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The Influence of Social Comparison Psychology on an Individual's Daily Emotional State (Anxiety and Happiness)

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Abstract. As social media has become deeply embedded in daily life, maladaptive social comparison has emerged as an important factor contributing to emotional exhaustion, self-denial, and persistent psychological stress in individuals. This study focuses on the dual mechanisms of social comparison, and conducts a systematic analysis from three dimensions: multi-dimensional value cognition, the regulation of social platform browsing behavior, and the construction of flexible comparison boundaries. This paper clarifies the identification criteria for three categories of harmful social comparison, namely, selecting unattainable reference objects inconsistent with individual development demands, blindly benchmarking across heterogeneous dimensions, and continuously engaging in negative social comparison without accounting for differences in resource endowments. The results indicate that individuals could dynamically adjust their comparison targets, comparison dimensions and subsequent comparison strategies, so as to select and retain positive comparison behaviors with practical reference value, eliminate ineffective comparisons that easily induce anxiety and self-deprecation, and ultimately transform social comparison from a potential source of emotional risk into a positive driving force for self-growth. This study extends existing research on micro-intervention paths in the field of social comparison, and provides a theoretical reference for individuals to carry out emotional self-regulation and optimize the content ecology of social platforms.

Keywords: Anxiety, happiness, social comparison

1. Introduction

Before the widespread use of social media, social comparison was limited to offline acquaintance circles and specific social scenarios. This indicates that the frequency of such comparison was low, the scope was narrow, and individuals' reference frames for social comparison remained relatively stable.

In the digital wave, the development of mobile social networking platform has greatly changed the way of social comparison. Social comparison has changed from a "specific event" to a normal behavior, and has penetrated into fragmented time such as commuting, lunch break and bedtime. The mobile platform enables individuals to continuously contact other people's diversified and frequently updated information in these scenarios, thus making social comparison more sustainable

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and frequent [1, 2]. This normalized social comparison phenomenon is consistent with the existing research [3].

The increase of comparison frequency may strengthen individual self-awareness. When individuals keep making social comparisons in fragmented time, and the comparison objects and situations are highly diverse, they are more likely to perceive the significant differences between themselves and others. For example, when individuals repeatedly contact others who perform well in multiple fields, they may pay more attention to their perceived deficiencies. This perceived gap may weaken an individual's self-esteem, strengthen negative self belief, and adversely affect their emotions and behaviors, thus causing negative effects on their mental health and daily functions [3]. This view is consistent with the existing research [4] on the impact of comparative differences on individuals.

Therefore, exploring the impact of social comparison on two key emotions - Daily anxiety and well-being - has become an important direction that can not be ignored in the current research. This is of great significance for understanding the psychological changes of individuals in the digital age and promoting their mental health.

2. The definitions and characteristics of anxiety and happiness

Social comparison affects anxiety and happiness. Meanwhile, digital technology has made online social interaction more developed, leading to a significant increase in the prevalence of online social comparison [5].

2.1. The definition and characteristics of anxiety

Anxiety is a multifaceted and complex emotional state. From a physiological perspective, anxiety triggers a series of physical reactions, as if the body has entered a state of alertness. At the psychological level, anxiety often leads to continuous repetitive thinking, which affects the allocation of attention to the current task, accompanied by excessive worry and unease about possible future outcomes. In more severe cases, individuals may make catastrophic predictions about what is about to happen.

2.2. The definition and characteristics of happiness

Happiness can be understood as a positive emotional state, which is characterized by subtle and continuous subjective pleasure. It comes from the continuous evaluation and integration of positive experiences in daily life. Obtaining social recognition and achieving goals can promote the generation of subjective satisfaction and realized well-being. From a physiological perspective, well-being is related to a series of relaxed, restorative and pleasant physical reactions. By gaining recognition and achieving goals, individuals will have a sense of satisfaction and joy.

From the perspective of physical feeling, happiness will bring a series of relaxed and pleasant physiological reactions, such as the rise of the corners of the mouth and the relaxation of the muscles of the whole body. From the perspective of psychological experience, happiness can make individuals form positive expectations for the future and enhance their confidence, making them more confident that difficulties can be successfully overcome. In short, happiness is a comprehensive psychological and physiological experience produced by individuals when they perceive the good things in life, which is embodied in satisfaction, pleasure and hope for the future.

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3. The impact of social comparison on anxiety

3.1. Upward comparison: a breeding ground for anxiety

A large number of empirical studies show that upward social comparison is an important positive predictor of the increase in daily anxiety. Studies have pointed out that long-term repeated comparisons with others who are more successful than themselves may magnify individuals' perception of their own shortcomings and lead to persistent frustration and helplessness. The accumulation of such negative emotions may eventually lead to the continuous rise of individual anxiety [6].

In the context of the wide spread of digital information, social media platforms have significantly amplified the psychological impact of social comparison. Research has confirmed that social media users tend to carry out selective self presentation, focusing on the display of idealized living conditions and personal achievements, so as to jointly build a well-designed and nearly perfect virtual social environment [7]. When individuals are immersed in this environment for a long time and frequently compare themselves with these idealized others, their sensitivity to self-evaluation differences and anxiety levels may be significantly improved [8].

3.2. Downward comparison: increased anxiety under dual effects

Unlike upward comparison, downward comparison has more complex effects.

Research shows that in the short term, downward comparison can indeed give individuals a temporary sense of self-satisfaction [9]. When people engage in downward comparison, a sense of superiority gradually forms in their hearts. This sense of superiority can to some extent alleviate the current stress and anxiety, although short-term downward comparison may bring immediate emotional relief.

This behavioral pattern will fuel persistent subconscious anxiety, because individualswill gradually develop an unconscious worry. This potential worry will remain latent in the cognitive system for a long time. Over time, the cumulative effect of this long-term low-level anxiety will in turn amplify the individual's stress response. Eventually, they will be trapped in a self-reinforcing vicious cycle.

In conclusion, whether it is upward or downward comparison, it may have varying degrees of impact on an individual's anxiety level. Therefore, people need to view social comparison more rationally, avoid falling into the trap of comparison, and thereby better manage emotions and maintain mental health.

4. The impact of social comparison on happiness

4.1. The effect of upward comparison segmentation

Upward social comparison has a two-way regulatory effect on individual well-being [9]. When the goal represented by the comparison object is achievable, and the individual believes that the gap between himself and the goal is within a controllable range, appropriate upward comparison can stimulate intrinsic motivation, so as to improve subjective well-being. Empirical research shows that parallel comparison can significantly promote individuals' perception of interpersonal empathy and sense of belonging, and will not cause destructive self-evaluation differences, so it can lay a solid cognitive foundation for long-term and stable well-being [6].

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4.2. Improving happiness through parallel comparison

"Comparing with individuals in similar situations can help individuals generate emotional resonance and obtain a sense of belonging, thus providing a strong basis for the stability of well-being." existing studies have clearly pointed out that parallel comparison makes it easier for individuals to obtain empathy and a sense of belonging without causing a strong psychological gap, so it can provide a more stable basis for well-being [6].

Take a group of young entrepreneurs in the early stage of entrepreneurship as an example, they may face similar difficulties and challenges such as insufficient funds, fierce market competition and lack of management experience. In the process of mutual exchange and comparison, they can share each other's experience and lessons, and understand and support each other. When one of the entrepreneurs encounters a setback, the other entrepreneurs can feel it and give encouragement and help. This empathy and sense of belonging make every entrepreneur feel that he is not alone, thus enhancing his confidence and courage to deal with difficulties. In the process of pursuing entrepreneurial goals together, happiness will also be accumulated and enhanced in an atmosphere of mutual support.

4.3. The blunting of happiness brought about by social media

In the current social media environment, people tend to selectively show their success, so as to create an ideal and not completely in line with the reality of daily life. This environment makes individuals more vulnerable to the influence of "perfect life" presented by others when browsing social media information, and thus forms an inappropriate cognition of their own life.

For example, an ordinary office worker may unconsciously compare his own life with the colorful life displayed by others on social media. In the process of comparison, he often ignores the ordinary but precious moments in his life, such as the love from his family, the company of his friends and the stability of his work. As time goes on, he may gradually reduce his perception of his own happiness and generate dissatisfaction and anxiety about his current life, making it difficult for happiness to be stably generated from daily life experience [10]. In conclusion, social comparison has a profound impact on an individual's sense of happiness through various forms such as upward comparison, parallel comparison, and comparison in the social media environment.

Correctly understanding and grasping the mechanism of social comparison is of great practical significance for individuals to enhance self - awareness and increase happiness. Individuals may benefit from using comparison selectively: choosing relevant and attainable targets for learning, limiting repeated exposure to idealized online content, and evaluating personal progress against realistic goals in order to protect daily happiness and achieve a healthier and more positive life state.

5. Suggestion

Individuals should focus their attention on their own growth and development, taking their own growth as the core. They should clearly define their personal development goals and paths, and reduce the anxiety and internal consumption caused by blindly comparing themselves with others in multiple dimensions. For example, in career development, individuals can refer to others' experiences to identify actionable skill development paths and feasible career planning frameworks, while avoiding taking others' promotion speed or salary level as the primary criterion for evaluating their own value and progress.

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Social media is an important scenario that triggers social comparisons. Individuals need to reasonably control the ineffective browsing time on social media. What is presented on social media is often the carefully selected "highlight moments" of others. Excessive browsing can easily lead to self-deprecation and emotional distress. Individuals need to reasonably control the ineffective browsing time on social media, and adopt diversified strategies including content filtering, negative information flow management, and unfollowing accounts that easily trigger negative self-evaluation, so as to reduce unnecessary social comparisons induced by social platforms.

People should reduce the bondage of a single comparison dimension on emotions. Social comparisons should not be limited to a specific dimension, such as academic performance, appearance, etc. It should be recognized that an individual's value and abilities are multi-dimensional, covering professional competence, interpersonal relationships, moral resilience, creativity, and the capacity for continuous learning, rather than being confined to a single indicator such as academic performance or physical appearance.

6. Conclusion

Social comparison has a dual mechanism on an individual's anxiety and happiness. Appropriate social comparison, such as moderate upward comparison (comparing with more outstanding individuals), can stimulate an individual's striving motivation, promote self-improvement, and enhance happiness after achieving goals; downward comparison (comparing with those in a worse situation) can alleviate negative emotions and enhance self-worth. However, excessive upward comparison is likely to cause individuals to feel inferior, anxious, and frustrated, lower their self-evaluation, and reduce happiness; blind comparison will make individuals ignore their own advantages and generate dissatisfaction with life.

Inappropriate comparison methods constitute the core driving factor of emotional internal consumption. A comparison can be defined as psychologically harmful when individuals repeatedly select unattainable reference targets, conduct cross-dimensional comparisons that are completely irrelevant to their own development needs, disregard objective gaps in resource endowments and situational conditions between themselves and the comparison objects, or persist in comparison behaviors even after continuous negative emotional experiences. Whether it is upward comparison that excessively focuses on others' advantages or blind comparison across unrelated dimensions, both types of behavior will induce negative emotional experiences and sustained psychological pressure in individuals.

Specifically, individuals should adjust the comparison objects, comparison dimensions, and behaviors according to their own development stages. Those comparisons that can provide genuine reference information and bring about constructive development motivations should be retained; while those comparisons that continuously trigger anxiety, self-deprecation, and helplessness should be reduced, so as to effectively obtain beneficial information from social comparisons.

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