gender

- Table 3 provides insights into male and female students' psychological and emotional motivations for uploading personal photos on social media.
- The table indicates that males and females upload photos for different purposes, such as impressing others, attractive appearance, and enhancing self-esteem. However, none of the emotional and psychological variables is statistically significant on the chi-square test ( $X^2 .038$ ;  $P = .491$ ).

**Table 1: Use of social media by Males and Females**

Gender	Low Use	High Use	Total
Male	23 (45.1)	43 (43.4)	66 (44.0)
Female	28 (54.9)	56 (56.6)	84 (56.0)
Total	51(100.0)	99 (100.0)	150 (100.0)

Note: 1. percentages are in the parenthesis. 2. Chi-square test .038;  $P = .491$

**Table 3: Posting of Photos by Gender**

Variable	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U
Uploading pictures on social media	Male	66	74.29	5085.00	2670.00, P=.680
	Female	84	77.05	6240.00	
	Total	150			

**Table 3: Psychological and Emotional Factors for Uploading Photos by Gender**

	Male	Female	Total
Attractive	32 (55.2%)	26 (44.8%)	58
Sexually Appealing	15 (31.3%)	33 (68.8%)	48
Impress Others	35 (44.3%)	44 (55.7%)	79
For appreciation	32 (45.1%)	39 (54.9%)	71
For show-off	21 (36.2%)	37 (63.8%)	58
Pleasing friends	19 (40.4%)	28 (59.6%)	47
Pleasing opposite	<b>57 (45.2%)</b>	<b>69 (54.8%)</b>	126
For self-esteem	<b>50 (44.6%)</b>	<b>62 (55.4%)</b>	112
Inferiority complex	43 (45.3%)	52 (54.7%)	95
Hide blemishes	45 (40.9%)	65 (59.1%)	110
look fair and attractive	<b>57 (43.5%)</b>	<b>74 (56.5%)</b>	131
Look less pale	34 (44.2%)	43 (55.8%)	77
Remove wrinkles	23 (37.1%)	39 (62.9%)	62
Look slim	28 (50.0%)	28 (50.0%)	56
Brighten teeth	14 (41.2%)	20 (58.8%)	34

RQ3 What is the relationship between social comparison and life satisfaction?

H2: The more social comparisons by the users, the less they are satisfied with life.

### *Social Comparison and Life Satisfaction*

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do university students make a social comparison while using social media, and how satisfied are they with their lives?

**Table 4** compares social comparison activities between male and female university students.

- The table shows more female students (37.3%) engage in heavy social media use and social comparison than male students (24%).
- However, the difference between male and female students in terms of social comparison did not reach statistical significance (chi-square 2.290,  $p = .090$ ).
- This suggests that female students are more engaged in social comparison, but it is not significantly different from male students.

**Research Question 3:** How far does social comparison make user satisfied with their lives?

**Hypothesis 2:** There is a likelihood that social comparison will negatively correlate with happiness and life satisfaction but will positively correlate with depression and change in appearance.

**Table 5** shows the relationship between social comparison and various emotional aspects, such as happiness, depression, life satisfaction, and the pressure to change appearance, by males and females.

1. The table data demonstrates that social comparison negatively correlates with happiness and life satisfaction among female users. Simultaneously, it positively correlates with depression and heightened pressure to alter one's appearance.
2. Regarding male social comparison on social media, there is no significant relationship between happiness and depression. However, there is a notable negative correlation with life satisfaction and a positive correlation with the pressure to change appearance. This suggests that male students who engage in social comparison tend to be less satisfied with their lives and experience increased pressure to modify their appearance.



**Table 4: Social Comparison by male and female students**

Value	Male	Female	Total
Light Users	30 (20.0%)	28 (18.7%)	58 (38.7%)
Heavy Users	36 (24.0%)	56 (37.3%)	92 (61.3%)
Total	66 (44.0%)	84 (56.0%)	150 (100.0%)

chi-square 2.290, P = .090

**Table 5: Relationship between Social Comparison and Life Satisfaction**

Comparison by Gender			Feeling happy	Feeling depressed	Satisfaction with life	Change appearance
Female	<i>Comparing self with others</i>	Pearson	-.336*	.345**	-.363**	.369**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.006	.005	.003	.014
		N	84	84	84	84
Male		Correlation	-.202	.159	-.227*	.300*
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.052	.149	.048	.001
		N	66	66	66	66

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

## Discussion

University students in Pakistan rely extensively on social media platforms, utilizing them for various purposes such as seeking information, entertainment, and gratification of their social and psychological needs. These platforms serve as a medium for instantaneous messaging, photo and video sharing, blogging, event promotion, and connecting with peers. Unfortunately, this heavy reliance on social media has spawned lurking behaviors and an inclination towards social comparison among the youth, resulting in significant psychological challenges such as a distorted sense of identity and a disconnection from their authentic selves. Consequently, these issues have

manifested in dissatisfaction, diminished self-esteem, emotional turmoil, emptiness, complexity, and even narcissistic tendencies.

This study delved into how the youth's adoption of false identities and denial of their true selves correlates with their dissatisfaction with life and reduced self-esteem. The research findings, drawn from data collected from students across various universities in Islamabad, revealed that female students, in particular, exhibit a higher propensity for social media usage and concurrently report greater dissatisfaction with their lives. Moreover, females tend to engage in more social comparisons and are susceptible to depression and diminished self-esteem. Furthermore, gender-based social comparison prompts individuals to post meticulously edited photos on social media, driven by the desire to appear attractive to the opposite sex, conceal imperfections, erase wrinkles, create a slim appearance, and seek validation. The falsehood identity syndrome compels young individuals to adopt lurking and social comparison behaviors, adversely affecting their overall life satisfaction and leaving them vulnerable to anxiety, depression, psychotic disorders, and diminished self-esteem.

## **8. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the pervasive and intensive use of social media among university students in Pakistan has far-reaching implications for their mental and emotional well-being. The study's findings highlight that many students, especially females, are more deeply engaged with social media and report higher dissatisfaction with their lives. This heightened engagement is associated with increased social comparison tendencies, which can lead to depressive feelings and lower self-esteem. The desire to conform to societal beauty standards and gain approval often results in presenting carefully edited, idealized versions of oneself on social media, contributing to a distorted sense of identity. As such, this study underscores the importance of promoting digital literacy and mental health awareness among university students. It calls for interventions encouraging a healthier and more balanced approach to social media use, emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and authenticity. By addressing these issues, educational institutions and mental health professionals can help young individuals navigate the complexities of the digital age while safeguarding their psychological well-being.

## **9. Limitations of the Study**

This study is confined to graduate students from the universities in Islamabad. It is important to note that Islamabad, the capital and a city known for its modernity and educational institutions, represents a well-educated population. Therefore, the findings of this study can be cautiously extrapolated to populations across Pakistan sharing similar characteristics. It is worth mentioning that a small number of participants chose not to respond to certain questions, citing various social factors examined in the questionnaire, such as self-esteem, false identity, and life dissatisfaction.

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