Social Media, Body Image Anxiety, and Self-Presentation: An Experiential Study of Young Adults Aged 21 to 25

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Submitted to the Faculty of

Department of International Affairs in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs

Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages

2026

WENZAO URSULINE UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL

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Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, 2026

Abstract

This study explores how social media use influences body image anxiety and self-presentation among young adults aged 21 to 25. Using a qualitative approach, ten participants from diverse backgrounds were interviewed through semi-structured, in-depth conversations, and thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns in their social media behaviors, emotional responses, and value perceptions. Findings reveal that most participants consider social media an indispensable part of daily life, yet it often triggers body dissatisfaction, self-doubt, and anxiety. Exposure to idealized content and social comparison on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Threads frequently leads to emotional fluctuations and decreased concentration. Moreover, feedback mechanisms such as likes and comments play a significant role in shaping self-worth, while self-presentation tends to be selective and idealized. Participants with lighter usage generally demonstrated stronger self-control and emotional detachment, whereas heavy and extremely heavy users exhibited greater dependence and mood instability. Overall, social media serves as both a space for self-expression and a source of psychological stress for young adults. The study suggests that media literacy education and mental health interventions are essential to fostering healthier digital self-relationships among emerging adults.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Image Anxiety, Self-Presentation, Young Adults, Qualitative Interviews

社群媒體、外貌焦慮與自我呈現：21 至 25 歲年輕族群的經驗性研究

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文藻外語大學, 2026

摘要

本研究探討社群媒體的使用如何影響 21 至 25 歲年輕族群的外貌焦慮與自我呈現。透過質性研究方法，研究者以半結構式深度訪談的方式訪問了十位來自不同背景的參與者，並運用主題分析法找出他們在社群媒體使用行為、情緒反應與價值感知中的共同模式。研究結果顯示，多數參與者認為社群媒體是日常生活中不可或缺的一部分，但同時也常引發身體不滿、自我懷疑與焦慮。長期接觸理想化內容與進行社會比較（特別是在 Instagram 與 TikTok、threaes 上）會造成情緒波動與專注力下降。此外，按讚與留言等回饋機制在形塑自我價值方面扮演重要角色，而自我呈現往往具有選擇性與理想化的傾向。研究亦指出，使用程度較低的參與者展現出較強的自我控制力與情緒距離，而重度使用者則表現出更高的依賴與情緒不穩。整體而言，社群媒體同時是年輕人自我表達的場域，也是心理壓力的來源。研究建議透過媒體素養教育與心理健康介入，協助青年建立更健康的數位自我關係。

關鍵詞：社群媒體、外貌焦慮、自我呈現、年輕族群、質性訪談。

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

I often see my friends' editing photos, checking likes, or deleting posts that get few reactions. Sometimes I also do the same and wonder why it matters so much. It makes me think about how social media can change the way we see ourselves. In today's digital life, platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not just for fun or sharing daily moments. They have become important spaces where young people express themselves, compare themselves with others, and search for identity. For many university students who are still finding who they are, things like likes, comments, and filters make them care more about how others see them and what value they have. In Taiwan, most young people use social media every day. Recent local reports show that many teenagers already spend long hours online, and some even feel anxious or tired when they cannot check their phones. This shows that social media is already part of daily life, but also a possible source of pressure, especially about appearance and self-worth. (鄭曉楓, 2023) found that Taiwanese university students often feel Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), self-doubt from comparison, and emotional ups and downs caused by online feedback[1]. Similarly, (陳怡伶 & 趙儀珊, 2023) pointed out that young users try to deal with pressure by limiting time, avoiding comparison, or looking for support in real life[2]. These can help for a while, but without deeper self-awareness, they may still repeat the same emotional cycle. Therefore, social media today is not only a tool for connection but also a mirror that reflects and shapes how young people think about themselves. For those who are still building self-identity,

[1] 鄭曉楓, 一般年輕族群使用社群媒體的心理經驗：以國立大學學生為例, *教育心理學報* 54, no. 3 (2023).

[2] 陳怡伶 and 趙儀珊, 青少年使用社群媒體調適壓力之因應策略分析與適應性探討, *國立臺灣大學心理學系學位論文* (2023).

the constant outside judgment and algorithmic feedback can increase anxiety and weaken inner confidence. Based on this, this study aims to explore how university students in Taiwan build, present, and challenge their self-identity on social media, and how online feedback, comparison, and emotional experiences influence their sense of value and self-understanding.

Research Motivation

I noticed that many classmates carefully edit photos before posting them. Some even choose not to post if the photos are not edited. In daily life, even eating a meal often starts with taking pictures and choosing filters. A gathering with friends slowly changes from simple social time into a content collection for social media. These small actions show our strong wish to be seen and responded to. It makes me think: are we becoming used to looking at ourselves through the eyes of others on social media, and letting this redefine our appearance and value?

Another worrying trend is that in this highly interactive social environment, the warmth of human relationships is slowly disappearing. As (Social media-driven appearance anxiety among Taiwanese children and teenagers, 2024) explained[3], social media increases the frequency of connections but weakens the emotional quality of communication, creating what is called technological indifference. We start to replace words with emojis and real care with temporary posts. People are physically close, but the psychological distance grows stronger.

These observations are also supported by research. (Social media-driven appearance anxiety among Taiwanese children and teenagers, 2024)[4] showed that

[3]Social media-driven appearance anxiety among Taiwanese children and teenagers, 2024, https://www.children.org.tw/publication_research/research_report/2801.

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71.1% of junior and senior high school students in Taiwan are not satisfied with their appearance. Among them, 58% changed their looks because of appearance anxiety, and 45.2% edited photos or refused to upload them because of bad looking pictures. For heavy users of social media more than 42 hours per week, 67% changed their appearance due to anxiety, and 42.4% used filters to edit their looks. This shows that the aesthetics and algorithms of social media strengthen young people's acceptance of one single beauty standard.

These facts are not only about building self-identity but also about emotions and relationships. This makes me ask: in this age where social media is part of all aspects of life, how can university students build an authentic self while in the cycle of performing and being watched? This study therefore aims to explore how social media affects the building of self-identity and the experiences of emotional anxiety and also give reflection on today's digital relationships.

Research Purpose

The study also aims to explain how social interaction in digital spaces affect users' emotional changes and experiences of anxiety, and whether these reactions are related to the weakening or distortion of self-identity. By doing this, the research hopes to provide a deeper understanding of the mental state of young people in digital society. It also seeks to offer references for media literacy education, mental health promotion, and youth studies.

Research Question

1. How do young people build and present their self-image on social media?

2. How do social media interactions such as likes, comments, and views influence their self-identity and self-evaluation?
3. How is social media use related to young people's emotional changes, such as anxiety, comparison, or FOMO?

LITERATURE REIVEW

Social Media and Self-Identity

When discussing self-identity, (Goffman, 1959) theory of performance provides a classic foundation.[5] He saw individuals as actors who perform different roles depending on the situation, instead of showing a fixed inner self. He wrote: The self... is a product of the scene that comes off and is not the cause of it. This means that the self is made through social interaction, not something that exists alone. On social media, this idea becomes very visible. People carefully choose photos, captions, filters, and even the timing of posts to create an ideal version of themselves. The front stage, in (Goffman, 1959)'s words, has become our online profile, while the backstage—the real self—is often hidden.

But I think young Taiwanese people may feel this pressure differently because social media is part of our daily communication, not just entertainment. For us, it's not only about showing an ideal image but also about staying socially connected and being seen in a fast digital culture.

(Festinger, 1954) social comparison theory helps explain how people evaluate themselves through others.[6] In the age of social media, this comparison happens continuously through scrolling, liking, and viewing. (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015) and colleagues found that viewing Facebook for just 10 minutes can negatively affect women's mood and body dissatisfaction.[7] The negative effect was stronger when they looked at more attractive peers. This shows how idealized images on social media push people to question their self-worth.

[5] Erving Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient, *Psychiatry* 22, no. 2 (1959).

[6] Leon Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes, *Human relations* 7, no. 2 (1954).

[7] Jasmine Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood, *Body image* 13 (2015).

(Tiggemann & Slater, 2014) also found that more frequent Facebook use was associated with greater appearance comparison, internalization of the thin ideal, and body surveillance Long-term exposure makes people watch themselves as if they are constantly under others' eyes, creating anxiety and self-doubt,In my view, these comparisons don't only happen with celebrities but also with classmates, influencers, or even strangers. Many Taiwanese youth know that the photos are edited, yet we still feel the pressure to look better, as if not improving means falling behind.[8]

Beyond appearance, the psychological effects of social media are deep and continuous. (Marwick, 2015) described the idea of micro-celebrity, where even normal users manage their images like public figures.[9] She wrote: Self-branding has become a normalized strategy for visibility and social acceptance online. Similarly, (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014) found that people who spend more time on social networking sites report lower self-esteem, especially when comparing upward to people who seem more successful or happier.[10] This creates a loop where users post ideal content to gain validation, but the process also increases insecurity and emotional fatigue from my observation, many young people in Taiwan experience this emotional gap we talk with many people online but still feel nobody really understands us. It's like we are more connected but less close. Social media gives visibility but not always real intimacy.

[8] Marika Tiggemann and Amy Slater, NetTweens: The internet and body image concerns in preteenage girls, *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 34, no. 5 (2014).

[9] Alice E Marwick, *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age* (yale university press, 2013)..

[10] Erin A Vogel et al., Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem, *Psychology of popular media culture* 3, no. 4 (2014).

Social Media and Appearance Anxiety

In the strong visual culture of social media, appearance anxiety has become an important source of unstable self-identity. This anxiety is especially visible in digital contexts, where many idealized images and instant feedback expose users to constant comparison and self-checking. (Festinger, 1954) social comparison theory explains that people naturally evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others[11]. But on social media, the number of people and the speed of feedback make this comparison stronger and more emotional. Instead of learning from others, users may start to measure their value by likes or appearance standards. I think this happens easily for young people in Taiwan because social media is not only a tool for fun but it's also a social rule. If we don't join the comparison, we may feel invisible, but if we join too much, we start to lose our real sense of worth.

One main trigger of appearance anxiety is the constant showing of idealized images. (Fardouly et al., 2015) found that viewing Facebook for just 10 minutes can negatively affect women's mood and body dissatisfaction[12]. Even short exposure can lead to lower mood and more negative self-evaluation. (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014) added that more frequent Facebook use was associated with greater appearance comparison, internalization of the thin ideal, and body surveillance [13]. Their findings show that social media is like a daily space of surveillance, where people unconsciously monitor their body and compare it with others. Long-term use makes users feel like they are always being watched, which increases self-objectification and anxiety. From my experience and observation, this habit of checking ourselves becomes automatic. Many Taiwanese users, including students, scroll through social

[11]Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes..
[12] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.
[13] Tiggemann and Slater, NetTweens: The internet and body image concerns in preteenage girls.

media without thinking, but deep inside they keep comparing, wondering if they are attractive enough or confident enough. It feels like a quiet kind of stress that grows every day.

(Chae, 2018) expanded the discussion by studying celebrity and influencer culture. She found that the more users engaged in upward social comparison with more attractive people, the more likely they were to feel dissatisfied with themselves[14] . Interestingly, she discovered that when the comparison target is a peer or someone with a similar lifestyle, the anxiety becomes even stronger. This supports Festinger's idea that people compare most with similar others. But in today's digital world, this comparison rarely brings motivatio it often leads to emotional exhaustion and self-doubt. In my opinion, this is very true in Taiwan, where many influencers look ordinary yet still live a life that feels unreachable. The distance between real and online life becomes small but painful. We compare with people who seem like us, and that's what hurts more because it feels possible but never enough.

Social Comparison and Self-Esteem on Social Media

Social media has become a very active space for social comparison that strongly influences how users see themselves and their value. (Festinger, 1954)[15] social comparison theory explains that people naturally compare themselves with others to evaluate their ability and worth. He wrote, There exists, in the human organism, a drive to evaluate his opinions and abilities. In the digital world, this drive becomes stronger because visibility and constant feedback make comparison almost automatic. But instead of learning from others, users may end up judging themselves more

[14]Jiyoung Chae, Explaining females' envy toward social media influencers, *Media psychology* 21, no. 2 (2018).
[15]Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.

harshly. I sometimes feel that social media makes people more self conscious than self aware. We start to notice what we lack instead of what we already have, and that slowly weakens our inner stability. (Vogel et al., 2014) tested this theory in a social media context and found that those who engaged in more frequent social comparisons on Facebook reported lower self esteem and poorer self-perceptions[16] (Meier & Gray, 2014) also showed that viewing ideal lifestyle[17] accounts could lower happiness and life satisfaction. (Chae, 2018) found that women often compare upward to influencers, which increases anxiety[18], and (Fuchs, 2021) noted that even ordinary users now use filters or photo editing to appear more ideal[19]. This shows that comparison is now part of daily interaction, not only with celebrities but also with peers. From what I see among my friends and classmates, this comparison doesn't always feel painful. It feels normal, like something we just accept. We laugh about filters and editing, but deep down we all know that we are trying to meet the same invisible standard.On a broader level, researchers also separate self-presentation from personal branding. (Goffman, 1959) saw self presentation as a shortterm performance shaped by context[20], while (Marwick, 2015) described personal branding as a long term project for visibility and social approval[21]. In social media, both merge, turning normal users into their own managers. This mix makes identity flexible but also tiring to maintain. I think this reflects a larger cultural trend in Taiwan, where being visible online is linked to self worth. Many young people now treat social media as both a mirror and a

[16] Vogel et al., Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem.
[17] Evelyn P Meier and James Gray, Facebook photo activity associated with body image disturbance in adolescent girls, *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking* 17, no. 4 (2014).
[18] Chae, Explaining females' envy toward social media influencers.
[19] Christian Fuchs, Social media: A critical introduction, (2021).
[20] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.
[21] Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.; Alice E Marwick, Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy, *Public culture* 27, no. 1 (2015).

stage. It helps them connect, but sometimes it traps them inside the image they created.

Self-Presentation and Personal Branding on Social Media

In the digital society, social media has become a key space for building and showing personal identity. This can be understood through two related but different ideas: self-presentation and personal branding. Self-presentation focuses on how people change behavior depending on audience and situation, while personal branding is about managing one's image strategically over time.(Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011) defined personal branding as strategically creating and managing one's public persona to influence others' perceptions[22]. (Goffman, 1959) idea of the front stage and back stage helps explain how users perform different versions of themselves online[23]. I think this balance between performance and authenticity is difficult today. Many people, including myself, sometimes feel that the online version of us becomes more real than our private self, because it gets more attention and validation.

This difference between self-presentation and personal branding also shows how ordinary users and influencers overlap. Influencers use branding to gain attention and income (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017)[24], but normal users now face similar pressure due to algorithms and visibility. (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003) found that consumers use digital content to construct and show consumer-oriented selves. On platforms like Instagram or TikTok, even casual sharing can feel strategic[25].(Boyd,

[22] Lauren I Labrecque, Ereni Markos, and George R Milne, Online personal branding: Processes, challenges, and implications, *Journal of interactive marketing* 25, no. 1 (2011).
[23] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.
[24] Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, Self-branding,'micro-celebrity'and the rise of social media influencers, *Celebrity studies* 8, no. 2 (2017).
[25] Hope Jensen Schau and Mary C Gilly, We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space, *Journal of consumer research* 30, no. 3 (2003).

2010) described networked publics, where posts are visible, searchable, and lasting, creating the feeling of a long-term audience[26]. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) also noted that social media forces users to balance between self-expression and audience expectation[27]. From what I see among my friends, even people who claim not to care still edit or delete posts if they don't get enough likes. It's not about fame but about belonging. The need to be seen has quietly turned into a kind of social duty.

This moves from presentation to branding also brings psychological tension. (Marwick, 2013) wrote that self-presentation often feels more like work than play[28], and(Abidin, 2016) described it as visibility labour[29]. Both influencers and ordinary users feel the need to maintain exposure and engagement, which turns personal sharing into emotional work. Over time, this can blur the line between genuine expression and calculated performance. I sometimes feel this pressure myself, like needing to look consistent, positive, or creative online even when I am tired. It's strange that expressing yourself now also means managing yourself. Social media gives freedom to show who we are, but it also teaches us to perform that freedom in a controlled way.Aesthetic Norms and Body Ideals on Social Media gives freedom to show who we are, but it also teaches us to perform that freedom in a controlled way.

Aesthetic Norms and Body Ideals on Social Media

In the digital age, social media has become the main cultural space for creating and repeating aesthetic norms and body ideals. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and

[26] Danah Boyd, Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications, in *A networked self* (Routledge, 2010).
[27]Andreas M Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media, *Business horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010).
[28]Marwick, *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*.
[29] Crystal Abidin, Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and# OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram, *Media International Australia* 161, no. 1 (2016).

Facebook are filled with filtered, edited, and carefully selected images that present smooth skin, thin bodies, and luxury lifestyles. Although these pictures do not represent real life, they have gradually turned into ideal standards, shaping how people define beauty and normality. Studies such as (Fardouly et al., 2015) and(Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008)[30], and (Grabe et al., 2008) show that idealized images increase appearance anxiety[31], body dissatisfaction, and even eating problems, especially among young women. (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016) also noted that fitspiration content pressures men to achieve muscular bodies[32], showing that aesthetic norms now affect all genders. At the same time, social media has given rise to counter-movements like Body Positivity, where studies by (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015)[33] 2019 show that exposure to diverse body types can improve self acceptance and mood. However, critics like (Duffy & Hund, 2015) argue that Body Positivity has often been commercialized, becoming another form of branding rather than real empowerment[34]. (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, & Slater, 2019) also warned that celebrating only certain positive body types may build new forms of exclusion. These findings reveal the double nature of social media: it can both reinforce and challenge beauty norms, depending on how users engage with it[35]. From my point of view, this duality explains why body image issues remain so complex. In

[30]Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.
[31] Shelly Grabe, L Monique Ward, and Janet Shibley Hyde, The role of the media in body image concerns among women: a meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies, *Psychological bulletin* 134, no. 3 (2008).
[32] Grace Holland and Marika Tiggemann, A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes, *Body image* 17 (2016).
[33] Marika Tiggemann and Mia Zaccardo, Exercise to be fit, not skinny: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image, *Body image* 15 (2015).
[34] Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, Having it all on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers, *Social media+ society* 1, no. 2 (2015).
[35] Rachel Cohen et al., # BoPo on Instagram: An experimental investigation of the effects of viewing body positive content on young women's mood and body image, *New media & society* 21, no. 7 (2019).

Taiwan, I notice many young people say they support body diversity, yet still chase the same aesthetic ideals shaped by influencers and brands. I sometimes feel that even when we try to be confident, we still compare unconsciously because beauty has become part of identity and social survival. True body acceptance seems less about ignoring beauty standards and more about forgiving ourselves for not fitting them.

Mental Health and Social Comparison on Social Media

The spread of social media has made it an important part of daily life, but its impact on mental health shows both positive and negative sides. Many studies show that when users compare themselves with others online, they often feel stress, low self-worth, and anxiety. (Festinger, 1954) social comparison theory explains that people compare to understand their own value[36], but the visibility and constant updates of social media make this tendency stronger. Another related feeling is Fear of Missing Out FOMO, the anxiety of seeing others doing things one is not part of (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013)[37]. (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2017) found that heavy social media users often report more stress[38], less sleep, and worse mental health, showing that digital dependence can become a form of chronic stress. (Frison & Eggermont, 2015)[39] also found that passive browsing is linked to more depressive symptoms in teens, especially when users compare upward. (Twenge & Campbell, 2018) observed that after social media became widespread, teenagers' happiness and sleep quality both declined. However, not all outcomes are

[36]Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.
[37] Andrew K Przybylski et al., Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out, *Computers in human behavior* 29, no. 4 (2013).
[38]Cecilie Schou Andreassen, Ståle Pallesen, and Mark D Griffiths, The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey, *Addictive behaviors* 64 (2017).
[39]Eline Frison and Steven Eggermont, The impact of daily stress on adolescents' depressed mood: The role of social support seeking through Facebook, *Computers in Human Behavior* 44 (2015)..

negative[40]. (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016) showed that online support groups can help people with mental illness reduce loneliness and find understanding[41], suggesting that social media can also support well-being when used for empathy and connection. This dual nature of social media stressful but also supportive shows that its psychological influence depends on how and why people use it. From my own observation, I think many Taiwanese young people live in this emotional tension every day. We check social media to feel connected, yet sometimes we leave it feeling emptier. The likes, comments, and messages give short comfort, but they also build an invisible dependency on being noticed. I have noticed that silence online can feel like rejection, while attention feels like approval, which means our emotions become tied to the rhythm of notifications. Still, I believe social media itself is not the problem; it only reflects our deeper wish to be seen and accepted. The challenge is learning to stay connected without losing the quiet space that keeps the mind stable.

[40] Jean M Twenge and W Keith Campbell, Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study, *Preventive medicine reports* 12 (2018).
[41] John A Naslund et al., The future of mental health care: peer-to-peer support and social media, *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences* 25, no. 2 (2016).

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The participants of this study are young adults aged between 21 and 25. This group was selected because they are often referred to as digital natives, having grown up in an environment shaped by the internet and social media. For these young people, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Threads are not merely tools for entertainment but also important spaces for self-expression, learning, and identity construction in their daily lives. Individuals at this age are in a crucial stage of self-exploration and socialization, making them particularly sensitive to images, comparisons, and feedback on social media. Therefore, they are considered an ideal group for examining how social media influences appearance anxiety, self-identity, and mental health.Related Research

Past research has shown that social media use strongly affects people's mental health and self-image. For example, (Fardouly et al., 2015) found that young people often feel more body dissatisfaction after seeing edited or idealized images online[42], especially among women. (Perloff, 2014) also pointed out that the design of social media keeps users in constant comparison[43], which increases anxiety and lowers self-esteem. These studies give both theory and evidence for how online interaction shapes self-perception. Building on this, my research focuses on the real experiences of ten young adults, not limited to students, to understand how ordinary people in everyday life experience social media pressure, comparison, and self evaluation. This study aims to offer a broader view by focusing on ordinary users, showing how social media affects everyday people beyond the often-studied groups like women or influencers.

[42] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.
[43] Richard M Perloff, Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research, *Sex roles* 71, no. 11 (2014).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

I chose interviews because I wanted to hear people's real stories and emotions, not just collect numbers. This research explores how Taiwanese young adults aged 21 to 25 experience social media and how it connects with their appearance, self-identity, and emotions. Because these topics are deeply personal, I used qualitative interviews to let participants describe their own feelings and reflections in their own words. Talking directly with them helped me capture subtle emotions that numbers cannot show. I interviewed ten young adults who use platforms like Instagram and TikTok in daily life. Through semi-structured conversations, I compared their experiences and found common patterns while still respecting each person's unique story. This approach helped me understand not only what they do online but also how they feel and make sense of themselves in the digital world.

Participants and Recruitment

I invited ten young Taiwanese adults aged 21 to 25 to participate in this study. The recruitment process was mainly conducted in the following way

Social media posts

I shared recruitment messages on university related Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger groups. The posts included a brief description of the study, the participation criteria, and a link to the registration form.

To ensure sample diversity, the following participation criteria were set:

Participants in this study were ten young adults aged 21 to 25. They were selected based on three main criteria: first, they had to use social media for at least

one hour per day on average; second, they needed to have posted some kind of content, such as photos, videos, or stories, within the past six months; and third, they had to be familiar with popular platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Threads. These criteria ensured that all participants were active users who could clearly describe their daily social media habits and feelings.

Eligible students first filled out a registration form with their basic information. Afterwards, I selected participants based on gender, field of study, and social media usage habits to maintain a balanced sample. In total, ten young adults completed the study, which was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

Data Sources and Interview Design

My primary source of data was semi-structured interviews. Each of the ten participants took part in a one-on-one interview that lasted around 20 to 45 minutes. Most interviews were conducted online through Discord or other communication platforms such as Messenger. Before each interview, I explained the purpose of the research, the semi-structured format, and the confidentiality rules. Participants were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed only after receiving their permission.

Here are the sample core interview questions:

1. How do you usually use social media?
2. When you upload a selfie or photo, how do you decide which one to post?
3. Have you ever felt pressure about your looks or image from social media?
4. What type of posts or content most influences how you feel about yourself?

5. Does social media make you feel more confident or more anxious? Why?

These five questions aimed to combine both openness and focus: they let participants respond freely while keeping the focus on self-presentation, social comparison and mental health.

Interview Design

In this research, semi-structured interviews were used to explore how social media use relates to young people's feelings about appearance, self-identity, and mental health. This method was chosen because interviews allow access to participants' lived experiences and emotional meanings, rather than relying only on numerical data or statistics. Before each interview, a short background sheet was used to collect basic information about participants, including their daily social media usage time, most frequently used platforms, and primary motivations for using social media. This information provided important contextual understanding of participants' habits and helped guide more in-depth discussions about their emotional experiences online. The interview framework focused on three main areas: social media habits (such as daily usage time, platform preferences, and purposes of use), appearance anxiety (informed by items adapted from the Appearance Anxiety Inventory to capture concerns related to physical appearance), and self-identity (drawing on items from the Self-Identity Scale to examine the clarity and stability of participants' self-concepts).

The questionnaire also includes someopen endedd questions, like: Do you think social media has influenced how you see yourself? Please explain briefly. These questions give participants a chance to express themselves more freely and provide some clue for the later qualitative interviews.

Interview Procedure and Atmosphere

After completing the initial data collection, I invited several participants who were willing to share more deeply to take part in semi-structured in-depth interviews, as I hoped to capture personal stories and emotions that could not be fully expressed through questionnaires alone. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 40 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and comfort level. Because many participants lived in different cities, the interviews were mainly conducted online via Discord or Messenger, which provided greater flexibility and helped participants feel more relaxed. Some participants drank coffee or casually scrolled on their phones during the conversation, making the interviews feel more like natural chats rather than formal research sessions. Before each interview, I clearly explained the research purpose, interview process, and anonymity rules, and obtained written informed consent as well as permission to record. All interviews were conducted by the researcher and fully recorded for later transcription and analysis. The core interview questions focused on participants' everyday social media use, decision-making when posting photos or videos, emotional reactions to likes and comments, perceptions of how social media influences their appearance and self-image, and whether social media provided emotional support or reduced feelings of loneliness. These open-ended questions allowed participants to freely express their feelings and experiences while still addressing the key themes of appearance, comparison, and self-identity, resulting in data that felt more genuine and reflective of real-life experiences.

Reasons for Selecting the Ten Participants

This study adopted purposive sampling and selected ten interview participants. The goal was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to capture sufficient

variation in lived experiences within a limited sample size, in order to explore in depth the psychological mechanisms through which social media influences young people's self-presentation, emotions, and self-identity.

The rationale for selecting ten participants aligns with three core objectives of qualitative research:

1. Maximizing variation to enable meaningful comparison

Participants were deliberately selected to reflect variations in social media usage intensity (light versus heavy users), platform practices (such as short-form video consumption, stories, feed browsing, posting, and interaction), and posting frequency. This sampling design enabled a comparative analysis of how light users maintain clearer boundaries with social media, how heavy users are more likely to experience dependency, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, and how frequent posters and infrequent posters differ in the sources of pressure they face and in the ways they construct self-identity.

2. Capturing key behavioral–psychological chains

Rather than focusing solely on whether participants use social media, this study examined how psychological states change after use and how users respond to these changes. These responses included behaviors such as deleting apps, limiting screen time, reducing posting, using secondary accounts, and consciously lowering social comparison.

A sample of ten participants allowed the study to trace this chain—from use, to feedback and interaction, to psychological reaction, and finally to regulation strategies—with sufficient depth and cross-case validation.

3. Achieving thematic saturation at a feasible scale

Through semi-structured interviews, recurring concepts—such as feedback anxiety, comparison pressure, attention fragmentation driven by algorithmic feeds, image management, and tensions between authenticity and performance—emerged across multiple interviews. Given the scope of the research questions and the depth of analysis, ten participants represent a scale that balances analytical manageability with thematic richness, making it feasible to reach thematic saturation.

In addition, these participants show clear differences in how they engage with social media. Some use it mainly for relaxation and communication, while others spend long hours scrolling or frequently posting content. This contrast allows the study to observe how different usage habits shape emotional responses, such as enjoyment, anxiety, comparison, and dependence.

The participants were also chosen because they are able to clearly describe their feelings and reflections. During initial contact, they showed willingness to talk openly about their emotions, habits, and struggles related to social media. This openness is important for generating rich and meaningful interview data.

Furthermore, all ten participants are at a similar life stage, facing academic, career, and social pressures. This shared background helps control for major life differences, allowing the analysis to focus more directly on the role of social media rather than unrelated external factors, these ten participants were selected because they provide both depth and variation. Together, they offer a balanced set of experiences that help explain how young people emotionally experience and psychologically respond to social media in everyday life.

Data Collection Procedure

Conducting interviews: I conducted the interviews in a quiet place where we could talk without interruption. All interviews were recorded with permission and later transcribed word by word by me. I felt that doing it this way helped me remember the participants' real emotions and expressions more clearly.

Data storage: All the data was kept in my laptop which is encrypted. I delete the audio files about six months after the study finishes and only keep the text that doesn't show any names. I do this because I want to protect people's privacy but still can use the data for school research.

Data Analysis

In this study, I used thematic analysis to process the qualitative interview data, a method commonly applied in psychology and social research to identify, analyze, and interpret key patterns in participants' experiences. I first transcribed all interviews word by word and read them several times to become familiar with the data and capture core ideas. Then, I conducted open coding by examining the transcripts line by line and marking text related to appearance anxiety, social comparison, self-presentation, and emotional fatigue. After that, I grouped similar codes into broader themes; for example, statements about how likes influenced emotions were categorized under the theme positive feedback and need for recognition. Once the initial themes were organized, I reviewed and compared them across participants to ensure that they accurately reflected the meaning of the data. I then defined and named each theme clearly—for instance, the theme image pressure included ideas about the anxiety of maintaining an ideal image and the habit of editing photos. Finally, I connected these themes with research

questions and relevant literature to explain how participants' experiences supported or challenged previous findings.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, I try my best to follow academic ethics to protect people who join. Every participant signs the consent paper before we start. I tell them clear about what is the purpose, what we going to do, what maybe the risk or benefit, and also their right. I also say again that they join by their free will, not forced. They can stop anytime they want, for any reason, and nothing bad will happen because of that. To protect participants' privacy, I used the following measures:

Anonymity: All transcripts used codes instead of real names. Any personal details that could show identity were removed.

Data storage and safety: Interview recordings and transcripts were saved on my personal encrypted computer and password-protected folders. Only I had access.

Data deletion: Audio files were backed up and safely stored after transcription, and then permanently deleted six months after the study was finished. The anonymized transcripts were kept only for academic research.

Academic use only: All data was used only for research and writing. They were not shared with third parties or used for business purposes. I also asked for and received approval from my academic advisor before starting the study. This was to make sure the research design and process followed ethical rules. These measures were taken to protect the privacy, dignity, and safety of participants, and to ensure the study was done in a responsible and transparent way.

INTERVIEW CONTENT ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings from qualitative interviews conducted with ten young adults aged 21 to 24, coded as Participants A through J. The group consisted of five males and five females, including both university students and early-career professionals. All of them were long-term users of Instagram, Threads, TikTok, or Douyin. Through thematic analysis, four major themes were identified:

1. Patterns and levels of social media use
2. Posting behavior, feedback attachment, and perceived self-value
3. Social media packaging and self-value perception
4. Emotional impact and psychological adaptation

These themes describe how participants use social media in their daily lives, how they present themselves, and how they cope with the emotional effects that arise from their online interactions. Together, these four themes summarize their overall experiences: patterns and levels of social media use, posting behavior and perceived self-value, social media packaging and self-perception, and emotional influence and psychological adjustment. They reflect participants' daily routines, emotional reactions, and coping strategies.

To enhance the authenticity of the findings, this chapter incorporates direct quotations from the participants. By comparing individual cases, it illustrates how young people, both students and early-stage workers, construct their self-identity and manage emotional pressures within the context of social media.

4.1 Patterns and Levels of Social Media Use

This section explores how participants engage with social media in their daily lives, focusing on their usage patterns, time spent, behavioral tendencies, and psychological attachment. Serving as a foundational part of the overall research, this theme provides insight into how the younger generation interacts with digital platforms and how these habits influence their later experiences in self-presentation, social comparison, and emotional adjustment. Analysis of the ten interview transcripts revealed that social media has become deeply integrated into participants' daily rhythms, functioning as a primary medium for emotional expression, information access, and social connection. However, distinct differences emerged among individuals: while some viewed social media as a simple tool for relaxation and leisure, others exhibited signs of long-term immersion and difficulty disengaging, reflecting varied levels of dependency and self-regulation in their digital lives. Therefore, this theme is analyzed across three dimensions:

1. Platforms and behavioral patterns – the main platforms participants use and how they browse or interact with content.
2. Time spent and dependency levels – psychological states and self-control under varying levels of usage.
3. Motivations and psychological effects – the functional roles social media plays in their lives and the emotional responses it triggers.

Through these analyses, this section aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social media use influences the psychological structure and everyday behaviors of young adults, establishing a clear foundation for the subsequent discussion of self-presentation, comparison, and emotional adaptation.

Overview of Participants' Basic Information

Table 4-1-1 summarizes the basic information of the ten participants, including their age, gender, occupational status, primary social media platforms, daily usage time, and psychological usage characteristics. Overall, most participants identified Instagram as their main platform, followed by TikTok and Threads. Their daily usage ranged from light use (1–3 hours) to heavy use (8–10 hours), indicating that social media has become deeply integrated into their everyday lives.

4.1.1 Overview of Participants' Demographic Information and Usage Characteristics

Participant	Age / Gender	Residence	Occupation / Status	Main Platforms	Daily Usage Time
A	23 / Male	Taoyuan	Unemployed	Instagram, Threads	1–3 hrs (Light)
B	23 / Male	Kaohsiung	Employed	Instagram, TikTok	1–3 hrs (Light)
C	21 / Male	Kaohsiung	University Student	Instagram	4–5 hrs (Moderate)
D	21 / Male	Kaohsiung	Employed	Instagram	12 hrs (Extremely Heavy)
E	21 / Male	Kaohsiung	University Student	Instagram, TikTok	8–10 hrs (Heavy)
F	23 / Female	Tainan	Preschool Teacher	Instagram	1–3 hrs (Light)
G	21 / Female	Hualien	University Student	Threads	4–5 hrs (Moderate)
H	21 / Female	Pingtung	University Student	Instagram	1–3 hrs (Light)

I	21 / Female	Kaohsiung	University Student	Instagram	8–10 hrs (Heavy)
J	24 / Female	Kaohsiung	Employed	Instagram, TikTok	8–10 hrs (Heavy)

Platforms and Behavioral Patterns

Among the ten participants (A–J), social media was deeply integrated into their daily lives, with Instagram (IG), TikTok, and Threads being the primary platforms used for activities such as passing time, watching videos, relaxation, and social interaction. Although all participants used social media regularly, their levels of dependence and usage patterns varied considerably, suggesting that these platforms function as important tools for psychological and emotional regulation among younger users. Daily usage time ranged from light to very heavy use: participants A, B, F, and H were light users who spent approximately 1–3 hours per day on social media; participants C and G were moderate users with about 4–5 hours of daily use; participants E and I were heavy users who reported spending around 8–10 hours per day; and participant D was a very heavy user, using social media for up to 12 hours per day.

In terms of checking frequency, participants reported significant variation in how often they accessed social media each day. Participant A and F mentioned checking about 10 times per day, B about 30 times, C around 15 to 20 times, H approximately 20 to 30 times, and D about 20 times. E stated, more than 20 times, G reported as many as 200 to 300 times, while both I and J estimated around 100 times per day. These figures clearly demonstrate the diversity of personal usage habits: some participants tended to engage in prolonged browsing sessions (D, E, I), while others exhibited short but high-frequency checking behaviors (G, H). Regardless of the

pattern, social media showed deep penetration into daily life and a strong sense of immediacy and dependency.

Main Content and Purpose

Most participants viewed social media as a tool for passive browsing and relaxation. Participants A, B, F, and H mainly used it to view friends' posts or stories, while C, E, G, I, and J primarily used it for watching videos and passing time. Participant D focused on personal hobbies, such as GK model-related contents, their behaviors were more centered on viewing rather than interaction, suggesting that their connection to social media leaned toward consumption and self-entertainment. These platforms not only provided information and amusement but also served as a source of psychological comfort and a way to fill their daily routines.

Time of Use and Degree of Dependency

Participants' sense of dependency and self-control toward social media could be categorized into three levels: low, moderate, and high dependency. The low-dependency group (participants A and B) described social media as optional rather than essential, expressing views. The moderate-dependency group (participants C, F, and H) showed clear awareness of their heavy usage but held different attitudes toward control; for example, participant C expressed a desire to reduce it to 2–3 hours, F admitted reliance on social media without wanting to regulate it, while H acknowledged dependence but actively attempted self-control. These responses suggest a dynamic tension between indulgence and self-regulation. In contrast, the high-dependency group (participants D, E, G, I, and J) reported extended daily usage and significant difficulty disengaging from social media. Participant D was an

extremely heavy user, while E and J explicitly described themselves as overly dependent and emotionally troubled by their usage. Participant G recognized her high reliance but expressed no intention to reduce usage, and participant I reported using social media for nearly ten hours per day as a way to cope with anxiety, indicating strong emotional dependence. Overall, these findings suggest that social media dependency is not solely determined by time spent online but is closely linked to emotional needs, psychological attachment, and perceptions of self-worth.

Motivation for Use and Psychological Impact

Most participants reported feeling relaxed, happy, and relieved when using social media. Participant A said, Watching girls makes me happy, it helps me relieve stress, while B mentioned, Browsing videos helps me relax, and C described it as a way to release pressure. D added, Seeing things I like improves my mood, and F said he mainly used it to relax. G explained, I feel happy and relaxed, but when I see negative posts, I feel sad, and H said, I feel relaxed, but sometimes emotionally low. On the other hand, E, I, and J showed more negative emotional patterns—E stated, Browsing social media doesn't relax me; I feel anxious but can't stop, and both I and J admitted that they use social media to relax when feeling anxious, showing a vicious cycle where anxiety leads to use, temporary relief, and then more anxiety afterward. Overall, most participants viewed social media as a temporary escape from reality or emotional stress, though some had already fallen into a dependency–anxiety–dependency loop. I believe this shows how deeply emotions are tied to social media—it is not just a tool, but an invisible companion that can both comfort and control. I also realized that I sometimes do the same: when I feel bored or tired, I instinctively reach for my phone, which helps

me understand their experiences on a deeper level. From the ten participants, three clear trends emerged.

Participants' social media use revealed several recurring behavioral and psychological patterns. First, almost all participants described a habit of unconsciously opening social media without a specific purpose, resulting in fragmented and high-frequency attention throughout their daily routines. Second, social media use was often internalized as a form of emotional dependence and emotional projection; for participants such as E, G, I, and J, these platforms functioned not only as sources of entertainment but also as coping mechanisms for relieving loneliness, stress, and anxiety. Finally, many participants experienced a coexistence of self-control and psychological conflict: while some (such as C and H) demonstrated self-awareness and attempted regulation, others (including F, G, and I) continued to follow habitual usage patterns despite recognizing their dependence. This tension highlights an ongoing struggle between rational restraint and emotional attachment in participants' relationships with social media.

Analysis and Theoretical Connection

From the participants' experiences, it is clear that social media use has long surpassed its role as mere entertainment, becoming a crucial mechanism for emotional regulation and psychological dependence. Most participants mentioned using social media to relax, de-stress, or kill time, yet behind these expressions lies a process of emotional avoidance and attentional distraction. This habitual tendency—to use social media to stop thinking for a while—functions as a form of everyday psychological defense.

I observed that many participants spoke about their motivations with a sense of inner conflict: they knew their behavior might not be healthy, yet they continued doing it unconsciously. As Participant E said, I feel anxious but can't stop, which illustrates a state of low engagement but high emotional consumption. Such behavior weakens self-regulation and turns relaxation itself into another source of stress. This cycle of repeated use also aligns with (Andreassen et al., 2017) social media addiction model, which suggests that when self-esteem or emotional stability declines, individuals are more likely to seek psychological compensation through online interaction[44]. Participants I and J both noted that they use social media to relax when anxious, yet end up feeling more anxious afterward revealing the paradox of comfort and anxiety coexisting. Social media, in this sense, becomes both a refuge and a new site of stress. I see this as a typical form of virtual intimacy—users believe they are connecting with others but are in fact passively engaging with information rather than people.

Participant G mentioned feeling sad when seeing negative posts, while H said sometimes I feel emotionally low. These responses highlight the emotional contagion effect of social media, where amplified emotional expressions spread quickly and unconsciously influence users' moods. This made me reflect on how modern individuals have redefined the idea of companionship—social media acts like an invisible partner, offering constant company and resonance, yet this companionship is one-sided, temporary, and often illusory. Perhaps this explains why loneliness remains so pervasive even in an always-connected world.

Ultimately, I realized that social media itself may not be the root problem; the deeper issue lies in whether individuals retain their sense of agency—the power to

[44] Andreassen, Pallesen, and Griffiths, The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey.

choose. As a researcher, I resonated deeply with these findings. I found myself engaging in similar behaviors: intending to relax for just a few minutes but losing half an hour unconsciously. This helped me understand the participants' relaxing yet exhausting paradox more personally. Social media, I believe, acts as a mirror—it reflects not only users' emotional needs but also this generation's dependence on stimulation and the constant pursuit of validation and presence.

4.2 Posting Behavior, Feedback Attachment, and Perceived Self-Value

This section examines how participants present themselves on social media, interpret others' reactions, and construct their sense of self-worth through these interactions. By analyzing participants' posting behaviors, emotional attachment to feedback, and processes of self-identity formation through external evaluation, this section explores how social media gradually penetrates and reshapes individuals' psychological structures. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: how participants use posts, stories, filters, and captions to present an idealized version of themselves; how they emotionally perceive and respond to feedback such as likes, comments, and social approval; and how idealized images on social media create ongoing comparisons between users' online personas and their real selves.

1. Posting Behavior and Image Selection

In the context of social media, posting is not merely a form of expression but an act of being seen. Most participants mentioned that before sharing a post, they would carefully think and make deliberate choices, hoping to present an idealized and appropriate self-image while simultaneously fearing being ignored or misunderstood. This psychological contradiction makes self-presentation on social media a process

that lies between authenticity and performance, reflecting how modern young people negotiate their identities and values in the digital sphere. As (Goffman, 1959) argued, individuals perform different selves in front of an audience, adjusting their behaviors and appearances to fit the social stage they occupy.[45] In today's online environment, this performance is amplified through digital visibility and algorithmic exposure.

Being seen here does not simply mean gaining others' attention, it also symbolizes confirmation of one's existence. When users post and wait for likes or comments, their anxiety does not necessarily stem from vanity but from a deeper emotional need for validation, a feeling of I truly exist. Within this cultural context, the feedback mechanism of social media becomes a key tool for sustaining one's sense of identity. As Marwick noted, social media fame operates within an attention economy, where visibility becomes a form of social currency and self-worth.[46] Although many participants emphasized that they were just sharing, their words, photos, and captions all revealed strategic choices, suggesting that sharing has already become a carefully designed performance.

> I might post something or share a story that shows only the side I want others to see. I think that's what social media is like. Usually, people only let you see the part of themselves they want to show, but what they're really like in private others will never know. (Participant A)

Participant A's description highlights the core logic of selective authenticity in social media. He is clearly aware that his self-presentation is filtered, recognizing that what others see is only a partial version of himself rather than his true self. This behavior echoes (Goffman, 1959) concept of the front stage performance, in which

[45] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.
[46] Marwick, Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy.

individuals tend to display idealized versions of themselves during social interactions to maintain a favorable social image[47]. In the context of social media, such performances are visualized and quantified—each post, edit, and caption choice becomes a detailed act on the social stage, this kind of presentation does not come without a cost.

A further mentioned that she used to be highly attached to external feedback, feeling anxious when likes, comments, or follower growth began to stagnate:

> I used to care a lot about the number of likes and comments. When I posted a photo or a singing video and not many people noticed it, I would start thinking maybe I didn't sing well, and that made me quite anxious. Also, when my follower count didn't increase or got stuck at a certain number for too long, I would feel pretty anxious too. (Participant A)

This kind of anxiety represents a form of feedback attachment. When social platforms transform social recognition into quantifiable data, users' sense of self-worth begins to externalize, becoming dependent on visible forms of approval such as likes, views, and comments. This phenomenon corresponds to (Festinger, 1954) social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate their own value through comparison and interaction with others' feedback[48]. When external responses are lacking, emotional anxiety and self-doubt are likely to emerge such self-modification for the sake of validation becomes even more evident in the experience of Participant G during the interview.

> I do worry about how others will see me. For example, I usually edit out my acne scars or adjust my jawline, but I don't really change much else. Especially my

[47] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.
[48] Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.

sister, she cares even more than I do. Before posting, she always asks me if the photo looks good or if the editing is okay. When it comes to editing, she mainly fixes her nose and the lighting. But my sister believes that since the photo has already been edited, it should look good when posted. (Participant G)

G's observation reveals an internalization of aesthetic values shaped by both family influence and social media culture. She not only cares about how she is perceived but also projects this anxiety onto her close relatives. The act of photo editing is no longer merely about beautification; it becomes a defensive strategy—a way to preemptively correct parts that might be criticized under the public gaze. This illustrates how social media allows appearance anxiety to permeate everyday interactions, teaching users to use modification as a means of maintaining psychological security.

In contrast, Participant H demonstrates another form of fear of being seen. She is not entirely obsessed with feedback but instead struggles between the desire to be visible and the fear of being misunderstood:

I often wonder if this photo might look strange suddenly appearing on other people's feeds, or if what I'm saying doesn't make sense to anyone—or maybe no one even cares. Then I start thinking that maybe nobody really cares about me. I always hesitate before posting. Every time, I write the caption and spend about ten minutes editing it, but then I feel it's not good enough and end up deleting it. (Participant H)

H's experience reveals another layer of psychological burden within social media interaction: while being seen can bring a sense of existence, it also comes with feelings of exposure and anxiety about being judged. This contradictory desire has become one of the most defining psychological traits of the social media generation—

people long to be noticed yet fear being misunderstood. From a researcher's perspective, this represents a clear example of digital performative anxiety: in the repeated process of preparing and deleting posts, she is actually engaging in a form of psychological self-censorship. This is not only a filtering of content but also a re-examination of self-worth, revealing the inherently paradoxical nature of social media expression.

Considering the experiences of Participants A, G, and H, posting behavior involves more than shaping one's external image—it also reflects deeper emotional dynamics. Each of them responds in different ways to the same psychological tension: the desire to be seen, yet the fear of being seen too much. This contradiction shows that social media has evolved beyond a communication platform into an emotional mirror—one that reflects how people learn to adjust themselves, conceal insecurity, and search for balance between seeing and being seen in the digital world. From selective presentation to editing anxiety and finally to hesitation before posting, we can trace an emotional continuum: external feedback gradually infiltrates the inner system of self-evaluation, and young users learn to maintain psychological safety and self-affirmation by controlling how they are seen.

2. Feedback Attachment and Emotional Response

In the algorithm-driven era of modern social media, feedback mechanisms—such as likes, comments, and follower counts—are not only symbols of interaction but have also gradually become key indicators through which users measure their self-worth. Most participants reported experiencing a psychological process of feedback awareness in their daily use: even when they claimed not to care, their emotions still rose and fell with the fluctuations in numbers. This phenomenon suggests that social

media has long ceased to be merely a platform for communication; it now functions as an emotional mirror system that continuously reflects how others perceive us while subtly shaping how we feel about ourselves. As (Vogel et al., 2014) pointed out, online social comparison and feedback strongly affect users' self-esteem and emotional states, often leading to a fragile sense of self-worth dependent on others' reactions.[49]

Within this algorithmic environment, emotions are no longer governed solely by personal experience but are driven by the logic of the platform. The immediacy of likes and comments turns feedback into an emotional trigger and creates a kind of predictable reward mechanism. When notifications appear and numbers rise, individuals feel brief satisfaction; but when feedback slows or stagnates, they often experience anxiety and self-doubt. I believe this repetitive psychological cycle has led social media to become an environment of emotional addiction, where users find it increasingly difficult to detach their self-worth from the judgments of others. This aligns with (Andreassen et al., 2017) , who found that excessive social media use is often linked to addictive behavioral patterns and emotional dependency rooted in self-validation needs.[50]

> I don't check my posts repeatedly, but if there are comments, I'll click in to take a look and maybe glance at the photos. I don't usually open it for no reason. But when someone likes my post, I'll still take a quick look. If the response isn't as good as I expected, it does affect me a bit—I start thinking maybe I didn't do well enough. (Participant A)

[49] Vogel et al., Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem.

[50] Andreassen, Pallesen, and Griffiths, The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey.

In A's account, I observe a typical form of latent attachment. On the surface, he maintains emotional distance, emphasizing that he doesn't check repeatedly, yet his words still reveal subtle emotional reactions triggered by feedback. This suggests that the influence of social media is often implicit and gradual: even when users do not consciously seek attention, external responses still shape their self-evaluation unconsciously. I believe this phenomenon corresponds to (Fardouly et al., 2015) and their concept of the social comparison effect, which proposes that individuals assess their own acceptance and worth based on external cues[51]. A's tendency to internalize feedback as maybe I'm not good enough clearly demonstrates how external metrics can transform into emotional pressure and self-doubt.

Sometimes I check, but the responses don't really affect me. (Participant E)

In contrast, Participant E demonstrates a relatively stable sense of emotional distance. I observed that he is able to distinguish between being given feedback and being defined by feedback, treating social media responses as neutral information rather than judgments of his self-worth. This mindset reflects a higher level of psychological awareness, even while being observed, he maintains a sense of agency and self-control. From a researcher's perspective, E's reaction offers an interesting point of comparison: it shows that not all users are dominated by external metrics. Some are able to find a neutral zone between algorithms and emotions, representing a form of self-balance unique to the digital age.

This ability reflects a higher level of psychological awareness and self-regulation within a highly visible digital environment. Consistent with Goffman's (1959) [52]view that individuals can differentiate between performed roles and their core sense of self,

[51] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.
[52] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

E appears to maintain a boundary between his online presentation and his personal identity, preventing external reactions from fully shaping his self-concept.

> I'm okay with it, but my sister cares. She's very concerned about how others see her, even people she doesn't know. For example, she pays attention to who follows her—if a prettier girl follows her, she notices it—and she often checks the number of likes she gets. She also compares her follower count with her friends, caring about whether she's doing better than them. She wants to feel that she's living a better life than others, but her follower number never seems to match what she hopes for. (Participant G)

G's account reveals an extended phenomenon of comparative anxiety. Although she claims to be not too concerned, her observations of her sister's behavior expose a deeper social-psychological dynamic: social media not only heightens personal awareness of self-image but also intensifies competition and comparison among peers. I found that surface-level metrics such as follower counts and likes have become tangible indicators of relational self-worth. Her sister's tendency to compare these numbers with friends reflects how data now symbolize who is more seen, turning social media from a platform of communication into an emotional ranking arena. I believe this represents the core contradiction within social media culture: people simultaneously seek authenticity and superiority—they want to express themselves, yet fear falling behind others.

This pattern strongly reflects Festinger's (1954) [53]social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others when clear standards are absent. On social media, these standards are replaced by visible metrics, making comparison both constant and unavoidable.

[53] Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.

Her sister's strong focus on being followed by prettier girls and surpassing friends in follower numbers illustrates a clear process of upward social comparison, which previous research has linked to heightened insecurity and anxiety (Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). Rather than functioning as neutral indicators of social interaction, follower counts and engagement metrics become emotionally charged signals that imply who is more admired, more successful, or more worthy of attention. Through my analysis, these three participants can be seen as representing distinct psychological response patterns: A's anxiety stems from internalized emotional attachment to social validation, G's observations reflect a comparative form of identity construction, and E's attitude demonstrates a more self-aware and distanced approach toward social media evaluation.

Together, these mindsets form a psychological spectrum of how contemporary social media users react to external feedback. They oscillate between being watched and self-examinations, sometimes emotionally driven by data, sometimes attempting to detach from it. I believe this dynamic balance is a microcosm of digital-age self-identity: individuals long to be seen yet strive not to be consumed by visibility. This ongoing process can be viewed as a new kind of psychological cultivation—learning how to remain oneself amid constant feedback without letting the gaze of others define who one is.

3. Idealized Self-Image on Social Media

Within the context of social media interaction, the boundary between the real self and the ideal self has become increasingly blurred. During the interviews, most participants admitted that the image they present on social platforms is not entirely authentic but rather a curated, edited, and filtered version of themselves. I found that

this behavior not only reflects sensitivity to external evaluation but also reveals a common psychological defense—people want to be seen, yet fear being seen too deeply. As (Goffman, 1959) described in his dramaturgical theory, individuals manage impressions by performing different selves in front of an audience, adjusting their presentation to maintain social approval and avoid embarrassment.[54]

As a result, self-presentation on social media often becomes a strategic expression: individuals aim to appear genuine but simultaneously worry that authenticity might lead to misunderstanding or rejection, so they choose to face others through an idealized persona. This idealization is not merely an act of fabrication but an adjustment made to preserve psychological safety. Through filters, beautification, and carefully crafted captions, users attempt to construct a socially acceptable self in order to gain recognition and belonging. This reflects what Schau and (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003) called constructed identity, where online self-presentation is an act of negotiation between authenticity and aspiration.[55]

I believe this phenomenon exposes a key survival strategy among today's young people in the digital world—they seek a delicate balance between the desire to be understood and the fear of being judged. This balance, in turn, represents one of the most complex forms of self-negotiation in the era of social media.

> Of course it's the ideal version of myself. Who would post an unflattering side of themselves? I think it's hard to show your true self on social media—it's always about highlighting your strengths and hiding your flaws. (Participant A)

In the interview, A's response most directly revealed the shared mindset of modern social media users: in an environment of constant visibility, people

[54], Goffman, E. (1959). The moral career of the mental patient. Psychiatry 22(2): 123-142.
[55] Jensen Schau, H. and M. C. Gilly (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. Journal of consumer research 30(3): 385-404.

consciously filter themselves to present a socially acceptable version. This act of highlighting strengths and concealing weaknesses functions as a form of self-protection. I believe this reflects (Goffman, 1959) concept of the front stage performance—social media has become a stage that never closes, and users are the performers constantly adjusting their roles.[56] A's words convey both rational awareness and emotional resignation: he clearly understands that idealization is a kind of performance, yet also recognizes that it has become an unavoidable part of surviving in today's digital reality.

> I think it's the version of myself that I want others to see, but it's still quite different from who I really am in real life. (Participant E)

E's response continues this performative way of thinking, but his tone is softer and more self-aware. I noticed that he placed particular emphasis on the phrase the version I want others to see, revealing a conscious act of self-construction. This is not passive conformity but deliberate design. By choosing to present himself in a specific way, he demonstrates an understanding of social media's power dynamics— those who can control how they are seen can retain control. This sense of control allows him to find safety within performance and represents a form of psychological self-mastery.

This reflects what Goffman (1959)[57] described as impression management, in which individuals strategically adjust their presentation to maintain control over social interactions and protect their sense of self.Importantly, E's approach suggests that performance does not necessarily imply deception. Instead, it functions as a form of psychological regulation. By maintaining a clear distinction between his presented self and his real-life self, E retains a sense of agency within a highly visible environment. This aligns with research on online self-

[56] Goffman, E. (1959). The moral career of the mental patient. Psychiatry 22(2): 123-142.
[57] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

presentation and personal branding, which suggests that individuals who can consciously manage how they appear online are better able to maintain control over their identity and emotional boundaries (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003[58]; Labrecque et al., 2011)[59].

> I think it's more like the ideal version of myself, because my real self doesn't look that good. (Participant G)

G's response reveals the appearance anxiety underlying the pursuit of idealization. I noticed clear signs of self-comparison and insecurity in her words, echoing her earlier comment about feeling anxious when seeing prettier girls online. For her, the ideal self is not merely a presentation strategy but a form of psychological compensation. By editing her images, she attempts to narrow the gap between the ideal and the real, using visual aesthetics to mend the cracks in her sense of self-worth. I believe this illustrates how social media reproduces appearance anxiety—when beauty is constantly reinforced as a social standard, the idealized self begins to replace the authentic one as the version deemed acceptable.

This pattern aligns with social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others in the absence of objective standards (Festinger, 1954)[60], a process that is intensified in image-centered social media environments.

Prior research has shown that frequent exposure to idealized images can heighten body dissatisfaction and appearance-related anxiety, particularly among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015[61]; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015[62]). In this context, visual modification becomes a way to temporarily restore self-esteem and regain a sense of control over how one is seen.

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[58] Jensen Schau and Gilly, We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space.
[59] Labrecque, Markos, and Milne, Online personal branding: Processes, challenges, and implications.
[60] Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.
[61] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.
[62] Tiggemann and Zaccardo, Exercise to be fit, not skinny: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image.

I tend to show the ideal version of myself because I'm very guarded and don't easily reveal my true self. (Participant J)

J's response reveals another layer of defensive self-protection. Her mention of being guarded and not easily showing her true self reflects the dual tension many social media users experience toward visibility—they want to participate yet fear being misunderstood or judged. I found this emotion to be quite common across the interviews, as many young people simultaneously carry the desire to be seen and the fear of being exposed. J's tone made me realize that for some individuals, the idealized self is not merely an act of beautification but a form of psychological armor, used to shield themselves from potential harm and the pressure of judgment.

From a dramaturgical perspective, J's behavior aligns with Goffman's (1959) [63]concept of impression management, in which individuals strategically regulate what is shown and what is concealed in order to maintain emotional safety.

Looking across the experiences of A, E, G, and J, I found that although all of them tend to present an idealized version of themselves on social media, their underlying motivations differ. A act out of rational choice, E emphasizes control and agency, G's behavior stems from appearance anxiety, and J's from psychological defense. These differences reveal that self-presentation on social media is not simply about fabrication but rather a psychological and social adaptation to external pressures. Each of them is attempting to find a balance—wanting to be seen but not fully exposed, seeking authenticity yet fearing that authenticity might not be good enough. I believe this reflects one of the central paradoxes of the digital age: people are no longer merely posting content on social media; they are posting idealized versions of themselves, often at the cost of overlooking their authentic selves.

[63] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

4.3 Psychological Impact and the Paradox of Dependence

As social media becomes an indispensable part of daily life, users' psychological states are increasingly shaped by digital interactions. This section explores three interconnected phenomena: emotional sensitization, psychological burden, and the formation of dependence and ambivalence. The study finds that social media not only changes the way people receive information but also reshapes patterns of emotional expression and perception. Constant exposure to high-intensity visuals and information makes individuals more emotionally reactive, often alternating between emotional fatigue and sensory numbness. As (Marwick, 2015) argued, the attention-driven culture of social media amplifies emotional reactivity and self-consciousness, transforming personal feelings into performative expressions within the attention economy.[64]

At the same time, algorithmic recommendations and real-time interaction mechanisms intensify emotional fluctuations and attention fragmentation, leading to widespread experiences of anxiety, insomnia, and irritability. Furthermore, users develop an ambivalent attachment to social media—on one hand, they are aware of its negative impact on mental health; on the other, they find it difficult to detach from their dependence on information, connection, and a sense of existence. This aligns with findings by (Andreassen et al., 2017), who reported that excessive social media use often leads to addictive behavioral patterns and heightened emotional dependency.[65]

[64] Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. Public culture 27(1): 137-160.
[65] Andreassen, C. S., et al. (2017). The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey. Addictive behaviors 64: 287-293.

These phenomena reveal the dual role of social media in contemporary life: it serves both as an outlet for emotional expression and social connection, and as a source of anxiety and dependence. Ultimately, this reflects the ongoing process of psychological adjustment and negotiation that defines modern individuals' inner lives in the digital age.

1. Psychological Impact of Social Media

As social media becomes deeply integrated into daily life, users' psychological states are increasingly influenced by the emotional tone of the content they consume and their patterns of usage. Most participants mentioned that social media not only affects their emotional fluctuations but also disrupts their concentration and daily rhythm. These influences are often subtle yet cumulative—ranging from mood swings, anxiety, and distraction to insomnia—gradually developing into a form of long-term psychological burden.

> For example, since I currently work as a preschool teacher, whenever I see negative posts about teachers on social media, I feel a bit down. (Participant F)

F's experience reveals the immediate emotional impact of social media content. I observed that her emotional response shows a strong tendency toward occupational projection—when topics related to her professional role are portrayed negatively, she feels personally implicated and hurt. This illustrates that social media does more than simply transmit information; it also amplifies emotional resonance, causing individuals not only to watch others but also to be psychologically affected by others in the process.

Consistent with Goffman's (1959)[66] view that social roles are closely tied to self-concept, attacks on a professional group can easily be experienced as threats to the self. In digitally networked environments, where negative narratives circulate rapidly and repeatedly, such role-based identification increases vulnerability to emotional distress.

> Yes, sometimes I feel anxious and irritated when I'm scrolling, and it also affects my concentration. Sometimes it just makes me feel mentally exhausted, and even causes insomnia. I think the reason is that a lot of the content on social media is somewhat negative or filled with hate, and seeing that really affects my mood. (Participant G)

G's experience reflects a typical pattern of emotional fatigue. I noticed that she mentioned psychological reactions such as anxiety, irritability, and insomnia, indicating that negative content on social media can subconsciously accumulate stress. I believe this phenomenon is related to information overload and emotional contagion: when users are constantly exposed to dense, conflict-driven, or hateful content, their emotional systems become overactivated, leading to mental exhaustion and a decline in concentration.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon can be understood through the concepts of information overload and emotional contagion. Social media platforms present users with a constant stream of dense, rapidly updating information, which can overwhelm cognitive and emotional processing capacities. Prior studies have shown that when individuals are repeatedly exposed to stressful or negative stimuli online, their emotional regulation resources become depleted, leading to mental

[66] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

exhaustion and difficulty concentrating (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).[67] G's description of feeling mentally drained suggests that her emotional system remains activated for prolonged periods without sufficient recovery.

> My concentration is often affected—no matter what I'm doing, I get distracted as soon as a social media notification pops up. Even when there's no notification, I still feel the urge to open it and check. I used to be able to focus and finish tasks efficiently, but ever since I started managing my social media, my ability to concentrate has noticeably declined. (Participant J)

J's account illustrates how social media has reshaped individuals' mechanisms of attention. I observed that her behavior exhibits the characteristics of habitual switching—even without external stimuli, she actively seeks social media interaction. This suggests that social media not only disrupts attention allocation but may also alter the brain's dependence on instant feedback, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to sustain prolonged focus and self-regulation.

This pattern aligns with research on addictive and compulsive social media use. Andreassen et al. (2017) [68]found that excessive engagement with social media is associated with behavioral addiction tendencies, in which users develop habitual checking behaviors linked to emotional regulation and reward-seeking. J's description of repeatedly checking social media, even without notifications, reflects this internalized reward expectation, where the anticipation of feedback becomes enough to trigger action.

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[67]Frison and Eggermont, The impact of daily stress on adolescents' depressed mood: The role of social support seeking through Facebook.

[68] Andreassen, Pallesen, and Griffiths, The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey.

I think I'm somewhat addicted to scrolling through useless videos on social media, and I often lose track of time while doing it, which causes me to miss deadlines or fail to finish some tasks on time. (Participant E)

E's description reveals a state of cognitive dissonance. I observed that he is aware of the time loss caused by he social media use yet still finds it difficult to stop, indicating the strong time absorption effect of such platforms. I believe this behavioral pattern demonstrates how social media reinforces dependency through subtle psychological mechanisms, trapping users in a cycle of conscious awareness but limited control over their usage.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) noted that social media platforms are designed to encourage prolonged engagement by minimizing stopping cues and maximizing ease of continuation. As a result, users may enter a state of temporal distortion, where subjective time perception weakens and usage duration exceeds intention. E's account demonstrates how social media dependency does not require complete unawareness; rather, it often persists even alongside conscious recognition of harm.[69]

Based on the experiences of the four participants, the psychological impacts of social media were found to manifest primarily across three interrelated dimensions. First, emotional contagion was evident, as repeated exposure to negative or emotionally charged content often triggered feelings of anxiety and low mood. Second, attention disruption emerged as a common concern, with frequent notifications and habitual engagement with short-form videos weakening participants' ability to maintain sustained concentration and deep focus. Finally, temporal imbalance was observed, as endless scrolling functioned as an emotional escape but

[69] Kaplan and Haenlein, Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media.

simultaneously reduced productivity and disrupted daily routines and overall efficiency.

These phenomena also reveal the psychological paradox between modern users and social media: people seek relaxation and connection on these platforms, yet they are simultaneously drawn into cycles of emotional overload and attention fragmentation. As a result, social media becomes a psychologically depleting environment, offering brief moments of satisfaction while gradually eroding one's inner calm and capacity for focus.

2. Social Media Dependence and Psychological Ambivalence

When asked whether life would be better without social media, most participants gave conflicted answers. This contradiction reflects the modern psychological relationship with social media, one that is both dependent and resistant. Social media serves as a channel for information and emotional connection, yet it is also a source of anxiety and stress. Participants generally acknowledged that social media provides convenience and companionship, but at the same time, it makes it difficult to escape the feelings of emptiness and emotional fluctuation that come with overuse.

> I don't know if life would be better without it, but I do know that the way I'm overly dependent on social media right now isn't good. (Participant E)

E's response reflects a state of clarity mixed with helplessness. I observed that he is aware of the psychological impact social media has on him, yet he still finds it difficult to detach completely. This reveals the core nature of social media dependence—it is not merely an addiction, but a form of psychological inertia. Emotionally, users understand its negative effects, yet they continue returning to the platform for comfort or stimulation. This cycle of rational rejection and emotional

attachment exposes a fundamental contradiction within the modern psychological structure.

This pattern aligns with research on problematic social media use, which shows that dependency often continues despite users' recognition of its harmful effects (Andreassen et al., 2017).[70] Rather than being driven by pleasure alone, continued engagement is frequently motivated by emotional regulation needs, such as escaping boredom, stress, or discomfort. In this sense, social media functions as a readily available coping mechanism, making disengagement psychologically challenging even when its costs are acknowledged.

> I think I would become more anxious because I wouldn't be able to keep up with what's trending or what's happening in daily life. For example, when my Threads account broke down recently and I couldn't log in, I felt miserable. (Participant G)

G's response highlights the informational security function of social media in modern life. I observed that her anxiety does not stem from the content itself but from the fear of losing real-time connection. Her account reveals that, for some users, social media is no longer just a tool for entertainment or communication but a form of existential attachment. Losing access to these platforms represents not only a loss of instant awareness of the world but also a disconnection from collective rhythms. This demonstrates that social media plays a dual psychological role in contemporary life—serving as both an informational anchor and a source of identity connection. It enables participation yet simultaneously creates a sense of confinement.

[70] Andreassen, Pallesen, and Griffiths, The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey.

This reaction can also be understood through the lens of fear of missing out (FOMO). Prior research has shown that anxiety related to social media use is often driven by concerns about missing social information, trends, or collective experiences rather than direct interpersonal interaction (Przybylski et al., 2013). [71]G's fear of not keeping up reflects this dynamic, where constant connectivity becomes a psychological necessity for maintaining a sense of normalcy and belonging.

> I think it's a double-edged thing. I feel that social media makes my emotional ups and downs more intense—it can make me happier, but also sadder. Without social media, I'd still have mood swings, but they wouldn't be as strong. (Participant A)

A's response presents a more balanced perspective. I observed that he acknowledges both the positive and negative influences of social media, viewing it as an emotional amplifier. I believe his answer reveals an important phenomenon: social media does not create emotions—it magnifies their intensity. It makes happiness feel stronger but also makes anxiety and comparison more tangible. This emotional amplification effect illustrates how social media heightens human psychological responses, causing individuals to experience a wider range of emotions within a shorter period of time, and consequently making emotional stability harder to maintain.

Prior studies have shown that frequent engagement with such content can strengthen emotional reactions, increasing both momentary happiness and vulnerability to anxiety or sadness (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).[72] A's observation

[71] Przybylski et al., Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out.
[72] Frison and Eggermont, The impact of daily stress on adolescents' depressed mood: The role of social support seeking through Facebook.

that emotions would still exist without social media, but in a less intense form, reflects this amplification effect rather than a direct causal replacement of emotional life.

Based on the experiences of the three participants, I found that the psychological impact of social media can be categorized into three typical patterns: E's self-aware attachment type represents a rational reflection on dependence; G's connection anxiety type reflects psychological reliance on information and social belonging; and A's emotional amplification type illustrates how social media accelerates emotional rhythms. Together, these types reveal the paradoxical nature of social media simultaneously fulfilling and drains human psychological needs, making people unable to detach from it yet unable to find true peace within it. I believe this ambivalent attachment captures the essence of modern life: we search for authenticity through virtual connections while learning to find stillness amid constant stimulation.

3. Emotional Sensitization as a Contemporary Phenomenon

In the highly interactive and constantly exposed environment of social media, users' emotional responses have become increasingly sensitive. Most participants agreed that this heightened emotional reactivity toward social media fluctuations is not an individual anomaly but a widespread phenomenon of our time. This emotional sensitization is not only linked to the frequency of algorithmic recommendations and the intensity of content stimulation but is also intertwined with people's psychological need to be seen and recognized.

> I think I do get affected, but over time you start to feel numb, like you need stronger stimulation to feel something. I think it's a common phenomenon of our time—at least half of the people in my social circle are like this. (Participant A)

A's description reveals the phenomenon of emotional fatigue brought about by social media. I observed that while he is aware of its emotional impact, he also points out the rising stimulation threshold—as emotions are constantly triggered, users gradually become desensitized to familiar content and begin seeking stronger emotional stimulation. This sensory diminishing effect reflects how social media algorithms use emotion as the core driver of engagement, unconsciously pulling users into a cycle of the more they watch, the more desensitized they become—and the more desensitized they are, the more they keep watching.

Twenge and Campbell (2018) found that increased screen time is linked to lower emotional sensitivity and higher emotional exhaustion among young users, suggesting that constant stimulation can blunt emotional responsiveness over time. In this sense, numbness is not the absence of emotion but a protective response to sustained emotional saturation.[73]

> I think it's a common phenomenon, especially with platforms like Threads—where the higher the engagement, the more the algorithm pushes the content. This kind of system only makes the problem more serious. (Participant E)

E's observation further highlights the amplifying effect of platform mechanisms on emotional contagion. I noticed that although his tone was calm, his awareness of algorithmic emotional amplification was remarkably sharp. His remark that the higher the engagement, the higher the visibility exposes the underlying logic of contemporary social media, where emotional intensity becomes the key criterion for content circulation. The more extreme the emotion, the wider the reach—and this

[73] Twenge and Campbell, Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study.

mechanism reinforces users' emotional alertness, turning hypersensitivity into a learned and habitual response.

This observation aligns with Boyd's (2010) discussion of networked publics, which emphasizes that visibility on social media is not neutral but shaped by platform affordances and algorithmic selection. Users are therefore not only exposed to information, but to emotionally filtered streams that prioritize engagement over balance. As a result, emotions are not merely expressed on social media; they are structurally amplified and redistributed through algorithmic processes.[74]

> I think it's a common phenomenon of our time. Everyone has their own reasons for being emotionally affected by social media—the more you care about it, the more sensitive you become. (Participant G)

G's response points out that the root of emotional sensitivity lies in caring too much. I observed that her reaction reflects a strong sense of self-awareness—the more people care about how others perceive them, the more easily they are influenced by the emotional atmosphere of social media. This made me realize that emotional sensitization is an extension of self-value within social media culture: people seek a sense of existence through feedback and experience emotional turbulence based on others' reactions. I found that this phenomenon is especially common among younger generations, whose daily interactions are deeply digitalized, making being understood and being seen essential for maintaining psychological stability.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligns with social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals rely on external cues to evaluate themselves when stable standards are absent (Festinger, 1954).[75] In highly visible digital environments,

[74] Boyd, Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications.
[75] Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.

feedback, attention, and emotional tone become central reference points for self-evaluation. Prior research has shown that stronger emotional investment in social media is associated with heightened sensitivity to feedback and increased emotional fluctuation (Vogel et al., 2014[76]; Fardouly et al., 2015[77]). G's statement captures this mechanism succinctly: emotional sensitivity increases in proportion to emotional investment.

> Yes. For example, I had a friend who often posted strange things on social media. One time, he accidentally mentioned someone else's girlfriend, and just because of that small incident, people on social media started saying they were going to dox him. (Participant D)

D's example illustrates the intensification of emotional reactions within social media environments. I believe this kind of emotional externalization not only reflects users' growing emotional sensitivity but also exposes the collective tendency toward aggression in online discourse. A minor incident can easily provoke disproportionate responses, leading to cyberbullying or social exclusion. This phenomenon reveals the risk of emotional imbalance in digital interaction—the more open the online space becomes, the more exposed individuals are, and the more likely they are to be swept up in waves of collective emotion.

This case also resonates with Goffman's (1959) discussion of social evaluation and the fragility of identity under public scrutiny.[78] When individuals are suddenly placed under collective observation, their actions are no longer interpreted charitably but are redefined through dominant emotional narratives. In D's example, the threat of

[76] Vogel et al., Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem.
[77] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.
[78] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

doxxing represents an extreme form of social sanction, where online audiences attempt to enforce moral boundaries through punishment rather than dialogue.

Drawing from the perspectives of the four participants, I found that emotional sensitization has become a structural outcome of contemporary social media use. A's fatigue, E's awareness, G's attentiveness, and D's experience together form a clear emotional ecology—people long for connection within social media, yet this very connection makes them more susceptible to emotional contagion. I believe this phenomenon extends beyond individual experience; it represents a collective psychological symptom of the algorithmic era. In an environment of information overload and emotional amplification, users have learned to react quickly but have gradually lost the ability to process emotions deeply.

4.4 Social Media Curation and Self-Worth

This section explores how participants respond to social media content related to fitness, self-discipline, success, and motivational messages, and how such content triggers various emotional reactions, including inspiration, anxiety, comparison, irritation, and identification. I found that these emotions arise not only from the content itself but also from users' projections and self-comparisons during the viewing process. As (Festinger, 1954) proposed in his social comparison theory, individuals evaluate their abilities and worth by comparing themselves to others, and such comparisons can evoke both motivation and distress depending on the perceived gap.[79]

As algorithms continually promote ideal lifestyles and models of success, users subconsciously adopt others' images as reference points for evaluating themselves,

[79] Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. Human relations 7(2): 117-140.

leading to emotional fluctuations and value reappraisal. These dynamics align with (Fardouly et al., 2015), who found that social media exposure intensifies body image concerns and mood changes through upward comparisons with idealized figures.[80]

These differing reactions reveal how individuals engage in psychological negotiation within the social media environment and expose the collective expectation in modern society to live well and become a better person. This section also examines how feedback and comparison shape participants' self-perception, reflecting both their underlying personal values and the broader social consciousness of the digital age.

1. Social Media Curation

In the social media environment, displaying has become a daily habit, while curation serves as the unspoken rule behind it. Most users are aware that their online personas do not fully reflect reality, yet they continue to craft carefully designed content to project an idealized version of life. In modern social media culture, such curation is not only a means of attracting attention but also a form of subtle social comparison—within the continuous cycle of seeing and being seen, people constantly reinforce their imagined notions of what success and happiness should look like.

> I once had a friend who was probably more successful in his career, and he often posted things about his girlfriend too. Since he was earning some money from his work, he would show it off online a bit, which felt kind of like flaunting his wealth. And his girlfriend would also post about how handsome and outstanding her partner was. (Participant B)

[80]Cohen, R., et al. (2019). # BoPo on Instagram: An experimental investigation of the effects of viewing body positive content on young women's mood and body image. New media & society 21(7): 1546-1564..

Participant B's experience reveals the implicit rule of image management on social media. I observed that such behavior often carries a dual meaning of showing off and self-presentation: the poster uses highlights of success to affirm personal value, while the viewer is unconsciously drawn into a psychological process of comparison and evaluation. This algorithmically amplified culture of display turns personal image into a consumable symbol. I believe this not only reflects the modern desire for external validation but also exposes the performative nature of happiness in digital society—a behavioral pattern in which individuals continuously polish reality to maintain an idealized impression.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, in which individuals curate selected aspects of themselves to sustain a favorable public image.[81] In digital contexts, such performances become continuous and highly visible, transforming everyday life into a stage where success and happiness are repeatedly displayed. The girlfriend's complementary posts further reinforce this front-stage performance, collectively amplifying the idealized narrative of success and desirability.

> I think most of the posts on social media are just nonsense. It's easy to say things but actually doing them is much harder. The stuff people post online isn't necessarily achievable, so most of the so-called motivational quotes are just meant to comfort the audience and make the poster feel superior. Especially those who think they're amazing, they can be really annoying. Most of the life lessons people post online aren't useful for anyone. You can say as much as you want, but it doesn't mean anything if you don't do it. Everyone can talk big, but not everyone takes action—and you never really know if they do. (Participant C)

[81] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

C's perspective reflects a contradictory emotion toward social media content—he criticizes its falseness yet is still inspired by its influence. I found that this attitude captures the complex psychology of modern users navigating between curation and authenticity. They are aware that social media is filled with exaggeration, fabrication, and emotional manipulation, yet they continue to browse, comment, and engage. This phenomenon of knowing it's not real but still being drawn to it reveals the psychological tension of social media—it both provokes skepticism and fosters dependence. I found C's case particularly interesting: although he expresses irritation toward so-called empty inspirational posts, he still feels motivated to take action after seeing some of them. This demonstrates that the true power of social media lies not merely in information transmission but in its ability to reshape emotions and value systems.

This dynamic can also be understood through the lens of self-branding and visibility labor. Research has shown that motivational discourse on social media often serves as a form of symbolic self-promotion, where expressing wisdom, discipline, or ambition becomes a way to signal personal value (Marwick, 2013;[82] Abidin, 2016[83]). C's irritation toward posters who appear to talk big reflects resistance to this logic, yet his continued exposure indicates how difficult it is to fully detach from environments structured around aspirational display.

I think that B and C's accounts together reveal the dual nature of social media curation—it serves both as a means of self-expression and as a field of psychological competition. People construct idealized versions of themselves through posts and carefully packaged content, yet while viewing others' curated lives, they experience

[82] Marwick, *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*.
[83] Abidin, Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and# OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram.

comparison, doubt, and anxiety. This intertwining of authenticity and fabrication turns social media into a space of emotional simulation, where everyone is performing while simultaneously searching for something real. I believe this tension not only shapes the patterns of online interaction but also profoundly influences how younger generations understand both themselves and reality.

2. Perception of Self-Worth

In the context of social media, self-worth has gradually shifted from internal affirmation to external comparison. I found that when users view others' posts, they often subconsciously evaluate whether they are good enough. What they care about is not only how others are doing, but the perceived distance between themselves and others. This sense of distance can, on one hand, motivate personal growth, but on the other, it may weaken inner stability, making emotions increasingly vulnerable to external evaluation.

> I think nowadays a lot of people start showing off their wealth online as soon as they make a bit of money. Everyone has a sense of comparison, but over time, if you truly recognize and affirm your own worth, it won't really affect you. At the beginning, though—especially when you feel lost—you do feel pressure and start comparing yourself to others. As for values, I think there's still some material comparison. For example, when a brand releases something new, I get interested, and it can even change the way I view expensive brands. (Participant B)

B's experience reveals how social media allows material comparison to infiltrate the construction of self-worth. I observed that he is aware of the anxiety such comparisons create and has gradually learned to replace external evaluation with self-affirmation. This suggests that an individual's sense of self-worth is not fixed but

evolves with psychological maturity and media experience. I find his statement—when I feel lost, that sense of comparison appears—particularly significant, as it highlights the link between inner insecurity and social media stimulation: when internal self-recognition is lacking, external images more easily disturb one's emotions.

From a theoretical perspective, B's reflection aligns with social comparison theory, which argues that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others, particularly during periods of uncertainty or instability (Festinger, 1954).[84] His statement that comparison intensifies when I feel lost highlights how moments of inner insecurity make individuals more vulnerable to external stimuli. In such states, social media content—especially displays of wealth and consumption—functions as a powerful comparative trigger.

> Yeah, I do. For example, I have a friend who often posts on Instagram about eating at expensive restaurants, and both she and her partner come from wealthy families. I feel like they eat well, live well, and use really high-end things. But I can't live that kind of life with my partner. Their meals can cost several thousand dollars, and it makes me feel a bit envious—I want to have that kind of wealthy lifestyle too. Especially since we're close friends, when we go out to eat together, I can really feel the gap between us. (Participant G)

G's account reveals the emotional effect of lifestyle comparison within social media. I observed that her envy is not merely a desire for wealth but a reflection of how self-perception becomes constrained by social standards. When others' lives are amplified by algorithms into ideal everyday images, individuals subconsciously begin to measure themselves by the same scale. I found that such comparisons not only

[84] Festinger, A theory of social comparison processes.

create a sense of disparity but also gradually erode inner satisfaction and self-worth. G's mention of feeling a gap when dining out with her friends shows that social media influences not only online emotions but also the subtle psychological distance within real-life relationships. I believe this reflects how people today increasingly struggle to distinguish between other people's lives and the life one should have. Once ideals are visualized through social media, living well becomes redefined as being seen as living well.

From a media perspective, social media platforms amplify everyday lifestyles into idealized visual narratives. Research has shown that repeated exposure to curated depictions of consumption, leisure, and luxury can heighten feelings of inadequacy and reduce subjective well-being, particularly when users engage in upward comparison (Vogel et al., 2014[85]; Fardouly et al., 2015)[86]. G's reaction illustrates how ordinary activities—such as dining out—are transformed into symbols of success and quality of life through selective posting and algorithmic reinforcement.

> Those social media posts do affect me psychologically. I'm a bit of a perfectionist myself—whenever there's something I want to do, I always want to try it. But when I can't do it as well as others, or better than them, I start to feel anxious and doubt myself. (Participant J)

J's account illustrates an anxiety state intertwined with achievement comparison and perfectionism. I observed that her sense of self-worth is highly dependent on external accomplishments, and when she fails to meet her own ideal standards, she falls into self-doubt. This phenomenon shows how social media amplifies individuals' sensitivity to performance and success, turning others' achievements into implicit

[85] Vogel et al., Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem.
[86] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.

benchmarks for self-evaluation. I noticed that she repeatedly used phrases like can't do it and not as good as others, revealing that her anxiety stems from an internalized logic of comparison. I believe this psychological pattern is especially common among perfectionist young users, who often rely on external achievements to validate their worth while neglecting the importance of inner growth and genuine self-satisfaction.

Prior research has shown that such upward comparison is associated with increased anxiety and reduced self-esteem, especially among young users (Vogel et al., 2014[87]; Fardouly et al., 2015).[88]

Based on the experiences of B, G, and J, I found that they represent different stages of self-worth awareness: B reflects the formation of self-affirmation, G embodies the envy and anxiety caused by the gap between ideals and reality, and J falls into the self-doubt of perfectionism. Together, these three states form a psychological spectrum that moves from external comparison toward inner balance. I believe that the impact of social media is not purely negative—it compels individuals to confront the question, How do I see myself? The real challenge lies not in escaping social media, but in learning to maintain psychological stability within visibility, allowing one's sense of self-worth to detach from external evaluation and return to an understanding rooted in genuine experience and internal affirmation.

3. Confidence and Anxiety

In the world of social media, users' emotions often fluctuate with the content they encounter. I found that modern social media not only offers a space for expression and connection but also serves as a simultaneous source of confidence and

[87] Vogel et al., Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem.
[88] Fardouly et al., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood.

anxiety. In this algorithm-driven, image-centered environment, the polished posts and highlight moments of others gradually construct an implicit framework of comparison. People unconsciously begin to measure themselves against others' appearances, body images, travel experiences, or achievements, falling into a psychological gap between the ideal self and the real self.

This gap extends beyond appearance or lifestyle—it also infiltrates one's sense of value and self-evaluation. When users see others receiving more attention and recognition, they easily experience anxiety and unease, even doubting whether their own efforts are sufficient. I found that such emotional fluctuations are often subconsciously rationalized as motivation to become better, yet, they trap individuals in an endless cycle of comparison.

Social media thus becomes an emotional mirror—it reflects who people aspire to be while simultaneously reminding them of what they have not yet achieved. I believe this contradiction represents a widespread psychological pattern among today's young generation: they seek affirmation and strength through social media, yet the very same mechanism gradually weakens their confidence. This inner tension makes social media both a source of comfort and pressure, outwardly offering connection and belonging, but inwardly intensifying feelings of isolation and self-doubt.

> After watching some motivational videos, I feel quite confident. But the negative experiences are more specific—like when I see some of my friends who seem to be doing well, I start comparing myself to them and feel anxious. I notice a gap, like my own life feels pretty ordinary right now, but some of my old friends seem to be living very different, more exciting lives. (Participant C)

C's experience demonstrates a typical case of emotional reversal. I observed that he undergoes clear emotional shifts depending on the type of content he engages with:

motivational videos temporarily boost his confidence, yet comparison with others quickly triggers anxiety. I believe this emotional fluctuation reflects the dual nature of social media—it can serve as a source of psychological support while simultaneously amplifying personal insecurity. C's mention of feeling anxious when seeing friends who seem to be doing well reveals the culture of performed happiness constructed by social media: others' highlight moments become invisible standards of comparison, making viewers feel a sense of disparity in life pace and a growing sense of inadequacy.

This reflects what has been described as the culture of performed happiness on social media, where selectively curated moments are presented as everyday reality (Goffman, 1959[89]; Marwick, 2013). [90]As a result, others' highlight moments become invisible standards of comparison, against which one's own ordinary life is judged as insufficient or stagnant.

> Yes, but this is more about my friend. All of her photos are heavily edited—to the point that you can barely recognize her. I don't really understand that behavior, but maybe it gives her confidence. I think people who edit their photos that much often have appearance anxiety—like if their nose doesn't look sharp enough, or the lighting or angle isn't perfect, they'll retouch it. But my friend edits her photos to an extreme level, and I think she does that because she wants to be the version of herself after the editing. Another example is from my own experience—when I see girls online who are really skinny with perfect proportions, especially those with short hair, I start to feel anxious. I find myself

[89] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.
[90] Marwick, *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*.

thinking, ‘Why are they so tall, thin, and pretty?’ and it makes me worry that maybe I’ve gained weight. (Participant G)

G’s account reveals the conflicted psychology between appearance and self-image. I observed that her remarks about her friend’s excessive photo editing, though seemingly critical, also carry a sense of projection—she understands that behavior because the edited self represents a kind of psychological ideal. I believe this mindset captures the essence of contemporary appearance anxiety: people simultaneously criticize unrealistic beauty standards while being drawn to and influenced by them. G’s comment about feeling anxious when seeing girls similar to herself but more perfect highlights the power of upward comparison. This comparison is no longer abstract—it occurs concretely between individuals who share similar traits, such as other short-haired girls. Such close-range differences are more likely to trigger self-doubt, because they provoke the thought: If she can look like that, why can’t I?

This aligns with research on appearance anxiety, which suggests that individuals use visual modification as a coping strategy to manage dissatisfaction with their bodies and self-image (Grabe et al., 2008[91]; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).[92]

I observed that the experiences of these two participants reveal a kind of emotional symmetry—C gains temporary confidence from positive content but feels anxious through comparison, while G feels uneasy about others’ edited beauty yet understands the psychological pursuit of confidence behind it. This shows that the influence of social media is rarely one-directional; rather, it functions as a cyclical

[91] Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, The role of the media in body image concerns among women: a meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies.
[92] Holland and Tiggemann, A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes.

psychological feedback loop that simultaneously fulfills the need for self-affirmation while creating new opportunities for self-doubt.

From my perspective, these phenomena make me realize that the true impact of social media does not lie in the content itself but rather in the way people watch. I observed that participants, while looking at others, are in fact also looking at themselves—in moments of envy, they are simultaneously reevaluating their own worth. This double gaze forms the emotional loop of modern youth on social media: they constantly swing between being inspired and being compared, caught in a cycle of wanting to improve yet feeling not good enough. I believe this inner tension represents the most authentic self-portrait of the digital age—people search for strength through the screen, even as that very strength turns back to consume them.

Goffman: Self-Presentation, Front Stage / Back Stage, and Impression Management

Social media posts such as photos, stories, selfies, and fitness results are forms of self-presentation in front of an audience. For this reason, the sample needed to include both people who post often and people who rarely post. Frequent posters are more active on the front stage, while low or non-posters are more often in the back stage, where they watch and compare others. Including both groups makes it possible to see different presentation styles and the mental cost behind them.

Goffman's ideas of front stage, back stage, and impression management help explain why people edit photos, choose certain angles, carefully select content, delete posts, or feel anxious about likes and comments. These actions show how users try to control how others see them on social media.

When choosing the ten participants, this study also included people who care about others' opinions and feedback at different levels. This is important because it directly affects how they build their identity online. Goffman explains the difference between a virtual social identity (how others see a person) and a real social identity (who the person really is). This idea matches the tension on social media between how someone looks online and how they are in real life.

Goffman's 1959 work *The Moral Career of the Mental Patient* focuses on how people gradually learn new ways of thinking in certain systems or situations, and how this process changes their self-concept. In this study, this idea is applied to digital life. Many participants described a process that starts with casual use and fun, then moves to dependence, comparison, and anxiety, and later to awareness and behavior control. This step-by-step process of learning, internalizing, and changing the self reflects the idea of a moral career.[93]

Other Related Theories

Several theoretical perspectives help explain the psychological patterns observed in participants' social media experiences. Festinger's social comparison theory explains why exposure to fitness, beauty, or success-related posts often triggers pressure, envy, and reduced self-confidence through processes of upward comparison. Marwick's concept of micro-celebrity and self-branding further clarifies why posting on social media becomes a form of self-management, in which likes and comments are experienced as indicators of performance and personal value. In addition, theories of emotional contagion and algorithm-driven content help explain how negative

[93] Goffman, The moral career of the mental patient.

emotions spread rapidly online, while short-form videos and personalized recommendations fragment attention and contribute to emotional fatigue over time.

Together, these theories support Goffman's framework. Goffman explains how people present themselves and are seen; social comparison explains why people are affected by others; micro-celebrity theory explains why people treat themselves like a product; and emotion and algorithms explain why users' feelings are shaped by platform design.

CONCLUSION

From the overall interviews, I found that social media has deeply influenced the lives and psychological states of young people. For most of them, social media is not just a platform for sharing but a stage that must be managed. Everyone wants to be seen, yet they also fear being seen the wrong way. Many participants said they carefully select photos, retouch images, and revise captions before posting, trying to make themselves look a bit better. Although this process can bring a sense of accomplishment, it also leads people to doubt whether their real self is good enough.

I discovered that most participants have different levels of dependence on likes, comments, and follower counts. Even when they say they don't care, their emotions are still affected by the numbers. This seemingly minor anxiety has already become part of daily life. Social media has turned into an emotional amplifier—making people happier when they are happy, but more down when they are sad. Under the push of algorithms, stimulating content becomes more attractive, and over time, people become more emotionally sensitive.

Some participants also mentioned that long-term scrolling makes them anxious, irritable, and unable to focus. Others felt that they were too easily influenced by what they saw online, with their moods shifting along with the content. This contradiction is common to know social media distracts us, yet without it, life feels incomplete. I believe social media makes people both dependent and tired of it. It gives everyone a chance to express themselves but also brings comparison and pressure. Young people today are constantly learning to balance, wanting to be themselves without being ignored, wanting to put down their phones without feeling left out. This tension, I think, represents the most authentic psychological state of modern life.

The four major themes together illustrate the intricate psychological mechanisms that shape how young people interact with social media. Rather than serving merely as a communication platform, social media has evolved into a psychological space where identity, emotion, and social belonging constantly overlap. It functions as both a mirror and a stage, where users observe themselves through others' eyes while performing selective versions of who they wish to be. This dual process echoes (Goffman, 1959) concept of self-presentation [94]and (Festinger, 1954) social comparison theory[95], showing how visibility and validation are now deeply internalized into self-perception. Moreover, the interviews indicate that social media is not only a site of anxiety and attachment but also a field for self-awareness and emotional growth. As young users become increasingly aware of its impact, they begin to regulate their behaviors and redefine what authenticity means in a mediated world. I think this paradox between dependence and awareness captures the essence of contemporary digital psychology, as people are both shaped by and consciously reshaping the online environments they inhabit.

Discussion

RQ1 How do young people construct and present self-image on social media?

During the interviews, I found that for most young people, social media is no longer just a place to share their lives—it has become a stage where they let others see who they are. Before posting, many think carefully about whether to edit their photos, which picture to choose, or which caption sounds just right. These small decisions reveal how they want to be seen by others. Many participants said that the version of

[94] Goffman, E. (1959). The moral career of the mental patient. Psychiatry 22(2): 123-142.
[95] Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. Human relations 7(2): 117-140.

themselves shown online isn't completely real, but rather a filtered and polished one. They know it's an idealized image, yet they also admit that this version tends to be more likable. As (Goffman, 1959) suggested, individuals continuously perform their selves in front of an audience, managing impressions to maintain social approval and avoid embarrassment.[96] I think this shows young people's strong desire to be understood and liked. Social media gives them the power to shape their own image, but it also creates a subtle pressure—to maintain a certain persona, to be seen but not too real,so most choose a middle ground between real and safe, appearing natural without exposing too much of their inner world. Through these interviews, I realized that most people are aware they're performing—it's just that this performance has become a habit. They're not pretending to be someone else; they're learning how to translate who they are in the language of social media—using filters, edits, captions, or tone to present a version of themselves that others can easily accept. As (Marwick, 2015) noted, visibility on platforms like Instagram turns everyday self-presentation into a calculated form of identity performance shaped by audience attention and feedback.[97] To me, this shows that social media isn't only a place to post; it's a space where everyone is quietly practicing who they want to become.

RQ2 How do social media interactions (likes, comments, views) influence self-identity and self-evaluation?

In the interviews, I found that many people are easily influenced by feedback on social media. Likes, comments, and follower counts may look like simple interactions, but in their minds, they have become indicators of how others see them. When a post

[96] Goffman, E. (1959). The moral career of the mental patient. Psychiatry 22(2): 123-142.
[97] Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. Public culture 27(1): 137-160.

gets a lot of reactions, they feel happy and confident, but when the response is cold, they start to wonder if they are not good enough. These emotional ups and downs are very real and show how social media feedback slowly shapes people's self-evaluation. As (Vogel et al., 2014) pointed out, online social comparisons and feedback have a strong impact on users' self-esteem, often leading to both momentary satisfaction and long-term insecurity.[98] What I found especially interesting is that everyone knows they shouldn't care too much about numbers, but almost no one can actually do it. Some say they don't care yet still check; others say that even one comment from someone they know can make them feel noticed and understood. These reactions made me realize that the real power of social media comes from the feeling of being seen. People aren't always trying to show off—they just want to confirm that they exist, that their life and thoughts matter to someone. Because of this, some have started to adjust how they present themselves online—choosing photos more carefully, writing captions more cautiously, and thinking twice before posting. They say it helps avoid misunderstandings or criticism, but I think it also makes their real self-blurrier over time. Eventually, the person shown on social media and the person in real life starts to drift apart, and some even begin to question which version is truly them. This sense of emotional dependence echoes what (Andreassen et al., 2017) described as the addictive nature of social media use, where people's self-worth becomes intertwined with digital validation.[99] To me, social media interactions are like a mirror—they don't just reflect how others see you; they slowly shape how you see yourself.

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[98] Vogel, E. A., et al. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. Psychology of popular media culture 3(4): 206.

[99] Andreassen, C. S., et al. (2017). The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey. Addictive behaviors 64: 287-293.

RQ3 Is social media use related to emotional fluctuations or anxiety experiences?

In the interviews, I found that almost every participant mentioned how social media affects their emotions. Some felt that it can bring relaxation or entertainment, but more often, social media use also makes people feel anxious, irritated, or emotionally down. These mood changes don't happen at all at once—they build up over time. The more people scroll, the harder it becomes to stop, and the more easily their emotions are influenced by what they see. Some participants said that when they browse social media, they are easily drawn into negative news, hateful comments, or constant comparisons with other people's lives, which gradually worsens their mood. Others mentioned that seeing friends who look happy, travel often, eat at nice restaurants, or have perfect bodies makes them think, Maybe I'm not good enough. This kind of feeling is very common—it's not just simple envy but a deeper sense of comparison anxiety. As (Fardouly et al., 2015) found, frequent exposure to idealized images on social media can heighten self-doubt and negatively affect mood through constant social comparison.[100]

Social media works like a magnifying mirror: it shows people the bright side of others' lives while constantly reminding them of what they lack. Many participants also mentioned that scrolling for too long makes them feel restless or tired, and sometimes it even affects their sleep or concentration. Some said that just seeing negative content can instantly ruin their mood, while others admitted that even when they go online just to relax, they end up feeling more anxious instead. This aligns with (Twenge & Campbell, 2018)findings that high screen time is associated with lower

[100] Fardouly, J., et al. (2015). Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. Body image 13: 38-45.

psychological well-being and increased emotional instability.[101] To me, this shows that the impact of social media on emotions is two-sided—it can bring short bursts of pleasure but also slowly drain one's mental energy over time. I found that social media use is indeed related to emotional fluctuations. It acts like an emotional amplifier: when people are happy, it makes them happier; when they are anxious, it makes them more anxious. Many have gotten used to using social media to escape boredom or loneliness, but the more they rely on it, the more their emotions become tied to it. I think this reflects one of the most common states of modern life—we look for happiness and connection through social media, but at the same time, we are pulled and drained by it, making it harder to find real calm.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was based on interviews with ten participants; although this small sample size allowed for in-depth qualitative exploration, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach by incorporating surveys or large-scale quantitative data to further validate and extend these results. Second, all participants were university students or young professionals from southern Taiwan, meaning that their social media behaviors and psychological responses may reflect regional, cultural, or age-specific characteristics that cannot be generalized to other populations. Third, because the data were collected through self-reported interviews, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, with some participants potentially downplaying negative emotions such as anxiety or overstating

[101] Twenge, J. M. and W. K. Campbell (2018). Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study. Preventive medicine reports 12: 271-283.

their ability to regulate social media use. Fourth, although platforms such as Instagram, Threads, and TikTok were frequently mentioned, this study did not conduct a detailed comparison of how platform-specific features—such as algorithmic design, visual emphasis, or interaction culture—shape users' emotions and self-presentation; future research could address this gap through cross-platform analysis. Finally, the study employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time, which limits the ability to observe changes in emotions, self-perceptions, or coping strategies over time; longitudinal or follow-up studies would be valuable for capturing these dynamic processes.

Suggestion

This study showed how social media can shape young people's feelings about appearance and the way they present themselves online, but there are still many things worth exploring in the future. More people from different backgrounds could be included to see if gender, lifestyle, or culture make a difference in how they experience appearance pressure. It would also be interesting to look at different platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Threads to see how each one creates a different kind of influence. Future studies could follow people for a longer time to understand how their feelings and habits change as they grow older or use social media differently. It might also be helpful to connect this topic with media literacy and mental health education, so young adults can learn to build a more balanced and healthy relationship with social media.

Conclusion

In the integrated analysis of the three research questions, this study shows that social media has become a central arena for young people to construct the self and express psychological states. Drawing on (Goffman, 1959) theory of self-presentation,

Festinger's social comparison theory[102], and (Marwick, 2015)'s perspective on the attention economy, this study finds the following[103]: first, young users perform an idealized self on social media to obtain recognition and emotional security; second, ongoing comparison leads to appearance anxiety and emotional imbalance; third, platform algorithms bind emotion to visibility, creating a cycle of anxiety and dependence; nevertheless, despite the pressures and challenges brought by social media, many young people also demonstrate media literacy and psychological resilience, learning to find a balance between attachment and rational use. Social media will keep changing, but what matters is how we use it to understand ourselves, not just to show ourselves.

In writing this thesis, I used AI as a research assistant, and through this experience, I realized that while AI can effectively help organize materials, translate texts, and synthesize content, significantly improving research efficiency, it also comes with many limitations and risks. Sometimes it cannot fully capture what I intend to express, and meanings may shift during Chinese-to-English translation; when processing interview transcripts, it can produce mistranslations, awkward phrasing, or tonal errors. More importantly, I discovered that AI occasionally generates non-existent references or data, such as fabricated study titles, publication years, or author citations, which can lead to misinformation if not carefully verified. This taught me that while AI can be a powerful research assistant, it should never replace human judgment and insight. I learned to maintain strong critical thinking and data verification skills, ensuring that every reference and interpretation remained accurate and meaningful. Completing this study was not only an exploration of social

[102]Goffman, E. (1959). The moral career of the mental patient. Psychiatry 22(2): 123-142..
[103] Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. Public culture, 27(1), 137-160.

media's psychological impact but also a learning process in human–AI collaboration. AI made my work more efficient and structured, yet genuine understanding, emotion, and value judgment must still come from the human mind. Ultimately, this process taught me not only how to analyze young people in the digital age but also how to find my own balance between technological convenience and human authenticity.

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