

Research Paper

## Social Media Use, Social Comparison, and Mood among Young Indian Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Social media has become an integral part of young adult's life. The impact of social media remains a topic of debate. Excessive usage has been linked to negative mood states, social isolation, and increased comparison, whereas some studies suggest that social media can foster positive emotions and enhance social comparison. The current study explores the relationship between social media use, mood, and social comparison among young Indian adults. One hundred eighty-five participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The results found no significant gender differences in social media, social comparison, or negative and positive affect. There is a negative relationship between social media and positive affect. There is a positive relationship between social media and negative affect, social media and social comparison, and social comparison and negative affect. Social media negatively predicts positive affect. Social media positively predicts negative affect, whereas social comparison positively mediates this relationship. Future research can employ longitudinal designs to better understand social media use, social comparison and mood.

**Keywords:** *Social Media Use, Social Comparison, Mood, Positive Affect, Negative Affect*

Social media has become integral in the young adult's lives. Indians have eagerly adopted the internet, experiencing rapid growth in its digital population over the past decade, surpassing 600 million active users. Projections indicate a rise of 67% till 2025 (Basuroy, 2022). They spend a lot of time on social networking sites, which revealed that in 2024, users worldwide spent an average of 143 minutes daily on social media (Dixon, 2024). Some social networking sites (SNSs) include Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Tumblr, Flickr, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat (Rao, 2022). Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp are some of the most used social media platforms (Mude, 2023). The effect of these SNSs on young adults is significant. It impacts the user's health and has a positive and negative impact on the society. Overusing social media can result in addiction, which is detrimental and can negatively impact individuals' lives (Rao, 2022, Kircaburun et al., 2020). Social media use has been linked to various mental health challenges, including anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Reer et al., 2019). It has also been connected to social isolation (Whaite et al., 2018) and "phubbing," a term describing the behavior of being preoccupied with or distracted by a smartphone during in-person interactions (Choi and Noh, 2019; Chatterjee, 2020). Social media usage strongly indicates increased negative

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emotions, including negative affect (Berry, 2018), sadness, and guilt (Bennett, 2019). Recent research suggests that social media exacerbates social comparison, heightens feelings of envy, and negatively impacts overall well-being (Meier & Johnson, 2022). In contrast, Veryduyn (2020) suggests that comparing ourselves to others on social media isn't always harmful. At times, it can boost our sense of well-being by sparking feelings of inspiration or motivating us to work on self-improvement. As a result of these contradicting findings, the current study focuses on the relationship between social media use, mood, and social comparison.

It is essential to understand these variables with a theoretical framework. Social media refers to a group of websites and apps designed to help people connect, share, and collaborate. It's a space where individuals can interact, exchange ideas, and stay in touch with friends, family, and communities. These platforms have become an integral part of daily life, making it easier to maintain relationships, discover new interests, and engage in meaningful conversations (Lutkevich, 2021). Mood is a conscious state of mind or a dominant emotion that shapes how we feel over some time (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Unlike fleeting emotions, moods tend to last longer and are not directly expressed through facial expressions (Prescott-Couch, 2005). According to Richard Lazarus (1994), moods arise from the deeper context of our lives. He explains that they reflect our overall sense of self, how we perceive our current circumstances, and how we are doing in the broader journey of life. Mood states, which are enduring and subtle emotional states, can be categorized as positive or negative. Positive mood states, characterized by calmness and emotional stability, foster the development of positive emotions and well-being (Xi et al., 2021). On the other hand, negative mood states can lead to decreased performance and often bring painful emotions from memories to the forefront, intensifying their impact (Chi et al., 2015).

The *displacement hypothesis* suggests that the time people spend on media takes away from the time they could be spending in face-to-face interactions, especially with close friends and family. In the past, TV and the internet were often blamed for this shift, and today, social media is thought to have a similar impact. The concern is that this shift could harm people's well-being and their mood because it replaces meaningful, connection-building activities with ones that may be less beneficial or even harmful (Hall and Lie, 2020). On the other hand, the *stimulation hypothesis* suggests that social media can improve the quality of existing friendships. Instead of focusing on making new connections, people use social media to strengthen their current relationships, which can lead to stronger social bonds, better emotional support, higher friendship quality, improved well-being, and a boost in mood and positivity (Nowland, 2018; Winstone, 2021).

Social comparison involves assessing oneself about others to evaluate or improve certain aspects of one's self-concept (Suls et al, 2002). *Social comparison theory* explains how people evaluate their abilities, attitudes, and beliefs by comparing themselves to others. This process helps them understand where they stand and shapes their sense of social identity (Festinger, 1957). Social networking platforms give enormous opportunities for social comparison. These comparisons can have a big impact on mood, self-esteem, and overall well-being, either lifting someone or bringing them down. On the positive side, social comparison can inspire self-improvement and drive success. On the flip side, it can trigger feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or shame, especially in today's social media-driven world (Ahmad, 2024).

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*Social rank theory* suggests that striving for a higher social rank is a fundamental human drive (Gilbert, 1992). This system encourages people to compare themselves to others to assess their standing, but these comparisons are often based on how they think others see them, rather than objective traits or achievements. Feeling “higher” or “lower” in rank can bring about strong emotional responses, like self-criticism, fear of rejection, overvaluing others’ opinions, or even shame (Duarte et al., 2016; Calissano et al., 2023).

Research exploring the relationship between mood and social media use among young adults is scarce, particularly in the Indian context. While some studies suggest that social comparison on social media can enhance subjective well-being (Verduyn, 2020), others indicate that social media use is linked to social comparison, which, in turn, predicts higher levels of stress (Yue, 2022). The current study aims to address the gaps in the relationship between social media use, comparison, and mood among young adults in India. The objective of the study is to assess the impact of social media use on mood, and the mediating relationship on social comparison. The study hypothesizes that there exists no relationship between social media use, social comparison, and mood.

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Sample*

The study recruited 185 participants who were between the ages of 18 and 25 years using purposive sampling, where the sample was chosen to fulfill the required inclusion and exclusion criteria.

#### *Instruments*

Three measures were used in this study,

- 1. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-SF):** Positive and negative mood was evaluated using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-SF) (Watson et al., 1988). The scale is a brief 20-item scale. Ratings are done on a five-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 (very slightly) to 5 (extremely). Scores for positive and negative scores range from 10 to 50. It has high internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient from .86 to .90 (Crawford & Henry, 2004).
- 2. Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS):** Social media use was assessed using the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Andreassen et al., 2016). The 6 items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often). The scale has high internal consistency i.e., the Cronbach alpha value is more than .863 (Copez-Lonzoy et al., 2023).
- 3. Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM):** Social comparison was measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). The scale consists of 11 items, which range from A (strongly agree) to E (strongly disagree). The scale has a discriminant validity. The scale has strong reliability ranging from 49 to 73 percent of variance (Schneider & Schupp, 2013).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study has 94 females and 91 males with mean ages of 21.6 years (SD= 1.68) and 22.2 years (SD= 1.85) respectively.

**Table No. 1 Descriptive Statistics**

	Gender	Mean	SD
BSMAS	Female	38.0	4.61
	Male	37.8	5.11
INCOM	Female	33.6	7.46
	Male	33.7	7.22
Positive Affect	Female	30.9	7.44
	Male	33.0	8.41
Negative Affect	Female	25.2	8.76
	Male	24.1	7.50

According to Table 1, the mean score of BSMAS for females is 38.0 (SD= 4.61), and for males is 5.11. The mean score of INCOM for females is 33.6 (SD= 7.46) and for males is 33.7 (SD= 7.22). The mean score of positive affect for females is 30.9 (SD= 7.44) and for males is 33.0 (SD= 8.41). The mean score of negative affect for females is 25.2 (SD= 8.76) and for males is 24.1 (SD= 7.50).

**Table No. 2 Gender differences**

		Statistic	df	p
BSMAS	Student's t	0.29	183	0.77
INCOM	Student's t	-0.09	183	0.92
Positive Affect	Student's t	-1.83	183	0.06
Negative Affect	Student's t	0.84	183	0.39

Independent sample t-test was conducted to assess gender differences. According to Table 2, there are no significant gender differences in social media use ( $t(185) = .29, p = .77$ ). This is consistent with earlier research (Bergagna & Tartaglia, 2018) but contradicts others which found that there is a significant gender difference in social media use and these differences are present due to the differences are in motivation to use social networking sites (Ali et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2022). Women participate in more communal activities whereas men participate in more agentic activities (Mazman et al., 2011). The current study found no significant gender differences in social comparison ( $t(185) = -.09, p = .92$ ). These results are consistent with previous research (Bergagna & Tartaglia, 2018), whereas it was contradicted where they found that women show higher social comparison orientation (SOC) than men (Furnham & Dowsett, 1993; Buunk et al. 2020). The current study found no gender differences between positive affect ( $t(185) = -1.83, p = .06$ ). Contradicting findings are present which state that women experience more positive emotions than men (Brebner, 2003; Chaplin, 2015). The current study found no significant gender differences in negative affect ( $t(185) = 0.84, p = .39$ ). This contradicts previous studies, which found that females score higher than males in experiencing negative emotions (Brebner, 2003; Thomsen et al., 2005).

**Table No. 3 Normality Test**

	Skewness		Kurtosis		Shapiro-Wilk	
	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE	W	p
BSMAS	0.30	0.17	-0.19	0.35	0.98	0.06
INCOM	-0.03	0.17	-0.34	0.35	0.98	0.10
Positive Affect	-0.03	0.17	-0.53	0.35	0.98	0.18
Negative Affect	0.58	0.17	0.01	0.35	0.96	<0.01

Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to assess the normality of the data. According to Table 3, the data for BSMAS ( $W(185)=.98$ ,  $p=.98$ ) is normally distributed. Similarly the data for INCOM ( $W(185)=.98$ ,  $p=.10$ ) and positive affect ( $W(185)=.98$ ,  $p=.18$ ) is normally distributed. The data for negative affect ( $W(185)=.96$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) is not normally distributed. Though the skewness falls between -2 and +2 and kurtosis lies between -7 and +7, the data is considered to be normal (Hair et al., 2010). Therefore, parametric measures were used for statistical analysis.

**Table No. 4 Correlational Analysis**

		BSMAS	INCOM	Positive Affect
BSMAS	Pearson's r	-		
	p-value	-		
INCOM	Pearson's r	0.33	-	
	p-value	<0.01	-	
Positive Affect	Pearson's r	-0.14	0.01	-
	p-value	0.047	0.839	-
Negative Affect	Pearson's r	0.22	0.329	-0.23
	p-value	0.002	<0.01	.0002

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to assess the correlation. According to Table 4, contrary to our assumption, there is a negative relationship between social media use and positive affect ( $r= -.14$ ,  $p=.04$ ). These results are consistent with previous findings (Tromholt, 2016; Hunt et al., 2018). A study by Ostic et al. (2021) found contradictory results which stated that there are positive associations between social media use and experience of positive emotions and well-being. There is a positive relationship between social media use and negative affect ( $r= .22$ ,  $p=.002$ ). This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Hunt et al. (2018) and Twenge et al. (2018). There is a significant, weak, and positive relationship between social media use and social comparison ( $r= .33$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This is consistent with earlier findings which propose that Facebook use leads to greater social comparisons (Vogel et al., 2014; Meier & Johnson, 2022). There is a significant positive relationship between social comparison and negative affect ( $r= .32$ ,  $p<.001$ ), which is supported by earlier findings (White et al., 2006)

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**Table No. 5 Mediation Analysis**

Effect	Path	$\beta$	SE	95% CI		z	p
				Lower	Upper		
Total	Social media use → Positive affect	-0.14	0.12	-0.47	-0.01	-2.01	0.45
Indirect	Social media use → Social comparison → Positive affect	0.02	0.04	-0.04	0.12	0.92	0.35
Direct	Social media use → Positive affect	-0.17	0.12	-0.59	-0.03	-2.21	0.02

According to Table 5, social media use negatively predicts positive affect,  $\beta = -0.14$  (95%CI: -0.47, -0.01),  $z = -2.01$ ,  $p = 0.45$ . Furthermore, social comparison does not significantly predict this relationship,  $\beta = 0.1$  (95%CI: -0.04, 0.12),  $z = 0.92$ ,  $p = 0.35$ . Nevertheless, social media still has a significant negative direct effect,  $\beta = -0.17$  (95%: -0.59, -0.03),  $z = -2.2$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . These findings suggest that using social media leads to the experience of negative emotions in young adults but social comparison does not play a role in this relationship. This novel finding extends our understanding of the associations between positive affect, social media use, and social comparison.

**Table No. 6 Mediation Analysis**

Effect	Path	$\beta$	SE	95% CI		z	p
				Lower	Upper		
Total	Social media use → Negative affect	0.33	0.10	0.30	0.71	4.82	<0.01
Indirect	Social media use → Social comparison → Negative affect	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.16	2.44	0.01
Direct	Social media use → Negative affect	0.27	0.10	0.21	0.61	4.03	<0.01

According to Table 6, social media use positively predicts negative affect,  $\beta = 0.33$  (95%CI: 0.30, 0.71),  $z = 4.82$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Furthermore, social comparison significantly mediates this relationship,  $\beta = 0.05$  (95%CI: 0.01, 0.16),  $z = 2.44$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . It is estimated that social comparison accounts for 43% of social media use effects on negative affect. Social media still has a significant positive direct effect,  $\beta = 0.27$  (95%CI: 0.21, 0.61),  $z = 4.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . These findings suggest that using social media leads to social comparison, which, in turn, results in the experience of negative emotions. It should be noted, however, that using social media can lead to negative affect beyond what could be explained by social comparison. This finding is consistent with an earlier finding by Yue (2021), who found that social media use was positively associated with social comparison and promoted higher levels of stress. Another study found that social media-induced comparisons promote lower mental well-being, lower life satisfaction, and higher levels of depressed mood (Verduyn, 2020; Yoon, 2019; Yang, Wei, & Tang, 2019). The current study expands our knowledge about the Indian population, especially among young adults, and explains the relationship between social media, social comparisons, and negative effects.

The current study was not without limitations. The study includes only a sample size of 185, which might not be large enough to generalise the population. The study does not

distinguish between various social media platforms and activities. The reliance on self-reported measures can lead to social desirability and response inaccuracy. The study does not account for external and contextual factors.

Despite these limitations, mental health professionals can use these findings to build interventions that can help adults manage the negative emotions that arise from social comparison on social media. Social media platforms can design features that minimise negative social comparison. Educational institutions can integrate social media literacy programs into curricula to teach students about responsible and mindful social media use.

### CONCLUSION

The current study found that there are no significant gender differences in social media, social comparison, or negative and positive affect. There is a negative relationship between social media and positive affect. There is a positive relationship between social media and negative affect, social media and social comparison, and social comparison and negative affect. Social media negatively predicts positive affect. Social media positively predicts negative affect, where social comparison positively mediates this relationship.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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