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The Idealized Self-representation on Social Media and Social Comparison Anxiety —Based on the Analysis of Social Comparison Theory and Self-discrepancy Theory

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Abstract. Social media has become ubiquitous in modern society. It enables people to share pictures, videos and stories, while also allowing them to peek into other people's lives. However, users typically only showcase their best, most beautiful and most successful moments. Because of this, what people see online are only a small and polished part of reality. At the same time, people spend a lot of time scrolling through others' posts, comparing themselves with others. This can lead to negative feelings. Psychologists explain this using two main theories. The first is Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, which posits that people evaluate their own worth by comparing themselves to others, especially when they do not have an objective standard. The second is Higgins's Self-Discrepancy Theory, which suggests that people compare themselves with their ideal self, and when the gap is too wide they feel anxious or unhappy. Both theories help explain why social media can create psychological pressure and negative feelings. Research shows that heavy use of social media is linked with body dissatisfaction, stress, and even depression. Understanding these psychological mechanisms is important because it can help researchers and educators better address the mental health risks confronting young people in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media, filters, false self, comparison culture, psychological stress

1. Introduction

Every day, when people unlock their phones and see their friends or strangers posting selfies, food, vacations, awards and achievements. Many people wonder, "Is my life not good enough?" Global reports say more than five billion people now use social media, and in China, teenagers spend an average of more than four hours online daily [1].

But content online rarely tells the full story. It is an "idealized" version of life, carefully chosen and filtered to look good. Scholars sometimes call this "false self" or "performative self", because people behave like performers on a stage, showing only what they want others to see [2].

Social Comparison Theory says people have a natural need to evaluate themselves by comparing with others [3]. Self-Discrepancy Theory says when the gap between one's "real self" and the "ideal self" widens, people feel anxiety and low self-esteem. On social media, both these processes become

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stronger [4]. People can now compare themselves to celebrities, influencers or top students worldwide. This makes upward comparison much more common and powerful.

Teenagers are especially vulnerable. They are still in the process of forming their identities and are highly sensitive to peer opinions [5]. Cultural factors can make this worse. In East Asian countries, for example, there is often high pressure to show academic success, family honor or beauty standards. In Western countries, the pressure may be more about lifestyle or uniqueness, but the psychological impact is similarly detrimental.

This article explores why idealized self-representations form in social media, how they induce comparison anxiety, and what strategies can help mitigate such harm. From psychological and sociological perspectives, it clearly articulates the impact of digital life on mental health.

2. Theoretical and analytical framework

2.1. Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory was developed by Leon Festinger in 1954. He suggested that when people do not have objective ways to evaluate themselves, they turn to others as a reference point. This means people are always comparing their opinions, abilities and achievements. In the offline world, such comparisons typically occur with classmates, neighbors or colleagues. In the online world, however, the number of people you can compare to is almost infinite.

There are two main types of social comparison. Upward comparison is when you compare to someone you think is better, richer or more attractive. Downward comparison, by contrast, refers to comparing oneself to those in less favorable circumstances. Upward comparison can motivate self-improvement, but it can also cause jealousy, stress and low self-esteem. Downward comparison can make you feel better temporarily but is less common online because people rarely post their failures.

On social media, upward comparison happens almost instinctively. For example, if you open Instagram and see a classmate's vacation photos, you might think, "I wish I could go there" or "Their life is better than mine." Even if you know logically that people only post their best moments, it is hard to avoid these thoughts. Over time, daily upward comparison can shape your self-image, making you think you are not good enough.

This process also happens with appearance. Filters, photo-editing tools and carefully ranged lighting make people look flawless. Others see these pictures and may feel unattractive by comparison. Research shows that repeated exposure to idealized images can reduce body satisfaction, which is a phenomenon especially pronounced among teenage girls, though it affects boys as well.

2.2. Self-Discrepancy Theory

Self-Discrepancy Theory was proposed by Edward Higgins in 1987 [4]. He said people have three main self-concepts: the actual self (how we see ourselves now), the ideal self (how we would like to be), and the ought self (how we think we should be according to others or society). When there is a gap between these selves, negative emotions emerge. a wide gap between the actual self and the ideal self triggers disappointment or sadness, while a disconnect between the actual self and the ought self induces guilt or anxiety.

Social media widens these gaps by constantly showing others' ideal selves. For example, a student might see a friend post about earning a high exam score, securing a summer internship, or

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receiving a scholarship. The viewer then compares their own actual self ("I did not get that") to their ideal self ("I should be successful too"). This gap will forster feelings of inadequacy.

Over time, such self-discrepancies manifest in chronic stress: individuals may feel perpetually inadequate, even when they exert their best efforts. This is particularly detrimental during adolescence, a period marked by the dynamic formation and solidification of personal identity.

2.3. Communication and sociological perspectives

Beyond psychology, communication and sociological perspectives offer additional frameworks to understand these issues. Tandoc et al. found that college students who used Facebook a lot felt more envy and depression [6]. Huang's meta-analysis revealed a significant correlation between increased time spent on social networking sites and reduced overall well-being [1].

Goffman's self-presentation theory compares social interaction to a theater performance [2]. He argues that individuals act as "performers" who actively manage the impressions they convey to their "audience". On social media, the stage expands globally and the audience is always watching. This makes impression management more intense. People learn to only show their highlights while concealing ordinary or negative aspects of life. As a result, the "idealized self" becomes the main version of self people present online.

This also connects to the idea of "networked publics" by Danah Boyd, who writes about how teens grow up in a world where audiences are invisible, context collapses and information is always available. This environment compels more strategic self-presentation and sustains constant social comparison [7].

3. Impact on mental health

Because social media constantly exposes people to idealized images of others' lives, it has profound effects on mental health. The most common outcomes are anxiety and lower self-esteem, but research also shows associations with depression, body dissatisfaction, and the fear of missing out (FOMO).

Daily exposure to others' highlight reels often leads to persistent upward comparison, where individuals feel they are falling behind. Over time, it can cause constant anxiety. For example, if you see classmates always going to parties, traveling or winning awards, you might think you are not social enough, not rich enough or not successful enough. This can lead to sleep disturbances, overthinking, and heightened stress [6]. Self-Discrepancy Theory clarifies the link to low self-esteem. If your actual self is far from your ideal self, you feel disappointed. Social media makes this gap larger by showing you endless examples of people who seem perfect. Even if those people are not really perfect, they create a misleading standard. Many teenagers report feeling of "not being good enough" after scrolling through their social meida feeds [4].

One of the most tangible effects appears in body image perception. Research shows that exposure to heavily edited photos diminishes individuals' satisfaction with their own bodies. Girls may feel pressure to be thinner or more conventionally attractive; boys may feel pressure to be taller or more muscular. Filters and photo-editing tools make this worse by creating a standard that no one can reach in real life. Twenge et al. find that increased time on image-based platforms is linked to higher rates of body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms in adolescents [8].

Over time, prolonged exposure to these pressures may contribute to depression. Studies show a strong link between heavy social media use and depressive symptoms, particularly among adolescents who check their phones late at night or struggle to disconnect from social platforms [8].

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Another mental health issue is FOMO. People worry that others are experiencing rewarding events from which one is excluded. When they see photos of parties or events they were not invited to, they feel left out. Przybylski et al. define FOMO as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent [9]. FOMO can make people compulsively check social media, which increases anxiety even more.

Ironically, despite its stated purpose of connecting people, excessive social media use often fosters social disconnection. Endless scrolling will result in lower face-to-face interactions, while late-night phone use disrupts sleep quality, leaving people more vulnerability to anxiety and depression. This creates a vicious cycle: social media use triggers negative emotions, which in turn drive more compulsive use.

Constantly maintaining an idealized self can induce a sense of inauthenticity. Some teens report feeling thattheir online "self" does not reflect their true identity This gap between the online self and the offline self can cause stress and confusion about who they really are. Higgins's theory helps explain this: when the actual self and the ideal self diverge too much, emotional distress intensifies [4].

The impact on mental health also varies by culture and gender. In cultures where family honor or academic success are highly valued, social comparison may focus on grades, jobs or status symbols. In cultures where beauty and lifestyle are more important, comparison tends to focus on appearance or leisure experiences. Girls and young women tend to report more appearance-related anxiety; boys may report more achievement-related stress, though both genders are adversely affected..

Despite these risks, social media is not inherently negative. It can also provide social support, information and inspiration. Some teens find communities online where they feel accepted, which can improve mental health. The critical distinction lies in usage purpose: social media harms mental health when it is used primarily for comparison, but can be beneficial when it fosters genuine connection.

4. The strategies for psychological stress

Because the effects of social media on mental health are serious, people at different levels—individuals, families, schools, platforms and governments—need to take action. Below are detailed strategies to address these challenges:

The first step is recognizing that social media is only a small part of reality. Posts are highlights, not full stories [5]. Teenagers should cultivate a critical perspective when viewing posts. For example, they can ask, "Would this person post about their bad day?" or "Could this photo be edited?" This helps reduce wrong assumptions. Schools can run media literacy classes. Schools can integrate media literacy courses into their curricula, where teachers demonstrate how filters, camera angles, and captions distort perceptions: one showing only the good parts, one showing the bad parts. This makes it clear how easy it is to manipulate reality online.

Reducing dependence on likes and comments also matters. Likes and comments do not measure a person's real value. People can remind themselves that a post with fewer likes is not a sign of failure. They can also try posting without looking at feedback for a day. Platforms could consider hiding like counts or giving users an option to turn off comments,Research indicates that concealing like counts alleviates the pressure to post "perfect" content and encourages more authentic self-expression [10].

Limiting screen time is another essential strategy. Teens can use a timer or app that tracks their usage of electronic devices. Many smartphones now include built-in "digital well-being" features for

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this purpose. Even small adjustments, such as banning phones during meals or avoiding scrolling after 12 a.m., can noticeably improve mood [8].

Building positive and supportive communities also plays a key role. Individuals should join or form supportive online groups to counter comparison, and concentrate on learning, hobbies, or mutual support rather than competing against each other; for instance, joining an online art group where others provide friendly criticism instead of mocking someone who can't yet draw well enough is a good way to helps members avoid harmful comparisons. Families can model healthy behavior. Parents can talk openly about the difference between online and offline life, creating phone-free zones (e.g., during dinner) to foster face-to-face communication. Supportive families provide teens a safe space to share their worries about social media [5]. Schools can organize workshops on resilience, self-esteem and digital wellness, invite mental health professionals to talk about social comparison and self-discrepancy, and set up peer mentoring, where older students help younger ones handle online pressure.

Social media platforms bear significant responsibility. They can redesign algorithms to promote diverse content instead of only rewarding extreme beauty or wealth [11]. They can add time-use reminders, optional filters, and private modes, and make follower counts invisible or optional. Governments can set guidelines for protecting minors online, similar to regulations governing children's advertising. Some EU states have already enacted regulations requiring influencers to clearly label sponsored content or edited images, helping audiences distinguish between reality and fabrication.

By balancing the time spent online with offline activities, such as sports, art, volunteering, and even just hanging out with friends in real life, teens are able to build up their confidence and get true feedback from real life instead of receiving empty likes and comments. This fosters a more stable and authentic sense of self.

Ultimately, one might practice self-compassion, which means being considerate towards oneself if feeling inadequate. Instead of fixating on comparisons, they should focus on their own personal growth. Strategies like journaling, mindfulness meditation, or confiding in a trusted friend can help cultivate this mindset.

5. Conclusion

This paper, based on Social Comparison Theory and Self-Discrepancy Theory, showed how idealized self-representation on social media affects mental health by revealing that selective posting, algorithm-driven popularity and cultural expectations amplify upward comparison, which causes anxiety, low self-esteem and self-doubt. Age, gender, and cultural factors further render certain groups more vulnerable to these negative effects. This paper also highlighted that constant exposure to idealized images widens the gap between the real self and the ideal self, making emotional pressure harder to ignore. Although social media connects people across the world, it also harbors hidden risks. Mitigating these harm requires action at many levels: individuals should build media literacy and self-worth independent of likes, families and schools should teach resilience and healthy online habits, platforms should redesign features to reduce comparison pressure, and policymakers should support initiatives and regulations to protect digital mental health. Supporting young people entails not only equipping them with coping skills but also addressing environmental triggers, including the design features, ranking systems, and visibility cues on social media platforms that subtly push users to measure their worth through likes, followers, and curated images.

Future research should explore differences in social media's impact across age, gender or culture, investigate how platform design influences mental health, and test which interventions work best. As

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society becomes increasingly digital, building a healthier online culture will be just as important as developing new technologies. With combined efforts from individuals, educators, designers and governments, social media can evolve from a space of constant comparison to a space of authentic connection, where young people, in particular, can express themselves without being constrained by unattainable standards and thrive with sound mental health in the digital age.

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