

Social Media Comparison, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction in Indian Emerging Adults: A Correlational Study

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Abstract: *This study examined relationships among social comparison on social media, self-esteem, and life satisfaction in Indian emerging adults. The study used a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design. Researchers collected data from 147 participants using non-probability convenience sampling and an online questionnaire. Researchers assessed social comparison with an adapted Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), self-esteem with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and life satisfaction with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The instruments demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .80, .80, and .86, respectively. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed significant negative relationships between social comparison and self-esteem ($r = -.52, p < .001$) and between social comparison and life satisfaction ($r = -.33, p < .001$). Self-esteem was positively associated with life satisfaction ($r = .49, p < .001$). All three null hypotheses were rejected. These findings indicate that social comparison orientation is associated with self-esteem and life satisfaction among Indian emerging adults. However, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference.*

Keywords: Social comparison, social media, self-esteem, life satisfaction, emerging adults

1. Introduction

Social media allows individuals to access information about others' achievements, relationships, and lifestyles through selectively curated posts. Such exposure can shape perceptions of others' lives [1] and create opportunities for social comparison [2]. Nevertheless, empirical studies have found inconsistent associations between online comparison and wellbeing, suggesting that factors beyond social media exposure influence users' experiences [3].

According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities relative to others, particularly when objective standards are lacking [4]. Gibbons and Buunk [5] introduced the concept of social comparison orientation, which refers to individual differences in the tendency to engage in social comparisons. Social comparison orientation is relevant to self-esteem, defined as the overall evaluation of personal worth [6], and life satisfaction, which denotes the cognitive appraisal of one's life as a whole [7].

Research in India has identified career development, financial security, relationships, and family expectations as prominent concerns during emerging adulthood [8]. These domains provide significant contexts for social comparison. This study examines associations between social comparison orientation on social media, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among Indian adults aged 24 to 35 years, using a cross-sectional correlational design.

2. Literature Review

Existing research on social comparison and self-esteem in

social media contexts has produced inconsistent findings. Vogel et al.

[2] reported that exposure to upward comparison information on Facebook was associated with lower state self-esteem compared to exposure to downward comparison information.

In a survey of 388 respondents in Singapore, Jiang and Ngien [9] identified social comparison and self-esteem as mediators in the relationship between Instagram use and social anxiety. Conversely, Mayukh and A. Manaf [10] found no significant association between social comparison orientation and self-esteem among 200 Malaysian university students.

Research examining life satisfaction has also revealed variation depending on the type of social comparison assessed. Anasril and Susanti [11] found that upward comparison was negatively associated with life satisfaction, whereas downward comparison was positively associated among 329 Indonesian Instagram users.

Zuo and Zan [12] investigated cyber upward comparison and psychological well-being among 500 Chinese college students, identifying mediating roles for self-esteem and emotion regulation. Their emphasis on upward comparison and broader wellbeing contrasts with the constructs examined in the present research.

Studies conducted in India have produced contrasting findings regarding the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Nagar and Saxena [13] found a significant positive association between these variables among 200 young Indian adults, whereas Kaur and Sekhar [14] found no

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statistically significant relationship among 173 young adults in Bengaluru. These discrepancies highlight the need to consider the study population, comparison measures, and psychological outcomes when interpreting existing research.

3. Problem Definition

3.1 Research Gap

Existing studies have examined social comparison, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, but the reviewed literature frequently focuses on separate relationships, specific comparison directions, or general social media use. Many studies also involve university students in their late teens and early twenties.

Research examining social comparison orientation on social media alongside global self-esteem and life satisfaction within the same sample of Indian adults aged 24–35 years remains limited in the literature reviewed. This study addresses this gap by examining all three relationships within a single correlational framework.

3.2 Aim and Research Question

The study aimed to examine the relationships among social comparison on social media, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among Indian emerging adults aged 24–35 years.

Research Question: What are the relationships among these three psychological variables in the selected population?

3.3 Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives were to examine the relationships between (1) social comparison and self-esteem, (2) social comparison and life satisfaction, and (3) self-esteem and life satisfaction. The corresponding null hypotheses were:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between social comparison on social media and self-esteem. **H₀₂:** There is no significant relationship between social comparison on social media and life satisfaction. **H₀₃:** There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction.

4. Methodology / Approach

4.1 Research Design and Participants

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional, descriptive-correlational design was employed. The final sample comprised 147 Indian social media users recruited through non-probability convenience sampling. Eligibility criteria required participants to be between 24 and 35 years old, possess Indian residency, maintain an active social media account, demonstrate English language proficiency, and provide informed consent.

Although eligibility extended to age 35, the actual sample ranged from 24 to 34 years. Ineligible or incomplete responses were excluded from analysis.

4.2 Research Instruments

Data were collected using an online questionnaire comprising sociodemographic items and three standardised self-report measures.

- **Social Comparison:** The adapted 11-item Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) [5] was used to assess social comparison orientation in the context of social media. Participants rated items on a five-point scale; two items were reverse-scored, yielding total scores ranging from 11 to 55.
- **Self-Esteem:** The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) [6] measured global self-esteem using four response categories. The scale included five negatively worded items that were reverse-scored, yielding total scores from 10 to 40.
- **Life Satisfaction:** The five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) [7] assessed global life satisfaction using a seven-point response scale, yielding total scores from 5 to 35.

Higher scores on each measure indicated greater levels of the respective psychological constructs.

4.3 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The research plan and questionnaire were reviewed and approved by the research supervisor prior to data collection. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms. Participants received study information, confirmed eligibility, and provided voluntary consent before participation.

Completing the questionnaire took approximately 10 to 15 minutes, and participants could withdraw before submission. No personally identifying information was collected. All responses were treated confidentially and reported in aggregate form.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency. The researcher applied Pearson's correlation to examine the three hypothesised relationships, using two-tailed significance tests ($\alpha = .05$) and 95% confidence intervals.

The researcher assessed distributional characteristics, linearity, and outliers, then conducted Spearman correlations and outlier sensitivity analyses as robustness checks. The researcher then interpreted the results as statistical associations rather than causal effects.

5. Results & Discussion

5.1 Results

The analysis included 147 participants aged 24–34 years ($M = 28.38$, $SD = 2.29$). The sample was predominantly male and metropolitan. Table 1 summarises the participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

(N = 147) Characteristic Value

Age, years M (SD) 28.38 (2.29)
 Observed age range: 24–34
 Male: 102 (69.4%)
 Female: 45 (30.6%)
 Metropolitan residents: 94 (63.9%)
 Non-metropolitan residents: 53 (36.1%)
 Undergraduate: 51 (34.7%)
 Postgraduate: 93 (63.3%)
 Other qualifications: 3 (2.0%)
 Employed: 136 (92.5%)
 Not employed: 11 (7.5%)

Note. Categorical values are presented as n (%). Other qualifications include higher secondary education (n = 1) and doctoral qualifications (n = 2).

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for the three psychological measures. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .80 to .86, indicating satisfactory internal consistency within the study sample.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study

Variables (N = 147)

Variable M SD Observed range Cronbach's α

Social comparison (INCOM) 28.89 7.05 11–47 .80

Self-esteem (RSES) 30.46 4.60 15–40 .80

Life satisfaction (SWLS) 22.58 6.30 5–35 .86

Note. INCOM refers to the adapted Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure; RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale.

Pearson's correlation analysis identified statistically significant associations among all three study variables (Table 3). Social comparison orientation was negatively associated with self-esteem ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($r = -.33$, $p < .001$). Self-esteem was positively associated with life satisfaction ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). Accordingly, all three null hypotheses were rejected.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Analysis and HypothesisTesting (N = 147) Hypothesis / Relationship r 95% CI p

- H_{01} : Social comparison–Self-esteem $-.52$ [$-.63$, $-.39$] $< .001$
- H_{02} : Social comparison–Life satisfaction $-.33$ [$-.47$, $-.18$] $< .001$
- H_{03} : Self-esteem–Life satisfaction $.49$ [$.35$, $.60$] $< .001$

Note. All correlations were calculated using two-tailed Pearson tests. CI = confidence interval. All three null hypotheses were rejected at the .05 significance level.

Distributional assessments supported using Pearson correlations. Supplementary Spearman correlations were consistent in direction and statistical significance with the primary findings. Excluding the identified multivariate outlier did not alter the direction or statistical significance of the three relationships.

5.2 Discussion

The strongest association identified was between social

comparison orientation and self-esteem, with higher social comparison scores generally corresponding to lower self-esteem. This finding matches Vogel et al. [2], who reported less favourable self-evaluations after exposure to upward comparison information on Facebook. Notably, Vogel et al. examined state self-esteem and specific comparison direction, whereas the present study assessed global self-esteem and overall comparison orientation.

In contrast, Mayukh and A. Manaf [10] found no significant relationship between social comparison orientation and self-esteem among Malaysian university students.

Social comparison orientation was also negatively associated with life satisfaction, although this association was weaker than its relationship with self-esteem. Anasril and Susanti [11] similarly reported a negative association between upward comparison and life satisfaction, while also identifying a positive association for downward comparison. As the adapted INCOM used in the present study did not differentiate between upward and downward comparison, the observed relationship cannot be attributed to a specific comparison direction.

The positive association between self-esteem and life satisfaction observed in this study is consistent with Nagar and Saxena [13], who reported a significant positive relationship among Indian young adults. Conversely, Kaur and Sekhar [14] found no statistically significant relationship in a Bengaluru sample. These discrepancies suggest that the association between self-esteem and life satisfaction may vary across populations.

The findings demonstrate statistically significant relationships among the three psychological variables within the selected sample. However, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Furthermore, convenience sampling, unequal demographic representation, reliance on self-report measures, and the lack of independent construct-validity testing for the adapted INCOM limit the generalisability and interpretation of these results.

6. Conclusion

The present study identified significant relationships among social comparison on social media, self-esteem, and life satisfaction in Indian emerging adults. A greater orientation toward social comparison was associated with lower self-esteem and reduced life satisfaction, whereas higher self-esteem was correlated with increased life satisfaction. These findings show the role of social comparison orientation in understanding psychological self-evaluation and overall life satisfaction in social media contexts.

This research provides evidence from an Indian sample and acknowledges limitations related to convenience sampling, reliance on self-reported measures, and the use of an adapted social comparison instrument. As the design is cross-sectional and correlational, it cannot infer causal relationships. Nevertheless, these findings create a basis for future investigations into social comparison processes and their associations with psychological well-being.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

Subsequent research should use larger, more representative samples from various regions of India to improve the generalisability of findings. Longitudinal designs are recommended to clarify the temporal relationships among social comparison orientation, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

Studies should distinguish between upward and downward social comparison and examine specific domains, including career achievements, interpersonal relationships, and physical appearance. Additional psychometric assessment of the adapted INCOM is required to establish its validity in social media contexts. Further investigation of variables such as perceived social support and individual circumstances may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the observed associations.

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