

## INVESTIGATING THE INFLUENCE OF EXCESSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON SOCIAL COMPARISON AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of excessive social media use on social comparison among university students. The objectives of current study were to explore how much university students use social media and how it makes them feel when they compare themselves to others online. Another objective of current investigation was to find out how comparing themselves on social media affects students' mental health and makes them feel bad and to look for any differences between guys and girls in how much they use social media and how it makes them feel about themselves. Through reflexive thematic analysis and non-probability purposive sampling technique a sample of (N=5) university students (n=2 males, n=3 females) with age range of 19-25 years was recruited. For this purpose, detailed interview was conducted from five participants. NVivo14 was used to analyze the data and identified the initials codes and themes of transcribed interviews of five participants. The findings of current study revealed that pervasive influence of social media on university students, disrupting various aspects of their lives while exacerbating feelings of inadequacy through heightened social comparison. It underscores the critical importance of implementing interventions to foster healthier social media habits and provide support for students in managing the psychological impacts of online comparison culture.

**Keywords:** Excessive Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, University Students.

### INTRODUCTION

The research evaluated the influence of excessive social media use on social comparison among university students. Social media has become an essential part of daily life, especially among university students, who are among the most active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter etc. While these social media platforms offer opportunities for connection, surfing and engagement, there is growing concern about their psychological influence, particularly regarding social

comparison. Social comparison theory, first presented by Festinger (1954), suggests that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others. In the context of social media, this theory becomes particularly relevant as users are repeatedly exposed to curated and often idealized images, lifestyles and narratives of others' lives. Research highlights that excessive social media use can aggravate feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem among young adults. A study by Vogel

et al. (2014) found that Facebook use is strongly associated with increased social comparison and, subsequently, negative self-evaluations. Similarly, Lup et al. (2015) reported that Instagram use, characterized by high visual content, is significantly associated to depressive symptoms, largely due to social comparison processes. These findings propose that the nature of social media, with its emphasis on visual and narrative perfection, may intensify the tendency for upward social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to those they distinguish as better off. The influence of social media on social comparison among university students warrants thorough investigation, given its implications for mental health and overall well-being. University students are at a critical developmental stage, where identity formation and self-concept are dominant. The constant exposure to peer content on social media platforms can influence their self-perception and social identity, possibly leading to adverse psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction and other psychological issues (Fardouly et al., 2015). This research aims to investigate how excessive social media use influences social comparison among university students. Employing reflexive thematic analysis, the study will examine the subjective experiences and perceptions of students, providing a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at play and offering insights for potential interventions. This qualitative approach will allow for a rich, detailed exploration of the themes and patterns that emerge from students' narratives, contributing to the broader discourse on social media's psychological impact.

### **1.1 Rationale of the study**

Understanding the influence of excessive social media use on social comparison among university students holds significant implications for both academia and practical interventions. Firstly, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the intersection of social media and mental health, providing valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of university students in an increasingly digitalized world. By delving into the ways in which excessive social media use affects social comparison processes, this study sheds light on potential risk factors for negative psychological

outcomes such as low self-esteem, envy, and diminished well-being. Moreover, the findings from this qualitative research can inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at promoting healthier social media habits and mitigating the adverse effects of excessive usage. By understanding the specific challenges faced by university students in navigating social comparison dynamics on social media platforms, educators, counselors, and policymakers can tailor support services and educational initiatives to better meet the needs of this demographic. Ultimately, this study has the potential to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between social media use and mental health among university students, thereby facilitating the development of more effective intervention strategies.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

There is still more to learn about the complicated and varied topic of how spending too much time on social media affects how university students compare themselves to others through social media platforms. University students face unique challenges when it comes to using social media too much, which could make it harder for them to feel good about themselves compared to others and could affect their mental health. This study aims to find out how excessive use of social media impacts students' ability to compare themselves to others.

### **1.3 objectives of Study**

The main objectives of the current study included:

1. To explore how much university students use social media and how it makes them feel when they compare themselves to others online.
2. To find out how comparing themselves on social media affects students' mental health and makes them feel bad.
3. To look for any differences between male and female in how much they use social media and how it makes them feel about themselves.

### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

There are some theories or perspective supporting the current study of excessive use of social media and social comparison among university students. The current analysis has been made on the idea of

following theory which can easily associated with the current research.

**Social Comparison Theory by Leon Festinger.**

Festinger. (1954) planned the primary systematic theory of comparison. Festinger suggested that people have an innate drive to evaluate themselves, often in comparison to others. People make all kinds of judgments about themselves, and one of the key ways that we do this is through social comparison, or analyzing the self in relation to others. Social comparison is a ubiquitous social phenomenon. Virtually everyone does it from time to time, mostly because it can serve a very fundamental purpose: providing useful information about where one stands in one's social world. The present study has its basis on this theory suggesting that students using excessive social media compare themselves with others. Excessive engagement with social media can divert students' attention away from their academic pursuits, interpersonal connections, and well-being. The pervasive phenomenon of social comparison can arise when individuals perceive their own lives as lacking compared to the curated portrayals of others online, leading to a diminished focus on personal and professional goals.

**1.5 Definition of Terms**

Here are some terms and their definitions related to the topic "The Role of Transformational Leadership on Innovative Performance in Colleges"

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Here are some terms and their definitions related to the topic "influence of excessive social media use on social comparison among university students."

**Excessive use of social media**

Excessive use of social media refers to engaging with social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for more than three hours

daily, often leading to negative impacts on other activities and responsibilities. This behavior includes frequent checking, difficulty reducing usage, and withdrawal symptoms when not using social media (Andreassen et al., 2016).

**Social Comparison**

Social comparison involves evaluating one's abilities, achievements, and well-being by comparing oneself to others on social media. It primarily focuses on upward social comparison, linked to negative self-evaluation and emotions like envy and depression (Vogel et al., 2014).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The main purpose of this chapter is to examine the phenomenon of excessive social media use and social comparison among university students. In Addition, this chapter examines how excessive social media use and social comparison in students were examined using theoretical work. A literature review can describe what other researchers have examined, what the results are and what the recommendations available for further study are. This chapter's addressing the following topics: a) excessive use of social media, b), social comparison c) university students.

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).

Utamia, Herawatia and Yunita (2023) conducted a similar study aimed The Influence of Social Media Use Intensity on Social Comparison in College Students. This study aims to explore the intensity effect of social media utilization on social comparison. With a general basis of the two-stage model of interactive media use for motivation and positive content, we conducted a cross-sectional online survey study (N = 450) in the context of student in Pekanbaru, Indonesia and empirically tested a mediation pathway linking to social anxiety. The survey was conducted online for two weeks in Islamic University of Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia. The collected survey data with the recruitment requirements of 18s to 23s general users who had day to day experience using differential social media services. The results indicated that use did not directly increase social anxiety. Instead, social comparison, a proximal outcome, and self-esteem, an intermediate outcome played mediating roles, supporting the complete mediation effects. As statistically, intensity of social media utilization has influence more in positive direction. This finding provides important theoretical and practical implications for the design of communication mental health campaigns and education in this digital era to enhance the positive effect of social media.

Siraj and Ali (2023) conducted another similar study to investigate the Influence of Social Media Usage on the Well-Being: Evidence from Pakistani University Students. 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. 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 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.

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).

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Aim and Objectives

This study applied reflexive thematic analysis to explore into university students' perceptions of their excessive social media use, particularly in relation to comparing themselves with others online and feeling inadequate compared to the portrayed lives on social media platforms. It also aims to explore the consequential impact on mental health resulting from such social comparisons. Additionally, the research seeks to uncover any apparent gender-based trends in social media usage patterns among students. By comprehensively examining these facets, the study endeavors to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between social media engagement, social comparison, and mental well-being within the university context.

#### 3.2 Sample

Participants were chosen using a non-probability purposive sampling method, meaning only those with specific characteristics were selected. All participants were university students, aged 18–25, who actively use social media. The study included both male and female students from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

#### 3.3 Inclusion Criteria

- Participants who are studying in different universities of Islamabad with age range 18 to 25 years will be included.
- Both male and female participants were be the part of research.
- Participants related to all religions were included in the study.
- Participants belonging to all socioeconomic classes were part of the research.

#### 3.3 Exclusion Criteria

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- Participants who are studying in different universities of Pakistan other than Islamabad were excluded.
- Participants with any physical disability were not included.
- Participants with diagnosed mental disability were excluded.
- Students who are studying in other countries were excluded.

#### 3.4 Materials and Procedure

The participants were interviewed individually for on average half an hour and hour each. The language used was Urdu as well as English, as based on the preference of the participant. More categories of interview were developed such as experience of excessive use of social media leads to social comparison. Inside each category a main question was framed, as well as in the starting question was added in the beginning asking about the interviewee's background. Participants were complete questionnaires regarding to the study variables. At the end questions were added at the conclusion, asking about the factors that contributed to the challenges face by the interviewees and end the conversation by discussing the study variables.

The interviews were recorded (with the consent of interviewees) and then transcribed into Verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the transcripts. Meanings and similar patterns will be discovered from the raw data based on personal experiences of participants. Then major themes were identified from their responses by using NVivo 14 software.

### RESULTS

#### 4.1 Data Analysis Process

The study was examining the influence of excessive social media use on social comparison among university students. The reflexive thematic analysis approach was preferred for data analysis. The main objectives of the study included:

- To explore how much university students use social media and how it makes them feel when they compare themselves to others online.
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- To find out how comparing themselves on social media affects students' mental health and makes them feel bad.
- To look for any differences between male and female in how much they use social media and how it makes them feel about themselves.

To achieve the objectives of current study, a reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze the qualitative data attained from interviewing five university students from Riphah International University Islamabad. According to Braun & Clarke (2020), reflexive thematic analysis is an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to the analysis of qualitative data, which will facilitate the identification and analysis of patterns or specific themes in a given data set. In this study the researcher relied on NVivo 14 a well-established qualitative data analysis tool to conduct the reflexive thematic analysis. The reflexive thematic

analysis process included the following six steps in analyzing qualitative data:

- Familiarization with the data
- Generating initial codes
- Generating initial themes
- Reviewing potential themes
- Naming themes
- Producing the report

Following the first step of reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher familiarized with the data by transcribing the interview transcripts. After completing the transcription process, the investigator took time to read through the interview transcripts to get a general understanding of the information provided by the interviewees.

After familiarizing with the data, the researcher proceeded to the second phase of reflexive thematic analysis, which is generating initial codes. The initial codes generated in NVivo 14 are shown in the table below:

<b>Initial Codes</b>	<b>Files</b>	<b>References</b>
Engaging more than Six Times Daily	1	1
Frequent Instagram, Snapchat, X Usage	5	6
Scrolling While Doing Other Activities	1	1
Social Media Usage Mood	3	3
Behavior & Appearance Posting	2	2
Compulsive use of social media	2	2
Inadequacy, Low Self-esteem	4	5
Feeling Insecure, Achievements	3	3
Exaggerated, Unrealistic social media	1	1
Others' Lives Idealized Online	4	5
set unrealistic standards	2	2
Influence Perception Both Negatively, positively	3	3
Lead Comparison, Jealousy	5	7
Fashion, Food, Travel social media	3	3
Following Healthy Lifestyle Online	1	1
Good Platform, Connect Friends	4	5
Posting Photos, Snaps with Friends	2	3
Social media, Procrastination, Distracts	5	5
Impact Studies, Experiences, personal life	2	2
Implementing Realistic Ways, Valuable Engagement	4	5
Need More Conscious Self-Awareness	2	2
Awareness During social media	1	1
Unfollow Accounts Making Feel Low	2	2
Easy Fall Trap Comparison	1	1
Expectation Perfect Body, Relationship, Life	2	2
Pressure, Post Certain Lifestyle	4	6

After the initial codes had been generated, the researcher took time to review the codes and identify any emerging patterns and relationships in the codes. Related codes were subsequently grouped together to generate initial themes, which represented the third step of the reflexive thematic analysis process. The fourth step of reflexive thematic analysis included reviewing the initial

themes and revising the themes in a way that they answered the research questions related to the study. The fifth step of the reflexive thematic analysis process included coming up with the final names of every theme in a way that related to the research questions and the research objectives. The final themes that emerged in the research are shown in the table below.

Themes	Files	References
Frequency and Nature of Social Media Use	10	11
Behavioural Changes	4	4
Psychological Effects	7	8
Perception of Reality	7	8
Emotional Impact	8	10
Content Consumption	10	12
Social and Academic Disruption	7	7
Coping and Mitigation Strategies	9	10
Social Comparison	7	9

The sixth and final stage of the reflexive thematic analysis process involved producing the report. The report represented the different codes and how they came together to form themes that answered the research questions posed in the study. The

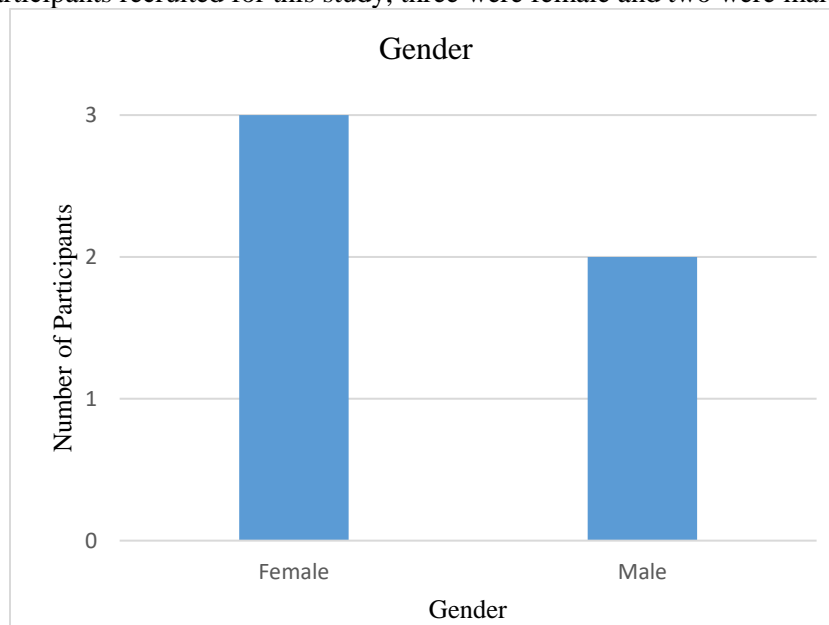
report also included excerpts representing the statements of different interviewed participants as evidence of different codes and themes. The table below shows the final codes and themes.

Names	Codes	References
<b>Frequency and Nature of Social Media Use</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
Engage on social media about 6 times a day	1	1
frequently use Instagram, snapchat and X	5	6
Scrolling While Doing Other Activities	1	1
Social Media Usage Mood	3	3
<b>Behavioural Changes</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
Engaging more than Six Times Daily	2	2
Frequent Instagram, Snapchat Usage	2	2
<b>Psychological Effects</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Inadequacy, Low Self-esteem	4	5
Feeling Insecure, Achievements	3	3
<b>Perception of Reality</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Exaggerated, Unrealistic social media	1	1
Others' Lives Idealized Online	4	5
set unrealistic standards	2	2
<b>Emotional Impact</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
Influence Perception Both Negatively, positively	3	3
Lead Comparison, Jealousy	5	7
<b>Content Consumption</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>
Fashion, Food, Travel on social media	3	3

Following Healthy Lifestyle Online	1	1
Good Platform, Connect Friends	4	5
Posting Photos, Snaps with Friends	2	3
<b>Social and Academic Disruption</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>
Social media, Procrastination, Distracts	5	5
Impact Studies, Experiences, personal life	2	2
<b>Coping and Mitigation Strategies</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
Implementing Realistic Ways, Valuable Engagement	4	5
Need More Conscious Self-Awareness	2	2
Awareness During social media	1	1
Unfollow Accounts Making Feel Low	2	2
<b>Social Comparison</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>
Easy Fall Trap Comparison	1	1
Expectation Perfect Body, Relationship, Life	2	2
Pressure, Post Certain Lifestyle	4	6

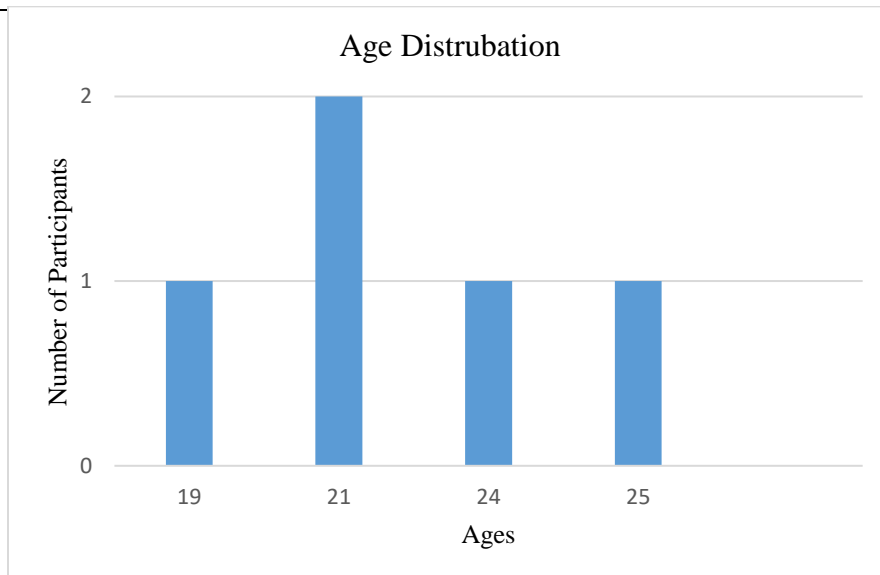
**4.2 Description of Participants**

Among the five participants recruited for this study, three were female and two were male.

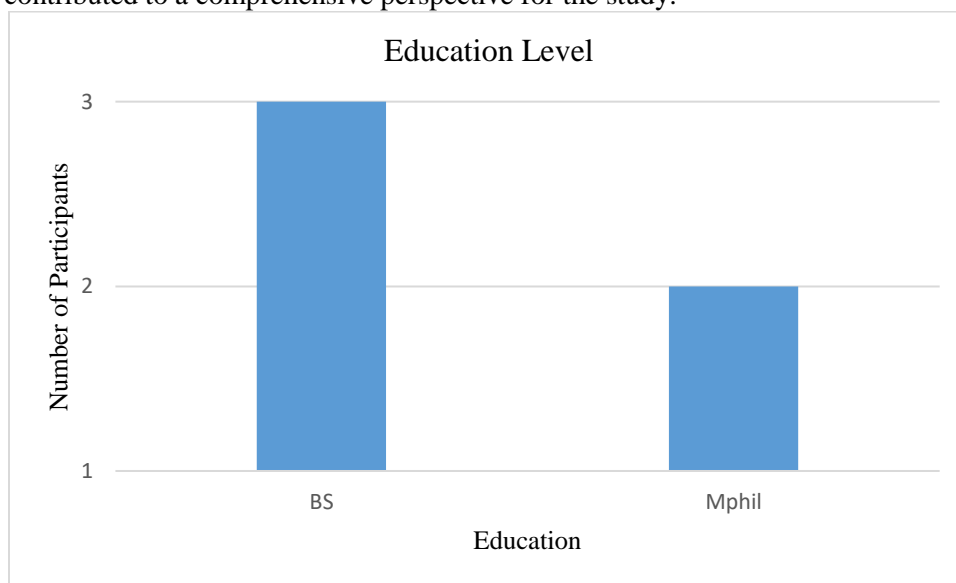


In the study, five participants were recruited, comprising individuals aged 19, 24, and 25 years. Specifically, the sample included two participants who were 21 years old.





Among the five participants, two were MPhil students and three were BS students. This mix of educational backgrounds contributed to a comprehensive perspective for the study.



### 4.3 Results

The main themes that emerged after conducting the reflexive thematic analysis process included frequency and nature of social media use, behavioural changes, psychological effects,

perception of reality, emotional impact, content consumption, social and academic disruption, coping and mitigation strategies and social comparison.

#### Frequency and Nature of Social Media Use

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Frequency and Nature of Social Media Use</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
Engage on social media about 6 times a day	1	1

frequently use Instagram, snapchat and X	5	6
Scrolling While Doing Other Activities	1	1
Social Media Usage Mood	3	3

The theme "Frequency and Nature of Social Media Use" reveals significant engagement with social media among university students, averaging six interactions daily. Students predominantly use Instagram, Snapchat, and X, indicating these platforms' substantial role in their social experiences. Social media use often occurs concurrently with other activities, highlighting its pervasive integration into their daily routines.

Additionally, social media significantly impacts students' moods, suggesting an emotional dependence on their online interactions. This extensive and emotionally charged use of social media likely enhances opportunities for social comparison, as students are continually exposed to idealized portrayals of their peers, potentially exacerbating feelings of inadequacy or competitiveness.

**Behavioural Changes**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Behavioural Changes</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
Engaging more than Six Times Daily	2	2
Frequent Instagram, Snapchat Usage	2	2

Behaviour Changes underscores shifts in university students' actions due to frequent social media use, notably exceeding six times daily. This behavior, particularly on Instagram and Snapchat, suggests a

significant integration of these platforms into their lives. Such patterns may intensify social comparison tendencies as students constantly evaluate their lives against online portrayals.

**Psychological Effects**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Psychological Effects</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Inadequacy, Low Self-esteem	4	5
Feeling Insecure, Achievements	3	3

Another theme is Psychological Effects which highlights the profound impact of excessive social media use on university students' mental well-being. Codes such as "Inadequacy, Low Self-esteem" reveal pervasive feelings of inadequacy

and diminished self-worth stemming from social comparison. Additionally, "Feeling Insecure, Achievements" highlights how constant exposure to others' achievements can aggravate feelings of insecurity.

**Perception of Reality**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Perception of Reality</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Exaggerated, Unrealistic social media	1	1
Others' Lives Idealized Online	4	5
Set unrealistic standards	2	2

The theme "Perception of Reality" explores into how excessive social media use shapes university

students' views of the world. Codes such as "Exaggerated, Unrealistic social media" highlight

the tendency for platforms to present exaggerated versions of reality. These perceptions set unrealistic standards, contributing to heightened

social comparison among students and potentially impacting their self-esteem and well-being.

**Emotional Impact**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Emotional Impact</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
Influence Perception Both Negatively, positively	3	3
Lead Comparison, Jealousy	5	7

Emotional Impact explain how excessive social media use affects the emotional well-being of university students. Codes like "Influence Perception Both Negatively, positively" reveal the nuanced influence social media can have on students' perceptions of themselves and others.

Additionally, "Lead Comparison, Jealousy" highlights the propensity for social media to fuel feelings of comparison and jealousy among students, potentially leading to heightened emotional distress and interpersonal tension.

**Content Consumption**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Content Consumption</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>
Fashion, Food, Travel on social media	3	3
Following Healthy Lifestyle Online	1	1
Good Platform, Connect Friends	4	5
Posting Photos, Snaps with Friends	2	3

The theme "Content Consumption" highlights the diverse array of content that university students engage with on social media platforms. Codes such as "Fashion, Food, Travel on social media" signify the prevalence of lifestyle-related content in their feeds. "Following Healthy Lifestyle Online" suggests an interest in health and wellness content,

while "Good Platform, Connect Friends" underscores the role of social media in maintaining social connections. Moreover, "Posting Photos, Snaps with Friends" reflects students' active participation in sharing their own experiences, potentially fostering comparisons with peers' lifestyles.

**Social and Academic Disruption**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Social and Academic Disruption</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>
Social media, Procrastination, Distracts	5	5
Impact Studies, Experiences, personal life	2	2

The theme "Social and Academic Disruption" reveals how excessive social media use can disrupt both social interactions and academic pursuits among university students. The code "Social media, Procrastination, distracts" highlights the propensity for social media to serve as a source of

distraction, potentially impeding students' productivity and focus. Additionally, "Impact Studies, Experiences, personal life" suggests that these disruptions extend beyond academic realms, affecting students' overall experiences and personal lives.

**Coping and Mitigation Strategies**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Coping and Mitigation Strategies</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>

Implementing Realistic Ways, Valuable Engagement	4	5
Need More Conscious Self-Awareness	2	2
Awareness During social media	1	1
Unfollow Accounts Making Feel Low	2	2

Coping and Mitigation Strategies another theme which addresses how university students navigate the influence of excessive social media use on social comparison. Codes such as "Implementing Realistic Ways, Valuable Engagement" suggest the importance of adopting practical approaches to engage with social media positively. "Need More

**Social Comparison**

Themes/Codes	Codes	References
<b>Social Comparison</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>
Easy Fall Trap Comparison	1	1
Expectation Perfect Body, Relationship, Life	2	2
Pressure, Post Certain Lifestyle	4	6

The theme "Social Comparison" discovers how excessive social media use shapes university students' tendencies to compare themselves with others online. The participants showing code "Easy Fall Trap Comparison" indicates the effortless nature of falling into the trap of comparing oneself with idealized portrayals on social media. Moreover, "Expectation Perfect Body, Relationship, Life" highlights the prevalent expectations students face regarding physical appearance, relationships, and overall lifestyle standards. Additionally, "Pressure, Post Certain Lifestyle" underscores the pressure students feel to conform to these standards by curating their online presence to reflect an idealized life. Overall, these codes reveal the pervasive influence of social comparison on students' well-being, fueled by their interactions on social media platforms.

**4.4 Summary of Findings**

The findings evaluate the relationship between excessive social media use and social comparison among university students. Frequent engagement, particularly on platforms like Instagram, Youtube, Facebook and Snapchat, underscores the significant integration of social media into their daily lives. This integration not only disrupts social interactions and academic pursuits but also exerts profound psychological effects, fostering feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Moreover, students

Conscious Self-Awareness" underscores the necessity for students to cultivate awareness of their online behaviors and its impact on their well-being. Moreover, "Unfollow Accounts Making Feel Low" reflects a proactive strategy to mitigate negative feelings associated with social comparison by curating their online social circle.

actively consume and contribute to idealized portrayals online, perpetuating unrealistic standards and intensifying social comparison tendencies. Despite these challenges, students employ coping strategies such as conscious self-awareness and curating their online experiences to mitigate the negative impact of social comparison. Overall, the study underscores the urgent need for interventions to promote healthier social media habits and support students in navigating the complex dynamics of online comparison culture.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study illuminate the complicated relationship between excessive social media use and social comparison among university students. Reflexive thematic analysis allows a deeper understanding of how recurrent engagement with social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X and Snapchat integrate significantly into students' daily lives and impacts their psychological well-being.

The study discloses that university students frequently use different social media sites, with a notable emphasis on platforms like Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and Snapchat etc. These platforms are deeply woven into the fabric of their daily routines, often accompanying other activities. This persistent use highlights the central role these platforms play in students' social lives, making

them a primary medium for communication and self-expression (Oberst et al., 2017). However, this extensive engagement is not without consequences. Excessive social media use has profound psychological effects on students, particularly in fostering feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. The study's codes, such as "Inadequacy, Low Self-esteem" and "Feeling Insecure, Achievements," underscore how constant exposure to others' curated achievements and lifestyles can diminish self-worth (Vogel et al., 2014). These feelings are exacerbated by the idealized portrayals commonly found on social media, which set unrealistic standards and fuel social comparison (Chou & Edge, 2012). This aligns with existing literature that links social media use with increased anxiety and depression among young adults (Primack et al., 2017).

Social media significantly shapes students' perceptions of reality. Platforms often present exaggerated and unrealistic versions of reality, leading students to idealize the lives of their peers (Fardouly et al., 2015). This idealization contributes to setting unrealistic expectations for one's own life, body, and achievements, further intensifying the cycle of social comparison and resulting in detrimental effects on self-esteem (Steers et al., 2014). The emotional impact of social media use is nuanced, influencing students' perceptions both positively and negatively. While some students may find inspiration and motivation, others may experience increased feelings of jealousy and inadequacy (Verduyn et al., 2015).

Despite these challenges, students employ coping strategies to navigate the negative impacts of social comparison. These strategies include cultivating conscious self-awareness and curating their online experiences to foster a healthier relationship with social media. For instance, some students unfollow accounts that make them feel low, which helps mitigate the adverse effects of social comparison. This proactive approach highlights the importance of self-regulation and intentional engagement with social media to buffer against its negative psychological impacts (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Moreover, the theme of "Content Consumption" sheds light on the types of content that students frequently engage with on social media. Popular categories such as fashion, food, and travel dominate their feeds, reflecting a

lifestyle-oriented consumption pattern. This continuous exposure to aspirational content can perpetuate unrealistic standards and reinforce social comparison behaviors. Furthermore, students often follow accounts promoting healthy lifestyles, which, while potentially beneficial, can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy if their own lifestyles do not measure up to these idealized standards. The act of posting photos and snaps with friends also plays a significant role, as it not only serves as a means of self-expression but also as a benchmark for social comparison, where students evaluate their social lives against those of their peers.

The disruption caused by excessive social media use extends beyond psychological effects to impact students' social interactions and academic pursuits. The study highlights how social media can serve as a major source of procrastination, detracting from time that could be spent on academic work and face-to-face interactions (Meier et al., 2016). This distraction can lead to a decline in academic performance and hinder the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships. The interference in academic and social domains underscores the pervasive influence of social media and the importance of developing strategies to manage its use effectively.

Coping strategies are essential for mitigating the negative impacts of social comparison on social media. Students often implement practical approaches such as setting boundaries on their social media use and engaging in more meaningful and realistic online interactions. Developing conscious self-awareness about their social media behaviors allows students to recognize the potential negative impacts and take proactive steps to counteract them. For example, unfollowing accounts that evoke feelings of inadequacy is a common strategy used to curate a more positive and supportive online environment. These coping mechanisms highlight the resilience of students and their ability to adapt to the challenges posed by social media. However, there remains a critical need for institutional support and interventions that promote healthier social media habits, encouraging a balanced approach that fosters well-being and reduces the adverse effects of social comparison. Overall, the study underscores the urgent need for interventions to promote healthier social media

habits among university students. Such interventions could include educational programs that encourage mindful use of social media, strategies for managing online content consumption, and support systems to help students cope with the pressures of social comparison. By addressing these issues, universities can better support students in navigating the complex dynamics of online comparison culture, ultimately fostering a healthier and more supportive academic environment.

### 5.1 Conclusion

The findings of current study highlight that excessive social media use among university students significantly disrupts their social interactions and academic performance, while also negatively affecting their psychological well-being. The constant exposure to idealized portrayals online and compare themselves to other which fosters feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, intensifying social comparison. However, students are not entirely passive; they actively employ coping strategies like self-awareness and curating their online presence to combat these effects. This study emphasizes the critical need for interventions aimed at promoting healthier social media habits and supporting students in managing online comparison culture.

### 5.2 Limitations and Suggestions

Regardless of the interesting and important content of the study and its implications for research, this study is subject to some limitations.

- The study used a method called thematic analysis, which only gives a partial view of the situation. To fully understand the topic, future research should consider using a method called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for a more detailed exploration and in-depth of current study.
- Thematic analysis may not address the full complexity of the topic. It focuses on identifying themes but may miss out on deeper alternative viewpoints. To broaden understanding, future research could incorporate diverse qualitative methods or mixed-method approaches to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

- The way participants were chosen for the study might not represent the whole population well because it wasn't done randomly. To make sure the results can be applied broadly, future studies should use a method like random multi-stage sampling, which gives everyone an equal chance of being selected.
- The number of participants was small, and they were only from universities in Islamabad. To get a clearer understanding, future research should include participants from major cities all across Pakistan. This would make the findings more reliable.

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