

**The Impact of Social Media Culture:
Self-Comparison, Consumerism, Perceived Loneliness, and Mindfulness**

Abstract

Engaging in social networking sites has become an everyday norm for a large portion of the population. With social media's increased presence, its effects on mental health have become an integral topic of discussion and investigation. This research paper encompasses how social media usage impacts perceived loneliness, self-comparison, consumerism, and mindfulness. Research shows that viewing content uploaded to social networking sites (SNS) negatively skews a person's view of themselves while instilling a notion of competition and loneliness between themselves, those images, and others (Marks et al., 2020; Midgley et al., 2021). The marketing tactics commonly exhibited on social media do not always provide helpful content, influencing social media consumers' buying habits. Continually using social media also directly impacts a person's mindfulness (Du et al., 2021). To receive a full understanding of how social media influences us, we need to not only recognize how and what we use it for, but also how our use affects us and what we can do to combat the negative thought processes that social media instills within its viewers.

Keywords: mindfulness, social media, comparison, loneliness, consumerism

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Social media is an ever-growing part of the lives of young adults. More than half of 18-24-year-old Americans reported using Instagram, spending an average of 30 minutes on it daily (Hunt et al., 2018; Marks et al., 2020). Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are used in various ways, from creating social connections, to purchasing accessories to staying on top of the latest trends. Despite these positive uses of social media, there is an imbalance, where the scale is tipping towards the overwhelming negatives. Social media can affect mindfulness, influence how we compare ourselves, negatively impact different areas of our self-image, and allow us to absorb misinformation (Du et al., 2021; Midgely et al., 2021; Sabbagh et al., 2020). These potential side effects can negatively influence a person's mental health and quality of life. We explore how social media culture contributes to self-comparison, consumerism, loneliness, and its effects on our mindfulness.

Comparison and Self-Absorption

Similar to the influence of media outlets like TV and magazines, these photo-focused apps construct the societal standards of physical appearance. With the use of likes and comments allowing for real-time feedback, there is pressure to compete with online peers. This competition is a push factor of the internalization of beauty standards, which makes users more self-focused and self-critical of their appearance (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). The vast number of posts that an individual can view daily on social networking sites (SNS) makes the chances of comparison frequent (Midgley et al., 2021). The exposure of social media influencers' content allows viewers to create unfair comparisons between themselves and others, which can then

cause an increase in self-destructive behaviors, such as eating disorders and anxiety (Marks et al., 2020; Midgley et al., 2021).

Social media culture promotes unhealthy self-absorption and comparisons between its users and the idealized images they see. In our research, we find that the social comparison theory best supports the pattern of lower self-esteem in SNS users. The social comparison theory is defined as individuals assessing themselves through comparison with peers (Dijkstra et al., 2010). This can be harmful because an abundance of filtered posts can cause unfulfillment in viewers' lives. If a person feels like they do not have a close circle of people they can rely on, it makes the possibilities for negative comparisons on SNS to form. Spitzer et al. (2022) found that when people who feel like they already do not belong make negative comparisons to others on SNS, the risk of suicidal ideation increases. When a person with low self-worth engages routinely on social media platforms, they begin to feel like they differ from those they view as happy and prosperous (Midgley et al., 2021). Studying the effects that seeing curated and seemingly perfect images others post has on our mental health and the way we compare ourselves to them is extremely important.

Users of social media who are more susceptible to making comparisons with those they see on SNS are likely to change how they think. They may develop appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC), which is defined as users of social media critically thinking about how they physically appear on social media regarding others (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). When users frequently consider how attractive they may appear on SNS, it leads to depression and a negative self-image (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). Taking it a step further, social media comparisons and ASMC can also influence a person's offline life because there are multiple occasions for pictures to be taken of an individual in public. Consequently, ASMC will make an

individual constantly assess and reassess how they look at any moment (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). This way of thinking is detrimental to the mental health and self-esteem of social media users.

While making frequent comparisons to others on social media can lead to low self-esteem and depression, it can also increase the possibility of becoming self-absorbed. Lowe-Calverley and Grieve (2018), found that a person's ego is a main contributor to the desire to like and post on social media. Active posters may use the prospect of being viewed on SNS as an opportunity to influence how others see them, positively increasing their egotistical view of themselves. Regarding liking posts, an individual may only like posts they feel will make others think positively of them or see them as trendy (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018). This careful crafting of one's self-image can distort people's perceptions of what is real versus fake on social media. Ultimately, social media posters are not being truthful to themselves by posting only the pictures they look the best in. Self-absorbed SNS posters and influencers paint themselves in an almost unattainable light, leading others to compare themselves to said individuals with no way to match them. An increase in comparison leads to a higher risk of depression, negative ideas about their body image, and low self-worth (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). Because social media users aspire to be like the influencers they see, they can be more susceptible to want to buy what the influencers possess.

Consumerism

With the expansion of the digital marketplace, businesses have found more success when they partner with social media influencers (Glucksman, 2017). From a capitalistic perspective, these individuals are a tool to help grow a company's brand. Social media influencers share their personal ideas, tips, and opinions on SNS to form trust between the company and the consumer

(Tafesse & Wood, 2021). However, research on the impact of these influencers shows that their presence on their followers' feeds harms users' mental stability. Exposure to images and promotional videos about nutrition, exercise, and physique from health and wellness influencers coerces their followers to internalize unattainable lifestyles and appearances (Marks et al., 2020). Moreover, upwards social comparison of these unrealistic standards may cause subscribers to develop a negative self-perception. These marketing tactics are not effective motivators for reaching healthy mental and physical goals, instead they lead to eating disorders and anxiety (Marks et al., 2020). Strubel et al. (2018) designed an experiment to measure the correlation between women's self-esteem, level of internalization, and their intent to purchase items on Facebook. Women who see SNS as a credible source, are more susceptible to internalizing negative emotions, and use SNS passively, in conjunction, are more likely to purchase products that are advertised to help them become their perceived ideal self. Influencers on social media may not have the best interest of the targeted consumer and their mental health in mind; rather, they focus on popularity and profit. Products advertised on SNS target insecurities while promoting confidence, satisfaction, and well-being. The culture of these virtual marketplaces exploits users' self-esteem while simultaneously profiting from their vulnerability. The impact of influencers' misleading information fuels the cycle of mental health struggles their patrons' experience (Marks et al., 2020). This fabricated system results in higher anxiety levels and less practice on mindfulness and self-reflection/self-awareness (Strubel et al., 2018). The pressures accompanied by social media and excessive social comparison have a destructive influence on young adults' levels of anxiety, self-esteem, and loneliness (Vally & D'Souza, 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). Purchasing products to help cope with these bad feelings is known as emotion regulation consumption (ERC). Kemp and Childers (2021) suggest that ERC is one

method to deal with negative emotions. Still, this expedient solution of burying or downplaying emotions is not effective for healing mental illnesses in the long term (Kemp & Kopp, 2011).

Demonstrating that integrating consumerism in social media culture is yet another aspect feeding into the list of negative side effects of SNS.

Perceived Loneliness

The social comparisons and engagement that take place through social media can not only result in users making negative social comparisons to peers and influencers, but it can lead to users experiencing increased feelings of perceived loneliness. Loneliness is defined as the level of social isolation that an individual feels, not the substantial social isolation that is physically experienced (Yavich et al., 2019). There is extensive previous research indicating that loneliness levels in users of social media are strongly associated with their social media use. However, it is unclear which variable predicts the other (Ergun & Alkan, 2020). A 2021 Turkish study found a strong positive correlation between social media use and feelings of loneliness in adolescents, citing that a decrease in face-to-face interactions occurs as social media use increases (Yaşar Can & Kavak Budak, 2021). This evidence can lead social media users to infer that decreased social media use and increased in-person socialization is the logical step to reducing feelings of loneliness. Alternatively, Vally and D'Souza (2019) conducted a study wherein two groups of participants were instructed to either continue social media use or abstain from it for an extended period to examine the effects on stress levels and loneliness among social media users. They found that individuals assigned to abstain from social media use reported substantially increased levels of loneliness, despite some of these subjects seeking face-to-face interactions to fill their need for socialization (Vally & D'Souza, 2019). The authors proposed that the individuals who sought in-person socialization but continued to report increased

loneliness might have become ineffective in face-to-face interactions due to heavy reliance on social media interactions for maintaining relationships (Vally & D'Souza, 2019).

This conflicting information leads to unclear recommendations on how to proceed with social media use to effect positive change in the levels of loneliness among its users. Chen et al. (2021) found that there are factors that relieve feelings of loneliness among social media users while still taking part in social media and that most types of social media use can cause social media anxiety and loneliness, both of which lead to social media fatigue among users. Users who regularly view positive morality and attitudes among those they follow on social media can relieve experiences of social media anxiety and loneliness during social media use (Chen et al., 2021). Yet, it was found that admiring the skills of others on social media, particularly skills that the user does not possess, can increase social media anxiety and loneliness (Chen et al., 2021). It can be understood then that the quality of social media use should be improved to obtain the maximum positive effects of socialization online rather than discontinuing social media use altogether, which was found to have negative consequences for users (Vally & D'Souza, 2019).

Mindfulness

The answer to avoiding the detrimental side effects of social media use discussed above may not be as easy as just avoiding social media altogether, but research has shown there are ways to alleviate the toll it has on users. Mindfulness is the act of being aware of one's internal and external experiences and emotions (Du et al., 2021). When it comes to social media, practicing mindfulness, such as meditating, increases positive self-image while reducing vulnerability to negative social comparison (Marks et al., 2020). Previous research supports that self-care methods revolving around mindfulness can result in better well-being in just 5 weeks (Klawonn et al., 2019). Klawonn et al. (2019) brings insight into the benefits of mindful

practices such as yoga therapy, meditation, and education on self-care revolving around the biopsychosocial-spiritual model of self-care with graduate healthcare students. The biopsychosocial-spiritual model of care considers all facets of human existence, such as physical state, mental standing, social considerations, and any spiritual beliefs that an individual holds (Beng, 2004). At the end of the 5 weeks, the healthcare students who took part showed lower levels of anxiety, depression, as well as stress levels. It also promoted more self-compassion in an individual after utilizing these mindfulness practices (Klawonn et al., 2019) These findings may provide coping mechanisms against the effects social media has on users of SNS.

Furthermore, research conducted by Du et al. (2021) showed that mindfulness practices could help users with their social media self-control failure. When it comes to social media self-control, users have a hard time being mindful about what they are consuming and the thoughts taking place as they mindlessly scroll. This leads to more social comparison, higher levels of loneliness, as well as the subconscious need to fall into the consumerism role while participating in social media. It also causes users not to have the self-control to step away from their phones, taking away from other activities that may lead to better well-being off the screen (Du et al., 2021). The more unaware they are of how they spend their time on social media, as well as when they choose to scroll, the more danger they can put themselves and others in. An example being user's who check social media while driving (Du et al., 2021). Social media use decreases their ability to be mindful, which amplifies all these effects. On the other hand, it was found that the more mindful an individual was, the more likely they were to be able to monitor their social media self-control, which led to higher life satisfaction overall (Du et al., 2021).

Rejection, another harmful effect for SNS users, may go hand-in-hand with comparisons described by the social-comparison theory. Barber et al. (2021) demonstrate how mindfulness

could help combat feelings of rejection. In the experiment, Barber et al. (2021) divided two groups of students. The first practiced mindfulness prior, while the second did not. Both groups participated in an online game called “Cyberball”. The game was intended for students to feel rejected when not given the ball. Before and after the game, both groups were asked to describe their mood and level of friendliness felt. The results concluded that the group who had practiced mindfulness could handle the rejection in a healthier manner than those who did not (Barber et al., 2021). From this experiment, practicing mindfulness could be an effective defense against the rejection users encounter while online. With these practices being implemented, it opens up possible methods for people to combat the negative effects brought on by social media use, such as stress, depression, and anxiety.

Conclusion

As social media is unlikely to disappear from our lives, users should continue to be more cognizant of its effects on the various sectors of their mental health. We investigated how social media affects feelings of loneliness and comparison, how it manipulates material consumption, and how mindfulness counteracts these feelings by presenting better thought processes and increased subjective well-being. The marketing tactics on SNS, such as influencers or promotional ads, tend to skew social media users’ views of themselves and what is healthy for them. These marketing ploys omit idealized images along with unattainable lifestyle habits, disconnecting the user from themselves and what’s in their best interest. This altered view creates a space for developing disordered eating habits, increased anxiety, low self-esteem, and higher internalization rates among viewers (Marks et al., 2020). Comparisons on SNS also increase suicidal ideation, develop ASMC, lower self-image/esteem, and increase self-absorption. Perceived loneliness research signifies the SNS can either be beneficial to one’s

perceived loneliness or detrimental to it. To acknowledge this, it is important to further research the ways viewers can productively interact with others to increase their relationship status and decrease levels of loneliness. Our findings suggest that mindfulness is key to providing healthy framing for one's mental health. Practicing self-care methods such as meditation, yoga, and different ways to frame thoughts and emotions promoted more self-compassion, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and overall mindfulness. Mindfulness can be seen to decrease the negative effects of social media that we have previously studied (Du et al., 2021). As a society, we should focus on implementing more mindful self-care methods, as the research provided has shown, it could be the answer necessary to combat the side effects caused by social media use. To further investigate how we can continue to use social media healthily, we advocate for further research on the impacts of limiting social media use, as well as how mindfulness impacts viewers in their social media interactions. We also advocate for the creation of resources for individuals whose mental health has been affected by SNS and enforce stronger regulations surrounding social media platforms policies to help alleviate the aforementioned detriments.

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