



A Study on Upward Social Comparison, Distress Tolerance and Authenticity among Young Social Media Users

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Abstract: Over the past decade, social media has become a central part of young people's lives, and its usage has drastically increased. Sharing their life's highlights, following trendy culture and building global connections have become an essential part of their daily routine. However, constant exposure of filtered posts, trendy reels and unrealistic beauty standards may cause upward social comparison which can pull focus away from personal values and losing real self in the virtual world. Young adults may struggle to handle negative emotions due to conditioning of expecting perfection online causing distress intolerance. The study was conducted to check the correlation between upward social comparison, distress tolerance and authentic self among young social media users. Standardized scales were used to measure upward social comparison, distress tolerance and authentic self among young social media users. The study included a total of 30 samples of young social media users. The results found out that there is a significant positive correlation between upward social comparison and distress tolerance which states that watching skilled peers or successful people can create positive envy and encourages young adults to work harder to match their high standard. On the other hand, there is no significant correlation between upward social comparison and authenticity. More systematic studies along with large sample sizes are suggested to expand further study. Moreover, digital literacy, conscious use, limited social media usage and gratitude practice are suggested in order to minimize the negative effect of social media usage.

Keywords: *Social Media, Upward Social Comparison, Distress tolerance, Authenticity, Young adults*

1. Introduction

“Everyone's life looks fun on social media; that's the sorcery of it. Your soul may be slowly decaying, but there's a filter for that.”

~ Tory Henwood Hoen

In today's world, social media plays an important role in our lives, especially among youngsters as it helps in connecting them to people across the world and fulfill natural humans' need to socialize. Beside connections, it supports learning, building communities and helps businesses to grow. Social media networking has made our lives way easier than it was before. Different social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, are being used among youngsters. For youngsters, their social media profile becomes the extension of themselves. Posting about their best part in their life provides a temporary sense of reward, happiness and triggers external validation, and praise from others.

However, when young adult users are constantly being exposed to filtered posts and unrealistic content, they may start to compare themselves and their lives to what they see on their screens, which may sometimes help them feel motivated, inspired and other times may cause them the feeling of inadequacy. They try to follow unrealistic beauty standards, latest trends, algorithms which may eventually cause digital inauthenticity. Going against their core values and not being true to themselves may cause inner conflict and emotional exhaustion in them.

A review of research on a social comparison while using social networking sites on social well-being which reveal that social comparison on SNSs may occasionally result in an increase in SWB but mostly negative effects are found due to people's engagement in upward social comparison (Verduyn et al., 2020).

Another study done by Kreling et al. (2022) on subjective authenticity across Instagram stories and posts. A total of 202 Instagram users participated in the study. Results from the study reveal that by allowing more spontaneous self-presentation, stories produced slightly more authenticity perceptions than posts. However, subjective authenticity was high in both features which indicates that both features offer a space for authentic online self-presentation.

1.1 Upward Social Comparison

Upward social comparison refers to “comparing oneself to those better than oneself” (Jin et al., 2024). Upward social comparison refers to “when individuals compare themselves with others whose abilities are better than their own” (Nortje, 2020).

A study conducted on the influence of mobile social networking site usage on upward social comparison, self-esteem, and well-being of adult smartphone users. Authors found out that Facebook usage predicted upward social comparison, which can harm individuals’ self-esteem and well-being over time whereas Instagram usage showed a directly negative effect on individuals over time. Additionally, authors found inter-relationships between upward social comparison on social networking sites, self-esteem as well as well-being in a longitudinal context (Schmuck et al., 2019).

A Meta-Analysis done by McComb et al. (2023) on the effect of social media exposure to upward comparison targets on self-evaluations and emotions. Analysis revealed significant negative effects of upward comparison on each outcome variable: body image, subjective well-being, mental health and self-esteem.

Another study conducted by Nor et al. (2025) on the role of false self-presentation and social comparison in excessive social media use. The study was conducted on 400 active social media users in Pakistan using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling. The study findings revealed that excessive social media usage is shaped by psychological factors, such as fear of negative evaluation and validation-seeking, driven by social comparison.

1.2 Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance is defined as “the individual’s capacity to experience and withstand negative psychological states” (Simons & Gaher, 2005). Distress tolerance is defined as “the ability to tolerate negative affect or aversive psychological or physical states” (Bernstein et al., 2008).

Shanthi et al. (2025) conducted a study on the depression and anxiety associated with problematic social media usage (PSMU) severity and mediating role of distress tolerance in Midwestern U.S. University. A total of 337 undergraduate students using social media participated in the cross-sectional web survey. The study found out that lower distress tolerance was significantly associated with depression and PSMU severity.

Another recent study on social media usage motives as a mediator of distress intolerance and social media addiction among college students in which a total of 298 Korean college students

participated who were regular social media users. The findings suggested that higher distress intolerance was associated with greater social media addiction (Kim & Lim, 2026).

Hew and Chew (2025) conducted a study which aimed to investigate whether distress tolerance could be a risk factor for three specific Internet-use disorder: Internet gaming disorder (IGD), problematic social media use (PSMU), and problematic pornography use (PPU) in which total 151 participants were there for study. Research findings revealed that lower distress tolerance significantly predicted higher severity in IGD above and beyond demographics and emotional regulation, but not for PSMU and PPU, which suggested distress tolerance as a more relevant risk factor for IGD than PSMU and PPU.

1.3 Authentic Self

Authenticity is defined as “being true to oneself” (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018). Authenticity is defined as “perceiving one’s behaviour as authored by oneself or internally caused” (Ryan et al., 1995; Wild, 1965).

Haimson et al. (2021) conducted a study on the online authenticity paradox to understand how people view online authenticity, and how it is related to social media sharing behaviors, and whether it is achievable or not. They interviewed 28 social media users who recently experienced major life transitions. Researchers found that people strive to achieve online authenticity, but it is often unreachable because doing so requires sharing negative experiences on social media, which is possible only at great cost, especially for those who have difficult life experiences.

Another study done by Bailey et al. (2020) on the association of authentic self-expression on social media with greater subjective well-being by analyzing data of around 10,560 Facebook users in which they found that individuals who are more authentic in their self-expression also report greater life satisfaction and individuals with socially desirable personalities benefit from authentic self-expression more than others. Additionally, findings also suggested that the extent to which social media use is related to well-being also depends on how individuals use it.

Grieve and Watkinson (2016) conducted a study on the psychological benefits of being authentic on Facebook in which a total of 164 individuals participated and completed a personality assessment once as their true self and once as the self they present on Facebook along with the measures of social connectedness, subjective well-being, depression, anxiety and stress. The findings of the study suggested that authentic self-presentation on Facebook can be associated with positive psychological outcomes.

1.4 Purpose

The purpose is to study the effect of social media usage on upward social comparison, distress tolerance and authenticity among young adults.

1.5 Hypothesis

H₁: There will be significant negative correlation between upward social comparison and distress tolerance among young social media users.

H₂: There will be significant negative correlation between upward social comparison and authenticity among young social media users.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The total sample of 30 young social media users in the age range between 18-28 years were collected from Rishikesh, Uttarakhand.

2.2 Measures

Distress Tolerance Scale (Simon and Gaher, 2005) is a 15 item self-report which measures emotional distress tolerance. Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale consisting Strongly Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Feel Neutral, Mildly Agree, Strongly Agree.

Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2000) is a 12-item scale used to assess the three dimensions of authenticity: authentic living, accepting external influence and self-alienation. Responses are measured by a 7-point scale ranges from does not describe me at all to describe me very well.

The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Gibbons and Bunk, 1998) is an 11-item scale which measures upward social comparison. It is measured on a 5-point Likert scale consisting Strongly Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Feel Neutral, Mildly Agree, Strongly Agree.

2.3 Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and the questionnaires were filled through google forms. Each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized psychological tests were administered to the participants.

3. Analysis of data

3.1 Results

Table 1: *N, Mean and Social Deviation*

	Upward Social Comparison	Distress Tolerance	Authenticity	Authentic Living	Accepting External Influence	Self-Alienation
N	30	30	30	30	30	30
Mean	32.7	37.0	56.9	22.8	14.2	15.8
Standard deviation	8.09	12.0	11.6	3.97	5.94	6.40

Table 2: *Correlation between upward social comparison, distress tolerance and authenticity among young social media users*

	Upward Social Comparison	Distress Tolerance	Authenticity	Authentic Living	Accepting External Influence	Self-Alienation
Upward Social Comparison	—					
Distress Tolerance	0.588***	—				
Authenticity	-0.263	-0.324	—			
Authentic Living	-0.234	0.057	0.270	—		
Accepting External Influence	0.218	0.422*	-0.848***	0.060	—	
Self-Alienation	0.129	0.231	-0.857***	0.076	0.644***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion of Results

The results found out that distress tolerance has significant positive correlation with upward social comparison ($r=0.58$, $p<.001$). Hence, the hypothesis that there will be significant negative correlation between upward social comparison and distress tolerance is rejected.

The result also found out no significant correlation between upward social comparison and authenticity. Hence, another hypothesis that there will be negative correlation between upward social comparison and authenticity is rejected.

Study conducted by Lee (2024) on moderated mediation model of social comparison and

distress over tolerance in which the findings suggested that students with higher distress over tolerance, experienced more contrastive upward comparison and emotional exhaustion.

5. Conclusion

The research study comprehends the effect of social media usage on upward social comparison, distress tolerance and authentic self among young adults. The study found out that upward social comparison was positively significantly correlated with distress tolerance. The study also revealed no significant correlation between upward social comparison and authenticity. This study shows that upward social comparison among young adults in social media can cause positive envy and can drive them to work harder. Watching skilled peers encourages them to practice more and more and also assure them that their goal is reachable.

While this study suggested positive correlation between upward social comparison and distress tolerance, and no significant correlation between upward social comparison and authenticity, in future, large sample studies are required to confirm this relationship as this study had a limited sample size of 30. Researchers can add more variables such as benign envy along with it and expand the further study. Additionally, in order to minimize the negative effect of social media comparison among young adults, it is advisable to limit the social media usage, have awareness of triggers, digital literacy and practicing gratitude.

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