Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

Upward Social Comparison, Perceived Social Rank, and Self-Concept among Young Adults on Social Media

Helly Jeong

Tsinghsiang International School Daoxiang Lake, Beijing, China
H2028111@thisdl.edu.cn

Abstract. Social comparison and social rank inference prompted by social media, and their impacts on young adults' self-concept, have been extensively studied. Researchers have found that social media platforms encourage upward social comparison by exposing young users to highly curated pictures. While most research examines the associations among social media use, self-concept, and social comparison, the cognitive mechanism by which individuals construct perceived social rank and experience changes in self-concept remains insufficiently understood. Thus, this paper investigates the role that perceived social rank plays in the relationship between upward social comparison and idealized online self-presentation and self-concept among young adults. A review of the relevant literature was conducted. This paper found that young adults use social comparison as an evaluative tool to develop social rank. They place themselves in an inferior position in relation to highly idealized and unrealistic pictures on social media. The perceptions of lower social rank may gradually alter self-evaluation and self-concept. These findings may contribute to a better understanding of the cognitive mechanisms linking social-media use to depression and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Social Comparison, Social Rank, Social Media, Self-Concept

1. Introduction

Humans are fundamentally social beings who constantly evaluate themselves in relation to others. Social comparisons play a crucial role in self-concepts, identities, and psychological well-being. Unlike offline settings, social media exposes the public to a continuous stream of highly curated and idealized self-presentation, fueling upward social comparisons. Exposure to idealized self-presentation may encourage individuals both to compare themselves with others and to evaluate their relative position within a perceived social hierarchy. According to social rank theory, perceived lower social rank is associated with anxiety, depression, shame, and a sense of inferiority [1]. Although many studies have demonstrated the relationship between social media use, self-concept, and social comparison, these associations are often examined directly. Relatively little research has investigated the cognitive processes through which individuals construct perceived social rank and whether this process helps explain changes in self-concept. This inspires the following research question: What role does perceived social rank play in the relationship between upward social

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

comparison with idealized online self-presentations and self-concept among young adults? This inquiry will be investigated through a review of the literature.

2. Social comparison as a mechanism of self-evaluation

Humans are naturally driven to evaluate their opinions and abilities in relation to others. Festinger provides a conceptual framework that demonstrates the nature of social comparison [2]. The author claims that people appraise their opinions and abilities by comparing them with the opinions and abilities of others, and vice versa [2]. The author pinpoints that the function of this external and internal appraisal is to yield an accurate evaluation of one's abilities [2]. Thus, the process is always active and unidirectional, meaning individuals may actively search for a comparable target in the environment without necessarily being influenced in return. Furthermore, when a reliable and objective measure exists, one will cease evaluating themselves using social comparison [2]. However, although Festinger's theory serves as a foundational framework for social comparison, its emphasis on rational human beings limits its ability to explain emotional, identity-related, and externally triggered forms of comparison. More importantly, he assumes social comparison as a self-motivated action and overlooks externally motivated ones. These limitations are then addressed by Wood, who expands the preceding theory by emphasizing comparison goals, social cognition, personal attributes, and the role of the surrounding environment [3]. Contrary to previous theory, which proposes the function of social comparison as solitary, the author articulates that an individual's goals could vary and have considerable influence on the comparison processes [3]. For example, people who seek self-improvement may engage in upward comparison, and people who seek self-enhancement may engage in downward comparisons. Additionally, the authors proclaim that individuals define themselves in relation to others in their social environment [3]. This statement demonstrates that comparison is not solely a self-motivated initiation, but that an impact could be imposed by people's environment. Together, Festinger and Wood show that social comparison can be both self-initiated and environmentally prompted, which provides a useful foundation for understanding comparison processes on social media.

3. Idealized comparison targets on social media

Social media presents individuals with vast idealized self-presentations. Boyd proposes a comprehensive definition of social networking sites (SNSs) as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" [4]. This definition suggests that SNSs enable editability, allowing users to selectively construct, revise, and polish their self-presentations before making them visible to others. In other words, SNS users can selectively choose how to portray themselves and revise information that they share online. Fox et al. complicated this tendency, stating that much of the content posted online is self-focused and optimized for social approval or positive feedback. Furthermore, based on objectification theory, the author proclaims that women, compared to men, demonstrate greater focus on their appearance, sexualize themselves more often, and post more selfies [5]. Thus, the author considers these two as the leading factors that mediate photo editing [5]. Due to the use of photo editing and cropping technologies, users could increase the physical attractiveness and likability of their posts. Harris et al., after conducting both quantitative and qualitative surveys using Instagram, observed the halo effect in the online self-presentational process. An aesthetically pleasing Instagram account or account holder will be

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

perceived in a positive light [6]. This demonstrates that users whose posts appear attractive in a few aspects, such as appearance, career, or background, could be perceived as overly positive in unrelated areas. The idealized nature of social media posts is intensified by this overgeneralization because users may infer the account owner's overall success, happiness, or social value from a limited set of attractive cues. Together, these studies show that SNSs allow users to selectively modify their online self-presentation, which, in combination with the use of editing and cropping technologies, improves the attractiveness of their posts and images. As a result, social media enables an abundant number of idealized comparison targets to be presented to users.

4. Upward social comparison in social media environments

Social media exposes users to highly curated and idealized content, such as selectively displayed achievements, edited pictures, and polished lifestyles, which encourages users to engage in upward social comparisons. Le Blanc-Brillon et al. assert that a large number of idealized targets fosters upward social comparison, where they compare themselves to seemingly superior others [7]. Frequent use of SNSs, they imply, is associated with an increase in these upward comparisons [7]. This demonstrates that constant and prolonged exposure to idealized targets facilitates unfavorable self-evaluation. However, Fox et al. challenge this singular account of comparison by claiming that users often evaluate themselves by identifying similar others and noticing favorable and unfavorable discrepancies [5]. By using objectification theory, they attribute the underlying motivation to pressure from peers and media adhering to societal beauty norms [5]. Social media provides instantaneous and widespread access to photos, making it a persuasive source for mediating body comparison.

5. From upward comparison to perceived social rank

Upward social comparison, prompted by social media, leads individuals to infer their relative social rank. Social comparison has been viewed as an adaptive mechanism that helps individuals evaluate relative strength, anticipate competition, and position themselves within dominance hierarchies [8, 9]. Parker proclaimed, as cited by Allen and Gilbert, that animals evaluate the probability of winning against their counterparts to maximize their survival, forming the structure that encourages one to challenge the weaker and submit to the stronger [8]. Thus, social comparison is used to judge who is weaker or stronger, which facilitates the formation of social ranks. The author demonstrated humans' tendency to compare their relative similarity to others, and emphasized that the degree of "fit" as a member of their group is significant for a sense of belonging and kinship [8]. This pattern also applies to social media settings, where highly curated images provide users with visible standards for judging their own popularity, attractiveness, competence, or social value [9]. While Allen and Gilbert attribute the transition of upward social comparison to the inference of relative social rank as a sense of belonging, Muller and Fayant expand their claim by noting the formation of a standard. According to Muller and Fayant, individuals perceive a condition, if superior to their current situation, as a standard that they should attain [10]. Thus, if people are outperformed by someone else, they may interpret the discrepancy as failure to achieve what should be achieved in a given situation [9]. With that being said, users may interpret online content as a set of normative standards, such as beauty versus ugliness, wealth versus poverty, or success versus failure. This process of matching features with a quality could be conducted without correct verification. For example, individuals may consider a normal and natural feature, such as body hair, as an undesirable trait, and perceive it as ugly instead. Thus, with kinds of extreme standards being constructed, such as beauty

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

versus the ugly, rich versus the poor, individuals are then inclined to compare and situate themselves within their self-constructed spectrum. Together, Allen, Gilbert, Muller, and Fayant demonstrate that social comparison leads to inference of relative social rank by facilitating self-constructed standards and humans' desire for a sense of belonging.

6. Perceived social rank and self-concept

Once these idealized representations are interpreted as normative standards, repeated perceptions of falling below those standards may negatively influence self-evaluation and self-concept. Fox and Vendemia found that both women and men reported feeling worse after viewing attractive photographs of others and feeling better after viewing less attractive photographs [5]. Furthermore, compared to men, women put more effort into cultivating a socially desirable physical appearance online by editing photos [5]. Upward social comparison also contributes more adverse mental impact on women than men [5]. These findings suggest that exposure to idealized appearance-related images may lead users to perceive themselves as occupying a lower social position. In other words, happiness felt while seeing unflattering pictures [5] may imply that users' perceived social rank is elevated when exposed to undesirable pictures, and sadness experienced when users are presented with attractive pictures may suggest users' perceived social rank is lowered. It highlights the fluctuation of self-concept through social media. Jennifer D et al. focus on how changes in self-concept are associated with personality traits, and introduce the concept of self-concept clarity: the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable [11]. The authors discover that low self-concept clarity (SCC) is associated with high Neuroticism, low self-efficacy, low conscientiousness, low agreeableness, chronic self-analysis, low internal state awareness, and a ruminative form of self-focused attention [11]. Gilbert and Allen explain the underlying mechanism, stating that rank judgments lead people to assign labels to themselves that imply "a reduced status with reduced eligibility for participating in social relationships" [9]. When individuals perceive themselves as lower in rank, they may internalize negative labels and come to see themselves as less eligible for acceptance, support, or participation in social relationships. This contributes to submissive behavior, in which individuals choose to back down or inhibit self-promotion in fear of rejection, being disliked, or being counterchallenged, which would result in a fall in status or exclusion [9]. Gilbert strongly substantiates this claim by arguing "social anxiety may be a form of competitive anxiety that is triggered in contexts in which individuals see themselves as relatively low in status hierarchy of desirable attributes or at risk for losing status (and control over social resources, e.g., approval, help or support) by being seen as having undesirable attributes" [1]. Users may engage in heightened self-surveillance during social interaction because they fear that visible mistakes could trigger rejection or further reduce their perceived social status.

7. Discussion

Social media exposes users to highly curated and unrealistic profiles and pictures. This prompts upward comparison, providing an evaluative tool for users to infer their social rank. The perceptions of lower social rank gradually alter self-concept and self-evaluation, potentially weakening self-concept clarity, self-image, and social assertiveness.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

7.1. Areas of agreement and disagreement

Many studies have found that social media exposes highly curated pictures and is associated with upward comparison and feelings of inferiority. They understood that the comparison process could vary based on the users' intention. For example, users may engage in upward comparison to pursue self-improvement, downward comparison to restore self-esteem, and lateral comparison to assess belonging or similarity. While most of them agreed on the comparison process and its relationship with social media use, their explanations of the underlying mechanisms and motivations differ in important ways.

According to Festinger, people compare only to attain an accurate evaluation of their abilities and opinions. He assumes humans are rational beings who, if a precise objective measure exists, one ceases comparing with their decided target [2]. Thus, social comparison, he renders, is an active process that individuals actively control [2]. Wood criticizes this speculation of human tendencies, and claims people's intention has substantial influence on the comparison process [3]. Furthermore, she argues that social comparison is a bidirectional process that could be imposed on individuals by their environment [3]. Disagreement has also been found about the relationship between social media use and the feeling of inferiority. Fox et al. explain the cause by introducing the objectification theory, and underscore that individuals may examine their worth through an external perspective [5]. When people compare themselves with curated images online, the comparison outcomes may closely tie to their overall sense of compliance with their popularity and attractiveness. This conjecture is supported by Fox et al. 's research outcome, in which a perceived lack of physical attractiveness fuels negative body image and low self-clarity [5]. Furthermore, Fox et al. emphasize that women are inclined to engage in higher levels of social comparison compared to men due to the objectification they have grown used to, which in turn predicts negative effects of upward social comparison [5]. This perspective suggests that idealized online self-representation may intensify upward comparison by encouraging users to evaluate themselves from an externalized perspective. Muller et al. challenge the inclusion of objectification theory as they believe that when individuals encounter pictures with desirable qualities or superior features, the pictures become a standard, or a basic criterion that an individual must attain [10]. Thus, the failure to attain the standards, or the perceived discrepancy between the norm and themselves, may contribute to feelings of inferiority and exclusion.

7.2. Critical evaluation

By and large, reviewed studies in this paper use empirical designs and validated psychological measures, strengthening the evidential basis of their conclusions. Nevertheless, the generalizability of their results varies because they differ in sample size, demographic composition, cultural context, and research design. For instance, some studies' data were collected from small and limited sample sizes [6, 7], which may reduce the external validity of the findings, increasing the difficulty of applying their findings to broader populations.

7.3. Explanation of differences

Studies may have produced different results due to various reasons. One possible explanation is that the studies examined populations differ in cultural backgrounds. For example, while many studies focus on Western samples, Jennifer D et al. compare Japanese and Canadian participants, accounting for cultural background as a factor that influences the relationship between self-concept clarity and

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

personality traits [11]. Furthermore, differences in methodologies also need to be taken into account. For example, some studies use subjective interviews, while others use self-developed or standardized tests to measure variables such as emotion and social comparison. More importantly, some conceptual frameworks were developed long before the advent of social media [3, 4]. Therefore, their perspective regarding social comparison may fail to consider the accessibility and highly curated nature of contemporary online comparison targets.

7.4. Research gaps

An important unanswered question regards how users evaluate the accuracy of the standards they construct when they treat online images as norms of beauty, success, or social desirability. Additionally, it also remains unclear how individuals account for relatively immutable personal characteristics when comparing themselves with idealized online targets. Furthermore, most of the studies focus on younger populations, who are more prone to compare appearance, attractiveness, and financial situation on social media compared with older populations [12]. Whether older adults engage in similar forms of social comparison, and what are some characteristics they compare on social media, remains understudied. More importantly, the use of subjective reviews is vulnerable to social desirability and leading biases; more robust research designs should be considered.

8. Conclusion

Young populations use social comparison as an evaluative tool to develop social rank. On SNSs, users are constantly engaged in social comparison as they are exposed to highly idealized and unrealistic pictures, which allows them to infer their social rank. These repeated perceptions of lower social rank may contribute to changes in self-evaluation and self-concept. Future studies should investigate understudied gaps, such as overlooked demographics, and the underlying psychological mechanisms through reliable and empirical methodologies. Understanding the relationship among social comparison, social rank, and alteration of self-concept is significant because it provides valuable insights into the cognitive mechanisms of depression and mental well-being related to social media use.

References

[1] Gilbert, P. (2001). Evolution and social anxiety: The role of attraction, social competition, and social hierarchies. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 24*(4), 723–751.
[2] Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations, 7*(2), 117–140.
[3] Wood, J. V. (1989). Theory and research concerning social comparisons of personal attributes. *Psychological Bulletin, 106*(2), 231–248.
[4] Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*(1), 210–230.
[5] Fox, J., & Vendemia, M. A. (2016). Selective self-presentation and social comparison through photographs on social networking sites. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 19*(10), 593–600.
[6] Harris, E., & Bardey, A. C. (2019). Do Instagram profiles accurately portray personality? An investigation into idealized online self-presentation. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 871.
[7] Le Blanc-Brillon, J., Fortin, J.-S., Lafrance, L., & Hétu, S. (2025). The associations between social comparison on social media and young adults' mental health. *Frontiers in Psychology, 16*, 1597241.
[8] Allan, S., & Gilbert, P. (1995). A social comparison scale: Psychometric properties and relationship to psychopathology. *Personality and Individual Differences, 19*(3), 293–299.
[9] Gilbert, P., Price, J., & Allan, S. (1995). Social comparison, social attractiveness and evolution: How might they be related? *New Ideas in Psychology, 13*(2), 149–165.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37062

[10] Muller, D., & Fayant, M.-P. (2010). On being exposed to superior others: Consequences of self-threatening upward social comparisons. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 4*(8), 621–634.
[11] Campbell, J. D., Trapnell, P. D., Heine, S. J., Katz, I. M., Lavallee, L. F., & Lehman, D. R. (1996). Self-concept clarity: Measurement, personality correlates, and cultural boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*(1), 141–156.
[12] Ozimek, P., & Bierhoff, H.-W. (2016). Facebook use depending on age: The influence of social comparisons. *Computers in Human Behavior, 61*, 271–279.