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Social Comparison, Digital Distraction, And Depressive Symptoms Among Social Media Users

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Abstract

The widespread use of social media has intensified concern regarding its possible effects on mental health, particularly depressive symptoms. Although existing studies have often focused on the amount of time spent on social media, less attention has been given to the behavioral processes through which digital engagement may influence emotional wellbeing. This study examines the relationship between social comparison, digital distraction, and depressive symptoms among social media users. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed using secondary data. After excluding non-users, the final analytical sample consisted of 478 active social media users. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression were used to analyze the data. The findings show that both social comparison and digital distraction are positively associated with depressive symptoms. However, digital distraction emerged as the stronger predictor in the regression model. Although depressive symptoms were higher among respondents who spent more time on social media, time spent did not remain statistically significant after behavioral variables were included. These results suggest that the emotional consequences of social media use are shaped more by the ways users engage with platforms than by duration of use alone. The study highlights the importance of examining specific digital behaviors when assessing mental health outcomes and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how social media engagement relates to depressive symptoms.

Keywords: social media use; depressive symptoms; social comparison; digital distraction; mental health; young adults

1. Introduction

The fast growth of social media has altered the communication and interaction patterns and consumption of information in societies. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Tik Tok have become part of everyday life, especially among young adults, which provides a platform to connect, express themselves, and socialize. Nevertheless, in addition to these advantages, there has been increasing concern about how the use of social media may affect mental health, particularly depressive symptoms. In early empirical studies, a strong correlation has always been established between social media use and negative psychological health outcomes, such as depression and perceived social isolation (Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017). Such results have made social media a very important field of research in modern social and behavioral studies.

Subsequent research has attempted to improve on this knowledge by investigating patterns and intensity of use. As an example, studies have shown that various groups of social media use are related to different degrees of depressive and anxiety symptoms, showing that the patterns of use may be as significant as the total exposure (Shensa et al., 2018). Simultaneously, there is also a growing evidence of a population-wide scope, indicating that the higher the screen time, the less the psychological well-being, especially in adolescents and young adults (Twenge and Campbell, 2018). This relationship is further supported by experimental results, which indicated that loneliness and depressive symptoms could be reduced with a restricted use of social media, which would indicate a possible causal pathway (Hunt et al., 2018). Collectively, these studies demonstrate the increasing worry that the use of social media can be involved in the worsening mental health outcomes. In spite of these results, the correlation of social media use and depression is not that simple. Recent studies have highlighted the complexity surrounding this association and have indicated that the direction of influence might not be in

one way. As an illustration, people with depressive symptoms might be more inclined to use social media more, which suggests a potential reverse cause factor (Hartanto et al., 2021). On the same note, extensive data analyses have revealed that the linkage between digital technology use and well-being is comparatively trivial and context-specific, demanding overly deterministic interpretations (Orben and Przybylski, 2019). These views demonstrate the necessity to go beyond simplistic models and to consider the behavioral processes that can be underlying and that may provide the answer to the relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms. Social comparison is one of those mechanisms as it is inherent to the design of social networking platforms. Users often have access to highly edited images of other people, which may contribute to upward comparison and sense of inadequacy. The increasing literature indicates that these comparison activities can decrease subjective well-being, especially when they compare themselves to imagined social perfection (Verduyn et al., 2017). Meanwhile, there is another significant mechanism emerging research has indicated: digital distraction. The nature of social media is such that users are meant to be drawn to the platform and to maintain the attention, which in many cases results in the fragmented attention, multitasking and less control of cognitive functions. Research related to the use of media has demonstrated that these trends may disrupt self-regulation and lead to procrastination and diminished psychological rest (Reinecke and Hofmann, 2016). Moreover, there are problematic patterns of social media use that are associated with various psychological challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and fear of missing out (Dhir et al., 2018). Problematic or excessive use of social media has also been found to be an important predictor of negative mental health outcomes, especially in younger populations, in large-scale studies (Bányai et al., 2017). These results indicate that the time one spends on social media is not important, but the type of interactions and patterns of behavior related to it. Hence, the analysis of particular processes like social comparison and digital distraction could be the key to a more accurate picture of the effects of social media on mental health. Considering these factors, the current research will seek to explore the correlation between social comparison, digital distraction, and depressive symptoms among social media users. The study aims to make a contribution to a more sophisticated perspective on the processes in this way: it does not pay attention to the total time spent on social media but directs attention at the behavioral mechanisms that can determine the impact of engagement with social media on the state of psychological well-being.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design that is quantitative to investigate the relationship among social comparison, digital distraction, and depressive symptoms among social media users. The quantitative design was considered to be suitable as the research aims to evaluate quantitative associations between behavioral and psychological variables and relies on statistical methods. The cross-sectional design also enables one to analyze these relationships on a single observational frame.

2.2 Data Source and Sample

The analysis was based on a secondary dataset (Ahmed, 2023), comprising 481 observations. The dataset was adequate in the current study since it comprises demographic features, trends of social media use, and self-reported measures of emotional wellbeing. The sample is composed of the respondents of diverse demographic backgrounds, which allows the study to investigate the suggested relationships in a socially diverse group of social media users. Three participants who said they did not use social media were not included in the final analysis, leaving an analytical sample of 478 participants who used social media.

2.3 Variable Measurement

Depressive symptoms were the dependent variable, and they were measured on a five-point scale based on how often the respondents said that they felt depressed or down. Social comparison and digital distraction were the main independent variables. The social comparison was measured by the questions that tapped into the tendency of social media to compare with more successful people and into the tendency to seek validation due to platform features. The indicators of purposeless use of social media, distraction during task execution, distraction being easily avoided, and the inability to focus were used to measure digital distraction. Moreover, age, gender, and hours spent on social media daily were also included as control variables so as to capture all the variations that are related to demographic and usage patterns that can influence depressive symptoms.

2.4 Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics were first computed to describe the features of the sample and distribution of study variables. Scale based variables were measured in terms of means and standard deviations whereas categorical variables were measured in terms of frequencies and percentages. The analysis was followed by correlation analysis to determine how strong and in what direction the relationship between social comparison and digital distraction was as well as the depressive symptoms. To further the discussion, a multiple linear regression was conducted to approximate how much social comparison and digital

distraction help predict depressive symptoms after adjusting out age, gender and the amount of time spent on social media daily. This method of analysis offers a brief yet strong foundation on which the study objectives can be analyzed.

3. Results

3.1 Sample Characteristics

The analysis involved 478 active social media users, having left out three respondents who said that they did not use social media. The average age of the respondents was 26.10 years (SD = 9.88) and the age of respondents was 13-91 years. The sample comprised of 263 females (55.0%), 208 males (43.5%), and 7 outside the gender binary (1.5%), as shown in Table 1. Occupation wise the majority respondents were university students (60.9%), salaried workers (27.2%), school students (10.3%), and retired persons (1.7%). The frequency of use of social media was fairly high among the sample daily. The highest percentage of the respondents indicated that they used the social media more than 5 hours per day (24.3%), and the least percentage was 6.9% who used the social media less than 1 hour per day. Such distribution suggests that the data set represents a population that has a significant involvement with the digital platforms. Figure 1 demonstrates the respective change in the depressive symptoms over time-use groups.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of respondents (N = 478)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	263	55.0
	Male	208	43.5
	Other/Non-binary	7	1.5
Occupation	University Student	291	60.9
	Salaried Worker	130	27.2
	School Student	49	10.3
	Retired	8	1.7
Daily time spent on social media	Less than an Hour	33	6.9
	Between 1 and 2 hours	68	14.2
	Between 2 and 3 hours	101	21.1
	Between 3 and 4 hours	93	19.5
	Between 4 and 5 hours	67	14.0
	More than 5 hours	116	24.3

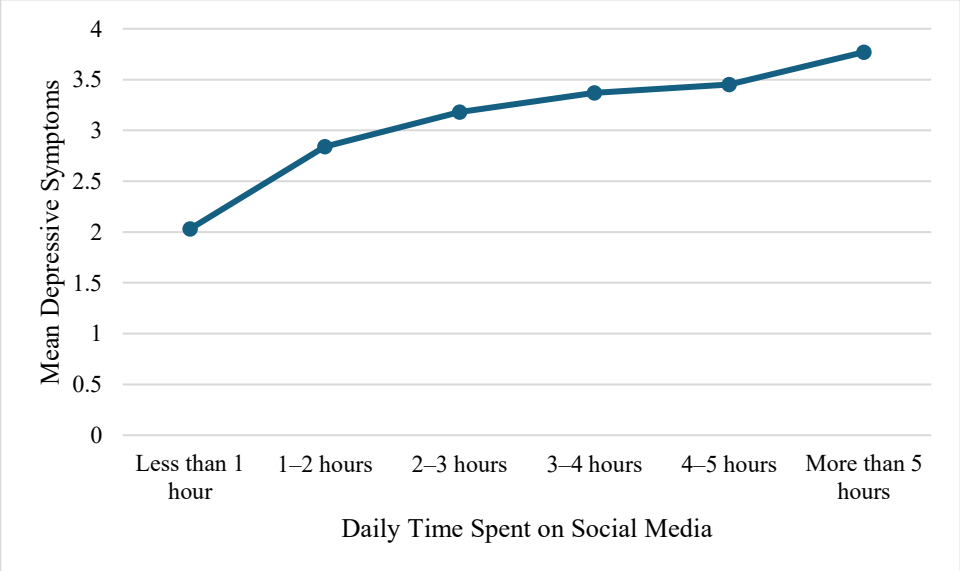


Figure 1. Mean Depressive Symptoms by Daily Time Spent on Social Media

3.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and estimates of reliability of the key study variables. Composite indices were created where the mean of the respective items were made. The frequency of comparison and validation-seeking were used to derive

social comparison, and purposeless use, distraction during tasks, ease of distraction, and difficulty concentrating were used to derive digital distraction. The average depressive symptoms were 3.27 (SD = 1.31), which means that the level of depressive mood was moderate. Social comparison had a mean of 2.65 (SD = 1.11) and the mean of digital distraction had a higher value of 3.38 (SD = 0.97). Reliability testing revealed that digital distraction had an acceptable internal consistency (α =0.79), and social comparison had lower but acceptable reliability to exploratory research (α =0.58). These findings indicate that the proportion of distraction-related behaviors are more reported compared to comparison-based behaviors in the sample.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability of the main study variables

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Social comparison	2	2.65	1.11	0.58
Digital distraction	4	3.38	0.97	0.79
Depressive symptoms	1	3.27	1.31	—

3.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships between the key variables as shown in Table 3. Digital distraction and social comparison were both significantly and positively related to depressive symptoms. There was a moderate positive association between social comparison and digital distraction ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), but digital distraction was more strongly correlated ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$). Also, the social comparison and digital distraction were positively correlated with each other ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$).

These results suggest that increased levels of depressive symptoms correlate with increased involvement in comparison-related and distracter behaviors. Figure 2 shows the changes in these behavioral variables through daily time-use categories with both constructs rising with increased social media use, but digital distraction rising more steeply.

Table 3. Pearson correlations among key study variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Social comparison	1.00		
2. Digital distraction	0.36**	1.00	
3. Depressive symptoms	0.41**	0.51**	1.00

Note. $p < 0.01$.

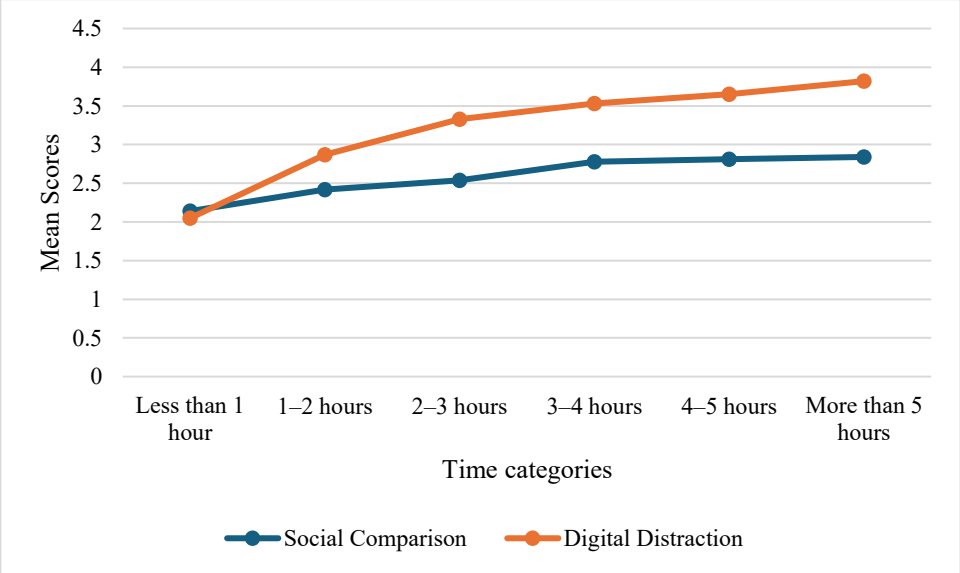


Figure 2. Social Comparison and Digital Distraction Across Daily Social Media Use

3.4 Differences by Time Spent on Social Media

There was an apparent descriptive gradient between the categories of daily social media use. As it is seen in Figure 1, the mean scores in depressive symptoms grew steadily, starting with 2.03 in the respondents using social media less than one hour a day up to 3.77 in the respondents using social media more than five hours a day.

Likewise, Figure 2 demonstrates that social comparison and digital distraction rose with the duration of time spent on social media. Digital distraction increased more sharply with an average of about 2.05 in the lowest usage group to 3.82 in the highest use group whereas social comparison increased more gradually at 2.14 to 2.84. These trends indicate that there is a

dose-response association between social media activities and both behavioral and emotional performance. These descriptive associations however need to be further analyzed in a multivariate framework.

3.5 Multivariate Analysis

The independent predictors of depressive symptoms were assessed using a multiple linear regression model to evaluate the independent effects of the key predictors. Table 4 gives all the results. This model was significant and accounted 35 percent of the variance on depressive symptoms ($R^2 = 0.35$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.34$; $F = 42.02$; $p < 0.001$).

The two core predictors were also significant when adjusting by age, gender and daily hours spent on social media. Depressive symptoms were positively related to social comparison (B = 0.30, SE = 0.05, 2 = 0.26, p = 0.001) though less so with digital distraction (B = 0.46, SE = 0.06, β = 0.34, p < 0.001).

The depressive symptoms had a negative relationship with age (B = -0.02, SE = 0.01, β = -0.16, p < 0.001), with younger respondents reporting a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms. On the contrary, the effects of gender and time on social media were not statistically significant in the adjusted model.

This is a substantively significant finding. Even though descriptive trends in Figure 1 and Figure 2 predict that time spent on social media is linked to a higher level of depressive symptoms, the regression estimates do not support this hypothesis, when the behavioral variables are put into consideration. This indicates that the correlation between depressive symptoms and the use of social media can be described best as the result of certain behavioral mechanisms, and not necessarily by the length of use. Figure 3 summarizes the relative importance of predictors.

Table 4. Multiple linear regression predicting depressive symptoms

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	1.23	0.29	—	4.29	<0.001
Social comparison	0.30	0.05	0.26	6.48	<0.001
Digital distraction	0.46	0.06	0.34	7.56	<0.001
Age	-0.02	0.01	-0.16	-3.89	<0.001
Female	0.05	0.10	0.04	0.52	0.602
Other/Non-binary	0.22	0.41	0.02	0.53	0.594
Daily time spent on social media	0.05	0.04	0.06	1.43	0.153

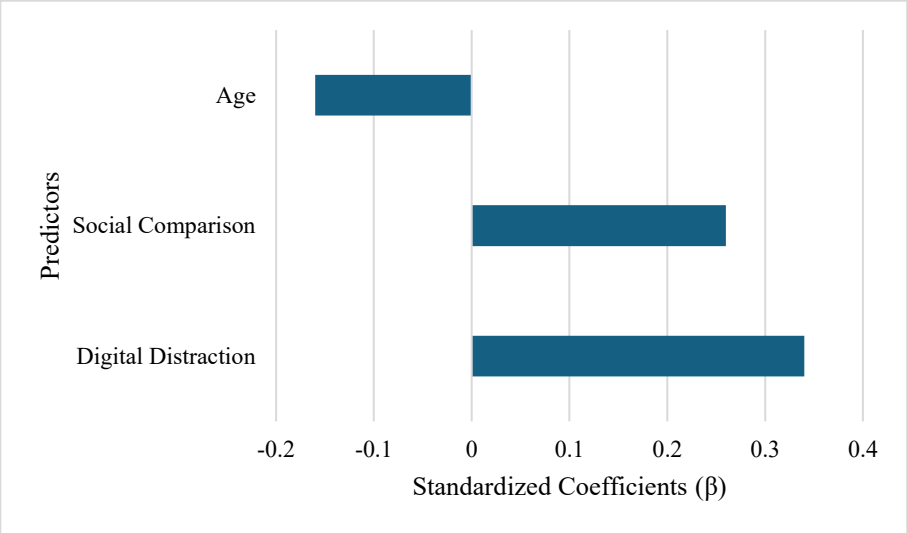


Figure 3. Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Depressive Symptoms

The standardized regression coefficients in Figure 3 demonstrate that digital distraction is the most effective predictor of depressed symptoms, then social comparison and age bear a lesser negative influence. This trend supports the finding that the significance of attention-related upsets is more dominant than the comparison-based behaviors in the process of explaining depressive symptoms in the context of social media users.

4. Discussion

The current research investigated the relationship among social comparison, digital distraction and depressive symptoms among social media users. Three important findings were made. Originally, the social comparison and digital distraction were positively linked to depressive symptoms. Second, digital distraction was more significant in the regression model as compared to social comparison. Third, despite the fact that the depressive symptoms grew descriptively as the time spent on

social media per day grew, this result was no longer significant on the background of behavioral variables. These results indicate that depressive symptoms are less determined by the time that individuals spend online and more by the way individuals interact with social media. The finding of a positive correlation of social comparison and depressive symptoms compares with current studies regarding self-evaluative process in the online setting. Social media sites expose users to idealized and edited images of the lives of others, and this can boost upward comparison. These comparisons can cause people to feel less successful or less satisfied and they are a cause of negative emotional response. The current results are consistent with the literature on the connection between social comparison and envy on social networking sites and depressive symptoms (Carraturo et al., 2023). They also align with studies that indicate that comparison-based engagement can lead to a negative impact on self-esteem and emotional vulnerability (Pahariya et al., 2025). These findings support the notion that comparison is a significant psychological process, by which social media can impact mental health.

Meanwhile, digital distraction turned out to be the better predictor of depressive symptoms. This is a significant contribution as most of the literature has focused on comparison and validation, whereas little has been given on disruption related to attention. Digital distraction in the current study was purposeless use, in-task distraction and inability to focus. These activities are indicators of divided attention and lessened cognitive control. The more powerful impact of digital distraction implies that depressive symptoms can be attributed not only to self-evaluative processes but also to the interference with the normal functioning. Findings facilitate the use of this interpretation as passive and disengaged social media use is seen to relate to depression via indirect psychological processes (Wang et al., 2025). Equally, more extensive data suggests that maladaptive digital use is highly correlated with depression, anxiety and other adverse implications (Jing et al., 2025). The current paper takes this point of view further by demonstrating that habitual distracter-related practices can become key in the description of depressive symptoms.

The relevance of time spent on the social media offers more understanding. Statistically, the respondents reported more depressive symptoms, social comparison and digital distraction as they spent more time on the internet. This correlation, however, was not found to be important in the regression model. This indicates that the amount of time spent on social media is not a predictor of depressive symptoms that is independent of behavioral factors. Time, rather, can serve as an overall measure of exposure, and the character of engagement will define its psychological effects. That is, there is no longer inherently harmful use of longer use, unless it has maladaptive patterns (e.g. comparison, distraction). This read is in line with evidence that decreasing social media consumption can reduce depressive symptoms (May et al., 2025), as well as evidence indicating that the impact of social media relies on the manner in which it is consumed as opposed to the duration spent on social media (Alwuqaysi, 2025). Therefore, the current research confirms a more subtle interpretation of the impacts of social media.

The results connected with age are also worth consideration. The respondents who were younger indicated greater levels of depressive symptoms as compared to older respondents. This trend is in line with the developmental studies that indicate that younger people are more susceptible to the demands of the digital space. The identity formation and sensitivity to peer evaluation are typical of adolescence and early adulthood, and they may enhance the effects of comparison and distraction. The current results align with other studies that reveal that depressive symptoms are linked with the use of social media in early adolescence (Nagata et al., 2025) and throughout adolescence (Puukko et al., 2020). As causality cannot be determined, these findings indicate that younger users might be especially vulnerable to the adverse consequences of social media use.

A significant implication of the research is the difference in various forms of digital engagement. Social comparison indicates a self-evaluative pathway whereas digital distraction indicates a cognitive-behavioral pathway. Both of them were related to depressive symptoms, yet the more significant effect of distraction implies that the role of disruption caused by attention-related factors might be particularly significant. The finding contributes to the literature by pointing out that problematic use of social media is not just restricted to addiction-like behavior. Rather, the patterns of distracted interaction in everyday life also can lead to emotional distress. Such a view corresponds with the overall evidence of numerous psychological outcomes of social media use, such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Jing et al., 2025).

Although these contributions exist, a number of limitations must be noted. The research is founded on cross-sectional data and thus it is not able to build causal relations. The scale of depressive signs is self-reported and is not a clinical diagnosis. Moreover, the social comparison measure was less reliable than the digital distraction measure which can impact the accuracy of the findings. However, the results are consistent with the current literature and do offer valuable information on the behavioral processes that connect the use of social media and depressive symptoms.

5. Conclusion

The present study analysed the connection between social comparison, digital distraction and depressive symptoms in social media users, and more specifically, how the behavioural processes may be understood to support this connection. The results show that social comparison and digital distraction are both highly correlated with depressive symptoms but digital distraction is the more potent predictor. Although descriptive patterns indicated that more time on social media correlates with increased depressive symptoms, this was not the case when behavioral variables were taken into account. This underscores the fact that the psychological effects of social media are determined more by the manner in which people use these sites rather than the amount of time they spend using them. The research contributes to existing literature by highlighting the significance of

distinguishing various kinds of social media activity. Social comparison is a self-evaluative mechanism, in which people compare their lives to idealized images of others, which may result in a sense of inferiority. Conversely, digital distraction is a cognitive-behavioral pathway that is disrupted, with fragmented attention, impaired concentration, and disruption of daily activities. The greater role of digital distraction implies that the effect of attention-related disturbances can be especially significant in the formation of depressive symptoms in the modern digital setting. These results have a significant implication both to research and practice. Mental health outcomes interventions should not be reduced to simply decreasing the overall screen time, but instead enhancing better health engagement habits, like limiting purposeless use, and limiting exposure to comparison-inducing content. This study should be used in future studies with longitudinal designs and using more comprehensive measures to gain a better understanding of causal relationships and underlying processes. In general, the study emphasizes the importance of a more behaviorally sensitive and nuanced perspective on the impact of social media usage on mental health.

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