

Social Comparison on Social Media and Psychological Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Social comparison on social media has become an increasingly prominent psychological process during emerging adulthood, driven by growing exposure to idealized portrayals of other people's lives. This study conducted a systematic review of empirical findings on the factors associated with social comparison on social media and its impact on psychological well-being during emerging adulthood. The literature search followed PRISMA guidelines across reputable academic databases, covering publications from 2022 to 2025. Of 165 articles initially identified, 18 empirical studies met the inclusion criteria. The synthesis shows that upward social comparison is the most common form of comparison and is consistently linked to lower psychological well-being, particularly through passive social media use and exposure to idealized content. Frequently identified mediating mechanisms include reduced self-esteem, impaired emotion regulation, and fear of missing out. In contrast, downward social comparison appears far less often and shows only limited protective effects. These findings highlight upward comparison as the dominant psychological risk for well-being in emerging adulthood and point to the need for interventions that strengthen social comparison awareness and emotion regulation.

Keywords: *Emerging Adulthood; Social Media; Social Comparison; Psychological Well-Being*

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INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has brought significant changes in the way individuals in emerging adulthood interact with their social environment. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok present various types of content that largely represent idealized portrayals of other people's lives, ranging from physical appearance to academic achievement and career success. Continuous exposure to such content encourages an increasingly intense process of social comparison among the 18–29 year age group (Vanherle & Beullens, 2025; Vranken et al., 2023). This age range is a developmental phase in which individuals are exploring their identity and beginning to build long-term commitments across various life domains. Because self-concept during this phase is still in the process of formation, social comparison on social media becomes one of the factors that can potentially influence the psychological well-being of individuals in emerging adulthood (Vranken et al., 2023).

This phenomenon can be understood through social comparison theory, proposed by Festinger (1954), which remains the primary theoretical framework for explaining individuals' tendency to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others when objective standards are unavailable. In the context of social media, this comparison process

more often moves upward (upward social comparison), given that users are more frequently exposed to content that has been selectively filtered to display the best side of life (Vanherle & Beullens, 2025; Vranken et al., 2023). Conversely, downward social comparison appears relatively rarely, because representations of failure, limitation, or personal difficulty are rarely shared openly in digital spaces (Yuan et al., 2025).

A number of recent empirical studies show that upward social comparison on social media is reported to be related to various aspects of psychological well-being in emerging adults (Le Blanc-Brillon et al., 2025; Vranken et al., 2023; Zuo & Zan, 2025). Exposure to idealized content is associated with decreased self-esteem and increased depressive symptoms, particularly among individuals who more frequently use social media passively through scrolling activities without active interactive engagement. This condition leads individuals to absorb idealized portrayals of life without a process of critical reflection, giving rise to feelings of inadequacy in self-evaluation (Ye & Gao, 2025).

In addition, several studies also report an association between upward social comparison and body dissatisfaction. Individuals who frequently compare their physical appearance with curated visual content on social media tend to experience dissatisfaction with their weight and overall appearance attributes. These findings confirm that the visual dimension of social media platforms serves as a major trigger for body dissatisfaction among emerging adults (Martinac Dorčić et al., 2023).

Upward social comparison on social media has also been linked to temporary decreases in self-esteem, particularly when individuals receive negative feedback or compare themselves with representations of others' lives perceived as more successful. This sensitivity to social evaluation is reported to be higher among younger age groups, in line with neurocognitive development that is still adjusting to the intense demands of social evaluation in digital environments (Chen, 2025).

The impact of social comparison can be further intensified by certain situational contexts. Exposure to others' positive self-portrayals during periods of social restriction, such as the COVID-19 lockdown, has been reported to be associated with an overall decline in psychological well-being. Limited direct social interaction made individuals increasingly dependent on social media as a source of social information, thereby strengthening the negative effect of upward social comparison (Vranken et al., 2023).

Although empirical evidence on the impact of upward social comparison on social media has been widely reported, a number of research gaps remain. Most studies use cross-sectional designs, so the causal relationship between social comparison and various psychological outcomes cannot yet be comprehensively understood. In addition, downward social comparison in the context of social media remains relatively understudied, even though social comparison theory suggests a potential protective effect of such comparison on individuals' self-esteem (Zuo & Zan, 2025).

Other research gaps are evident in the dominance of samples from particular countries and cultural contexts, as well as limited exploration of short-video platforms, which have become increasingly popular in recent years. Therefore, a systematic review is needed that can comprehensively integrate recent empirical evidence. By limiting the publication period to 2022–2025 and focusing on empirical studies measuring both upward and downward dimensions of social comparison, this systematic review seeks to map consistent patterns of findings while identifying research gaps that remain open (Vanherle & Beullens, 2025).

Based on the description above, this study aims to conduct a systematic literature review of upward and downward social comparison in social media environments during emerging adulthood, with the following specific objectives: (1) to identify the characteristics of empirical studies examining upward and downward social comparison on social media in emerging adulthood; (2) to describe the definitions, operationalizations, and dimensions of social comparison most frequently used in these studies; and (3) to synthesize the main patterns of findings regarding the impact of social comparison on social media on various aspects of psychological well-being in emerging adulthood, while identifying research gaps and directions for future research.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a systematic review design, covering the stages of planning, execution, and reporting of results (Kitchenham, 2004). The review focused on synthesizing empirical findings regarding upward and downward social comparison in social media environments during emerging adulthood (ages 18–29 years).

Subjects/Population and Sample

The population in this review consisted of empirical journal articles examining social comparison on social media published between 2022 and 2025. The initial search identified 165 articles as the population at the identification stage. Through a staged screening and eligibility process, the sample used for synthesis in this review consisted of 18 empirical articles that met the inclusion criteria, namely empirical studies with emerging-adult subjects (18–29 years) that addressed social comparison on social media and measured a relevant psychological well-being outcome. Non-empirical articles, publications outside the specified time range, and studies not aligned with the research focus were excluded.

Data Collection Procedure

The literature search was conducted through the Google Scholar and Scopus databases using a combination of relevant keywords, including social comparison, upward social comparison, downward social comparison, social media, emerging adulthood, and psychological well-being. Study selection was carried out in stages, beginning with title and abstract screening, followed by a full-text eligibility review, with the complete selection flow presented in the PRISMA diagram (Figure 1).

Data Analysis

Data from the selected studies were analyzed using a narrative synthesis approach, grouping findings according to patterns of upward and downward social comparison, the psychological mechanisms involved, and variations in context and individual characteristics.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Research Result

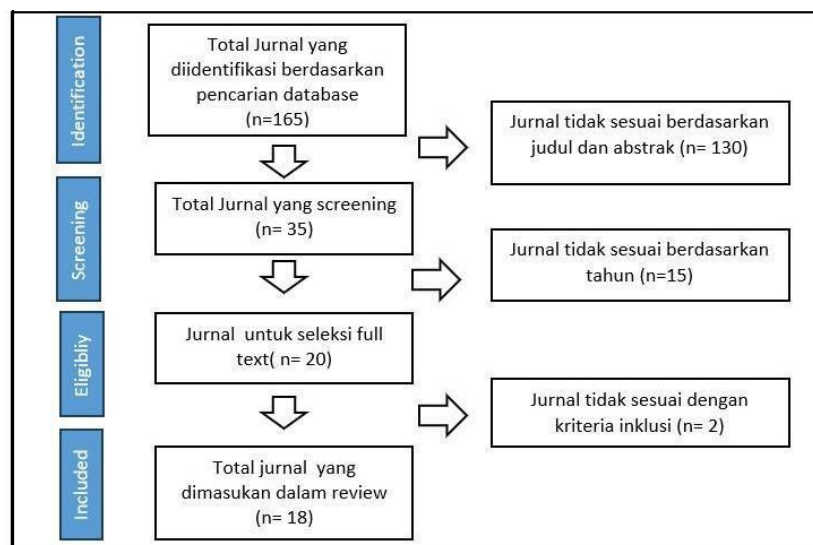


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of Journal Selection

The systematic review shows that social comparison on social media is a multidimensional psychological process that is consistently related to the psychological well-being of individuals in emerging adulthood. Most studies focus on upward social comparison as the primary mechanism explaining the relationship between social media use and various negative psychological outcomes, such as decreased self-esteem, increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and emotional pressure related to life achievements. In addition, several studies also highlight the role of intrapersonal factors, particularly emotion regulation, social comparison orientation, and self-perception, as important mediators in the relationship between exposure to social media content and psychological well-being.

In terms of subject characteristics, the studies reviewed generally involved individuals within the emerging-adulthood age range (18–29 years), with diverse cultural and social backgrounds, although most samples were drawn from student populations or young adults in developed countries. Overall, no sharp differences in findings were found based on age variation within the emerging-adulthood range, although several studies indicated differences in the intensity of social comparison effects influenced by life-transition stages, such as the education phase, early career, or particular situational conditions. All reviewed studies used correlational designs, employing survey approaches or subjective experience measures, indicating that current empirical literature still positions self-evaluation processes and intrapersonal regulatory capacity at the center of understanding the impact of social comparison on social media. Table 1 presents a summary of the 18 empirical articles that met the inclusion criteria and formed the basis of synthesis in this systematic review.

Table 1: Results of the Systematic Review

No	Author and Year	Title (Brief)	Main Findings (Social Comparison Focus)
1	Yuan et al. (2025)	Impact of online upward social comparisons on cyberbullying	Upward comparison is positively related to cyberbullying via mediation of cognitive and emotional relative deprivation
2	Ye & Gao (2025)	Distress disclosure on social media and depressive symptoms	Distress disclosure triggers social comparison (predominantly upward), which increases depressive symptoms, with a stronger effect in males
3	Zuo & Zan (2025)	Cyber upward social comparison and well-being	Cyber upward comparison decreases well-being directly and through chain mediation of self-esteem and cognitive reappraisal
4	Le Blanc-Brillon et al. (2025)	Associations between social comparison on social media and young adults' mental health	Upward exposure and extremity mediate decreased self-esteem and increased depressive symptoms; downward comparison was not significant
5	Vanherle & Beullens (2025)	The link between social media browsing and emerging adults' affective well-being	Passive browsing (upward exposure to positive content) is associated with a small decrease in positive affect
6	Vranken et al. (2023)	Exposure to positive self-portrayals on social media and mental health during lockdown	Exposure to others' positive self-portrayals (upward comparison) is associated with decreased mental health during lockdown
7	Martinac Dorčić et al. (2023)	Effects of social media social comparisons on body image satisfaction	Social media social comparisons (predominantly upward) are negatively correlated with appearance and weight satisfaction
8	Karayigit & Parlade (2023)	Social media use among U.S. college students	Frequent use of TikTok and Snapchat correlates with higher addiction (implicit upward comparison)
9	Chen (2025)	State self-esteem responses to social media feedback loops	Negative feedback decreases state self-esteem more sharply among younger emerging adults through upward comparison
10	O'Connell & Daruwala (2025)	Milestones and mindsets: how social media shapes young adults' expectations	Upward comparison toward idealized milestones on social media generates emotional pressure and decreased well-being
11	Arenz et al. (2023)	Social comparison on social media and mental health: A scoping review	Upward comparison is predominantly negative for mental health, with moderators such as orientation influencing effect strength

12	Wang et al. (2025)	Passive social media use and depression among college students	Passive use (implicit upward comparison) correlates with depression through vicarious traumatization and FoMO
13	Li et al. (2025)	The effect of social media use on employment anxiety of college students	High-frequency use triggers employment anxiety through passive upward comparison toward curated success
14	Gong et al. (2025)	Social media use and academic performance among college students	High social media use decreases academic performance through chain mediation of social anxiety and FoMO (implicit comparison)
15	Frost (2024)	The relative strength of social media use, social comparison orientation, and materialistic values on self-worth	Upward and ability comparison decrease self-worth, while downward comparison provides a temporary positive effect
16	Chen et al. (2025)	The effects of social media addiction on college students' psychological anxiety	Social media addiction increases anxiety through comparison-induced self-worth erosion
17	Zhang et al. (2025)	The influence mechanism of upward social comparison on work withdrawal behavior	Upward comparison triggers ego depletion (cognitive/emotional/behavioral), which then leads to work withdrawal
18	Tang & He (2025)	Impact of social media addiction on college students' academic procrastination	Social media addiction increases academic procrastination through chain mediation of lack of self-control and FoMO (implicit comparison)

Source: Synthesized by the authors (2026)

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review show that upward social comparison on social media dominates the self-evaluation process in emerging adulthood. Emerging adults consistently compare themselves with idealized portrayals of life curated on various social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Exposure to positive content displaying others' achievements, appearance, and lifestyle triggers feelings of inadequacy, which subsequently correlate with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. This pattern appears consistently across the empirical studies reviewed, in which upward comparison functions as the primary mechanism linking social media use with various negative psychological outcomes (Yuan et al., 2025).

This dominance of upward social comparison indicates that social media serves as an intense arena for self-evaluation, particularly for individuals undergoing the identity-transition phase. The still-developing self-concept during emerging adulthood makes individuals more sensitive to social comparison, so that exposure to idealized content has the potential to reinforce psychological vulnerability. This finding reinforces the view that the self-

evaluation process on social media is not neutral, but is shaped by content structure and patterns of digital platform use.

The upward comparison process more often occurs through passive social media use, such as scrolling without direct interaction. Under these conditions, individuals absorb others' idealized life portrayals without the opportunity for critical response, contextual clarification, or comparison with their own life realities. This condition strengthens the contrast between the self and the comparison target perceived as more successful, thereby temporarily decreasing self-esteem and triggering negative emotions (Vanherle & Beullens, 2025).

The effect of passive use is more evident among emerging adults who are undergoing the process of identity formation. Instability of self-concept makes individuals in this phase more vulnerable to the impact of social comparison, particularly when social media use is routine and lacks reflective awareness. In addition, on platforms that emphasize visual content, such as Instagram and TikTok, upward social comparison is further reinforced because of the dominance of aesthetically curated images and videos (Martinac Dorčić et al., 2023; O'Connell & Daruwala, 2025).

Several of the reviewed empirical studies highlight the role of psychological mediating mechanisms in explaining the relationship between upward social comparison and psychological well-being. Decreased self-esteem emerges as the primary pathway linking exposure to idealized content with increased anxiety and depression. Individuals who consistently compare themselves with idealized standards tend to experience repeated negative self-evaluation, which weakens their perceived self-worth (Zuo & Zan, 2025).

Beyond self-esteem, emotion regulation also plays an important role in determining the strength of social comparison's impact. Adaptive emotion-regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal can weaken the negative effect of upward comparison, while an inability to manage emotions worsens its impact. This finding shows that the impact of social comparison is not uniform across individuals, but is influenced by coping capacity and personal psychological characteristics (Ye & Gao, 2025; Frost, 2024).

In contrast to upward comparison, downward social comparison appears far less frequently in the reviewed literature. When downward comparison does occur, its effect tends to be temporarily protective for self-esteem, as individuals compare themselves with targets perceived as being in a lower condition. However, the frequency of downward comparison is relatively low because social media content rarely displays failure, difficulty, or negative aspects of life authentically (Ye & Gao, 2025).

The dominance of positive content and idealized representations makes upward comparison the norm in social media use, so the potential for downward comparison to serve as a balancing mechanism is barely utilized. The limited exploration of downward comparison in empirical studies also indicates a conceptual gap that future research needs to address, particularly through designs that explicitly consider the role of downward comparison in digital contexts (Arenz et al., 2023). Certain situational contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have been shown to reinforce the negative effect of upward comparison. Social restrictions during the lockdown period increased individuals' dependence on social media as a primary source of social interaction, making exposure to idealized content more intense. This situation contributed to a sharper decline in psychological well-being compared with normal periods (Vranken et al., 2023).

In addition, passive social media use during health emergencies has also been reported to be associated with increased depressive symptoms through mechanisms such as

vicarious traumatization and fear of missing out, which implicitly reinforce the process of upward social comparison (Wang et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025). This finding confirms that the impact of social comparison is influenced not only by individual characteristics, but also by the surrounding social and situational conditions.

Although the negative pattern of upward comparison appears dominant, variation in findings across studies shows that the intensity of social comparison's impact is influenced by platform type, frequency of use, and individuals' social comparison orientation. Visual platforms more strongly trigger body dissatisfaction and achievement-related pressure compared with narrative platforms, while individuals with a higher tendency toward social comparison experience greater psychological impact (Martinac Dorčić et al., 2023; Gong et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025).

Compared with studies from the 2010s that focused more broadly on the general effects of social media use, this review offers a more specific picture by explicitly distinguishing the upward and downward dimensions of social comparison. The emphasis on mediating mechanisms such as self-esteem, emotion regulation, and relative deprivation reflects more sophisticated methodological development in recent literature, thereby enriching understanding of the psychological processes underlying the negative impact of social media in emerging adulthood (Zhang et al., 2025).

Overall, the results of this systematic review reinforce the view that upward social comparison on social media constitutes a major psychological risk for the well-being of emerging adults. The dominance of passive use, exposure to idealized content, and the limited role of downward comparison call for greater attention to the development of interventions targeting social comparison awareness and the strengthening of emotion regulation. In addition, these findings open opportunities for future research, particularly longitudinal studies to confirm the direction of causality, as well as deeper exploration of short-video platforms and local cultural factors (Tang & He, 2025; Karayigit & Parlade, 2023).

This review is not free from limitations. First, all of the studies synthesized used correlational and cross-sectional designs, so the causal direction between social comparison and psychological well-being cannot be firmly established. Second, the literature search was limited to the Google Scholar and Scopus databases and to publications from 2022 to 2025, which means relevant studies indexed elsewhere or published outside this period may not have been captured. Third, most samples were drawn from student populations in developed countries, limiting the generalizability of the findings to more culturally diverse emerging-adult populations, including those in Indonesia. Despite these limitations, the findings carry practical implications: mental health practitioners and educators can use these findings as a basis for designing psychoeducation and intervention programs that strengthen social comparison awareness and emotion-regulation skills among emerging adults, while future researchers are encouraged to pursue longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to address the gaps identified in this review.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review concludes that social comparison on social media, particularly upward social comparison, is the dominant psychological process shaping self-evaluation and psychological well-being among individuals in emerging adulthood. The synthesis of empirical findings shows that exposure to idealized life representations on social media is consistently associated with various negative psychological outcomes, including decreased self-esteem,

increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, and dissatisfaction with achievement and appearance. In contrast, downward social comparison appears relatively rarely in the literature and does not show a significant protective role in the context of social media, and is therefore unable to offset the dominance of upward comparison's negative impact.

The main contribution of this review lies in its more explicit mapping of the upward and downward dimensions of social comparison and the underlying psychological mechanisms in the emerging-adulthood population. By highlighting the role of intrapersonal factors such as self-esteem, emotion regulation, and social comparison orientation, this review enriches understanding of how social media functions as an intense arena of self-evaluation during a vulnerable developmental phase. Recommendations for future research include the use of longitudinal designs to confirm causal direction, deeper exploration of short-video platforms, and consideration of local cultural factors. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of a more focused approach in media-psychology research, while providing a conceptual basis for further studies that can deepen understanding of the dynamics of social comparison in the digital era.

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