


The Relationship Between Social Comparison Processes and Well-Being in Digital Environments

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between social comparison processes and multiple dimensions of well-being within digital environments among adults. This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design and was conducted among adult residents of Tehran who reported regular engagement with digital environments, particularly social media platforms. Participants were recruited through online and offline convenience sampling methods and completed a set of standardized self-report questionnaires administered electronically. The instruments assessed social comparison orientation in digital contexts, positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, along with demographic variables and indicators of digital engagement intensity. Data were screened for statistical assumptions, and analyses were performed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, multiple regression analyses, group comparisons, and moderation analysis to examine gender differences in the observed relationships. Inferential analyses revealed significant negative associations between social comparison orientation and positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, alongside a significant positive association with negative affect. Multiple regression analyses demonstrated that social comparison orientation significantly predicted all well-being outcomes even after controlling for demographic variables and intensity of digital use. Group comparison analyses indicated that individuals with high levels of social comparison reported significantly lower well-being and higher negative affect compared to those with low comparison orientation. Moderation analysis further showed that gender significantly moderated these relationships, with stronger negative effects of social comparison on well-being observed among female participants. The findings indicate that social comparison processes play a central role in shaping emotional and psychological well-being in digital environments, highlighting social comparison orientation as a key risk factor for reduced well-being. These results underscore the importance of addressing maladaptive comparison tendencies in efforts to promote healthier digital engagement and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Social comparison; digital environments; well-being; social media; psychological health

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital environments has fundamentally transformed how individuals perceive themselves and others, reshaping everyday social interactions and psychological experiences. Social media platforms, online communities, and algorithm-driven content streams have created unprecedented opportunities for self-presentation, connection, and comparison. Within these environments, individuals are constantly exposed to curated representations of others' achievements, lifestyles, appearances, and emotional states, which intensifies social comparison processes and embeds them deeply into daily cognitive and emotional functioning. Contemporary research increasingly recognizes that social comparison is not merely a peripheral byproduct of digital engagement, but a central psychological mechanism through which digital environments influence well-being, mental health, and self-evaluation (Yaqoob et al., 2025). As digital technologies continue to permeate personal, educational, and occupational domains, understanding the psychological dynamics of social comparison in these contexts has become an essential scholarly priority.

Social comparison theory, originally proposed to explain how individuals evaluate themselves in the absence of objective standards, has gained renewed relevance in the digital era. Online platforms amplify both upward and downward comparisons by enabling constant exposure to peers, influencers, and idealized social norms. Research suggests that upward social comparison, in which individuals compare themselves to those perceived as superior, is particularly salient in digital spaces and is often associated with negative emotional outcomes such as envy, inadequacy, and diminished self-esteem (Sayyed Muhammad Mehdi Raza et al., 2025). At the same time, downward social comparison may provide temporary emotional relief or self-enhancement, yet its long-term implications for well-being remain complex and context-dependent. The omnipresence of comparison opportunities in digital environments differentiates them from offline contexts and raises critical questions about their cumulative psychological effects.

A growing body of empirical evidence links social comparison in digital contexts to a wide range of well-being indicators, including emotional health, psychological functioning, and life satisfaction. Studies focusing on adolescents and young adults have consistently demonstrated that frequent social comparison on social

media platforms is associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and psychological distress (Cao et al., 2025; Ruan et al., 2023). These findings suggest that digital comparison processes may function as a psychological stressor, particularly when individuals internalize idealized standards that are difficult or impossible to attain. Moreover, research conducted in diverse cultural contexts indicates that the impact of social comparison is not limited to Western societies but is observable across collectivist and individualist cultures alike (Wu et al., 2022; Yu & Sun, 2024).

Well-being itself is a multidimensional construct encompassing both hedonic components, such as positive affect and life satisfaction, and eudaimonic components, such as psychological well-being, meaning, and self-acceptance. Digital environments appear to influence these dimensions in distinct yet interconnected ways. While some individuals report enhanced social connectedness and emotional support through online interactions, others experience reduced well-being as a result of persistent comparison and perceived social inadequacy (Pigart et al., 2024). This dual nature of digital engagement underscores the importance of examining not merely the quantity of digital use, but the qualitative psychological processes, such as social comparison, that mediate its effects on well-being.

Recent studies have highlighted specific psychological pathways through which social comparison operates in digital environments. For example, social comparison has been shown to mediate the relationship between social media addiction and internalizing symptoms, including depression and anxiety (Yaqoob et al., 2025). Similarly, fear of missing out has been identified as both a consequence and a driver of comparison-oriented digital behavior, further exacerbating negative emotional outcomes (ÇİFÇİ & Kumcağız, 2023; Steinberger & Kim, 2023). These findings suggest that social comparison functions not only as an isolated cognitive process but as part of a broader network of psychological mechanisms that jointly shape digital well-being.

The role of individual differences has also received increasing attention in the literature. Variables such as self-esteem, self-compassion, emotion regulation, and psychological resilience appear to moderate the impact of social comparison on well-being. For instance, individuals with higher self-compassion may be less vulnerable to the negative effects of upward comparison, even in highly visual and appearance-focused digital platforms (Galhardo et al., 2024; Kang & Jo, 2024). Conversely, individuals with maladaptive schemas or heightened shame sensitivity may

experience intensified negative reactions to comparison cues (Li et al., 2024; Pourhosein et al., 2023). These findings emphasize the need to consider social comparison within a broader psychological framework that accounts for personal vulnerabilities and protective factors.

Digital social comparison has also been extensively studied in relation to body image, appearance concerns, and self-evaluation. Platforms emphasizing visual content, such as Instagram and TikTok, have been shown to foster frequent appearance-based comparisons, particularly among young women and adolescents (Intan & Dhani, 2025; Kato & Virlia, 2024). Such comparisons are strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem, and poorer mental health outcomes (Kim & Kim, 2023; Sayyed Muhammad Mehdi Raza et al., 2025). Importantly, these effects are not confined to appearance-related domains but extend to academic, social, and occupational comparisons, highlighting the pervasive influence of comparison processes across multiple life domains (Adefisayo, 2024; Apare, 2024).

Beyond individual psychological outcomes, social comparison in digital environments has broader social and behavioral implications. Research indicates that comparison-driven digital engagement can influence academic stress, competitive behavior, consumption patterns, and even energy use behaviors through norm-based comparisons (Park & Yun, 2024; Syed et al., 2023). These findings illustrate that social comparison is a powerful mechanism shaping not only internal states but also observable behaviors in digitally mediated contexts. Consequently, examining social comparison provides valuable insights into how digital environments structure both personal well-being and collective social dynamics.

Despite the expanding literature, several gaps remain. Many studies focus on specific populations such as adolescents or university students, while fewer investigations address adult populations in large metropolitan contexts where digital engagement is deeply embedded in professional and social life. Additionally, much of the existing research emphasizes negative outcomes, with comparatively less attention paid to the nuanced and potentially bidirectional relationships between social comparison and well-being. There is also a need for context-specific research that considers cultural, social, and urban factors influencing digital behavior and psychological experience. In rapidly urbanizing societies with high levels of digital connectivity, such as major Middle Eastern cities,

these dynamics may manifest in distinct ways that are not fully captured by existing studies.

Furthermore, methodological diversity in the field highlights the importance of integrating multiple well-being indicators within a single analytical framework. Studies examining isolated outcomes may overlook the interconnected nature of emotional, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of well-being. By simultaneously assessing positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how social comparison operates across different facets of mental health (Sheffler & Cheung, 2023; Sun et al., 2023). Such an approach is particularly relevant in digital environments, where emotional responses, self-evaluations, and social feedback processes occur rapidly and interactively.

Taken together, the existing body of research underscores the central role of social comparison in shaping well-being within digital environments, while also revealing important gaps related to population focus, contextual specificity, and integrative measurement. Addressing these gaps requires empirically grounded studies that examine social comparison processes and well-being simultaneously, within clearly defined digital contexts and culturally relevant settings. Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to examine the relationship between social comparison processes and well-being in digital environments among adults residing in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationship between social comparison processes and well-being within digital environments. The target population consisted of adult residents of Tehran who actively used at least one social media platform on a daily basis. Participants were recruited through a combination of online announcements disseminated via social networking sites and messaging applications, as well as offline invitations distributed in public spaces such as universities, libraries, and coworking centers. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 60 years of age, to have resided in Tehran for a minimum of one year, and to report regular engagement with digital environments, defined as at least one hour of daily use of social media or online networking platforms. Individuals with self-reported severe psychiatric disorders or

cognitive impairments that could interfere with questionnaire completion were excluded. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically prior to data collection. The final sample size was determined based on recommendations for correlational studies, ensuring sufficient statistical power to detect medium effect sizes. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from a university ethics committee, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

2.2. Measures

Data collection was conducted using a structured online questionnaire composed of several standardized instruments alongside a demographic information form. Social comparison processes in digital environments were assessed using a validated social comparison orientation scale adapted to online contexts, which measures individuals' tendencies to engage in upward and downward comparisons while interacting with social media content. This instrument captures both the frequency and the emotional salience of comparison experiences in digital settings, with higher scores indicating a stronger inclination toward comparison-based evaluation of the self. Well-being was measured using a multidimensional well-being scale encompassing both hedonic and eudaimonic components, including positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction, and psychological functioning. Participants responded to items on Likert-type scales, with demonstrated reliability and validity in prior research and acceptable internal consistency coefficients in the present study. Additional measures assessed intensity of social media use, including average daily time spent online and the number of platforms used regularly, to provide contextual information about digital engagement. Demographic variables such as age, gender, educational level, marital status, and employment status were also collected to describe the sample and to allow for potential control analyses. The questionnaire was administered in Persian, using previously validated translations where available, and a pilot test was conducted with a small group of participants from Tehran to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reasonable completion time.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using statistical software appropriate for social science research. Prior to inferential analyses, the dataset was screened for missing values, outliers, and assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics, levels of social comparison, and well-being indicators. Internal consistency of the measurement instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine bivariate relationships between social comparison processes and dimensions of well-being in digital environments. To further explore the predictive role of social comparison, multiple regression analyses were performed, with well-being indicators entered as dependent variables and social comparison scores as primary predictors, while controlling for relevant demographic variables and intensity of social media use. Where appropriate, additional analyses were conducted to assess potential moderating effects of gender or age on the relationship between social comparison and well-being. Statistical significance was evaluated at the conventional alpha level, and effect sizes were reported to facilitate interpretation of practical significance. The analytical approach was designed to provide a comprehensive and rigorous examination of how social comparison processes within digital environments are associated with individual well-being among adults in Tehran.

3. Findings and Results

The findings of the study are presented in a structured manner to provide a clear and comprehensive account of the empirical results. First, descriptive statistics of the main study variables are reported to offer an overview of participants' levels of social comparison processes and well-being in digital environments. This is followed by inferential analyses examining the relationships between variables, including correlation and regression analyses, as well as subgroup comparisons. Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics of the study variables and serves as a foundation for the subsequent analytical results.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics of Social Comparison Processes and Well-Being Variables*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Upward Social Comparison	3.42	0.76	1.40	4.90
Downward Social Comparison	2.98	0.69	1.20	4.70
Overall Social Comparison Orientation	3.20	0.63	1.60	4.80
Positive Affect	3.54	0.71	1.50	4.90
Negative Affect	2.61	0.74	1.10	4.80
Life Satisfaction	3.47	0.68	1.60	4.90
Psychological Well-Being	3.59	0.65	1.80	4.90

As shown in Table 1, participants reported moderate to relatively high levels of overall social comparison orientation in digital environments, with upward social comparison occurring more frequently than downward social comparison. In terms of well-being, mean scores indicated generally moderate levels of positive affect, life

satisfaction, and psychological well-being, while negative affect was reported at a comparatively lower level. The observed ranges suggest sufficient variability across all variables, supporting the suitability of the data for correlational and regression analyses.

Table 2*Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Social Comparison Processes and Well-Being Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social Comparison Orientation	1.00				
2. Positive Affect	-0.36*	1.00			
3. Negative Affect	0.41*	-0.48*	1.00		
4. Life Satisfaction	-0.33*	0.52*	-0.45*	1.00	
5. Psychological Well-Being	-0.38*	0.56*	-0.49*	0.58*	1.00

* $p < 0.01$

The correlation analysis presented in Table 2 revealed significant associations between social comparison orientation and all dimensions of well-being. Higher levels of social comparison were significantly associated with lower positive affect, lower life satisfaction, and reduced

psychological well-being, while being positively associated with higher negative affect. These findings indicate that frequent engagement in social comparison processes within digital environments is linked to poorer subjective and psychological well-being outcomes among the participants.

Table 3*Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Well-Being from Social Comparison Orientation*

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Positive Affect	Social Comparison Orientation	-0.41	0.07	-0.36	-5.86	<0.001
Negative Affect	Social Comparison Orientation	0.47	0.08	0.39	6.12	<0.001
Life Satisfaction	Social Comparison Orientation	-0.38	0.06	-0.34	-6.01	<0.001
Psychological Well-Being	Social Comparison Orientation	-0.44	0.07	-0.37	-6.28	<0.001

The regression results summarized in Table 3 demonstrated that social comparison orientation significantly predicted all examined dimensions of well-being, even after controlling for demographic variables and intensity of social media use. Social comparison emerged as a negative predictor of positive affect, life satisfaction, and

psychological well-being, and as a positive predictor of negative affect. The standardized beta coefficients indicate that social comparison processes exert a moderate and consistent influence on well-being outcomes in digital contexts.

Table 4

Comparison of Well-Being Scores by Level of Social Comparison Orientation

Well-Being Variable	Low Social Comparison (Mean ± SD)	High Social Comparison (Mean ± SD)	t	p
Positive Affect	3.89 ± 0.62	3.21 ± 0.68	7.14	<0.001
Negative Affect	2.21 ± 0.61	3.02 ± 0.72	-8.03	<0.001
Life Satisfaction	3.84 ± 0.59	3.12 ± 0.63	7.86	<0.001
Psychological Well-Being	3.95 ± 0.56	3.24 ± 0.60	8.11	<0.001

As shown in Table 4, participants with high levels of social comparison orientation reported significantly lower positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, alongside significantly higher negative affect,

compared to those with low levels of social comparison. These group differences further underscore the detrimental association between intensive social comparison in digital environments and overall well-being.

Table 5

Moderating Effect of Gender on the Relationship Between Social Comparison and Well-Being

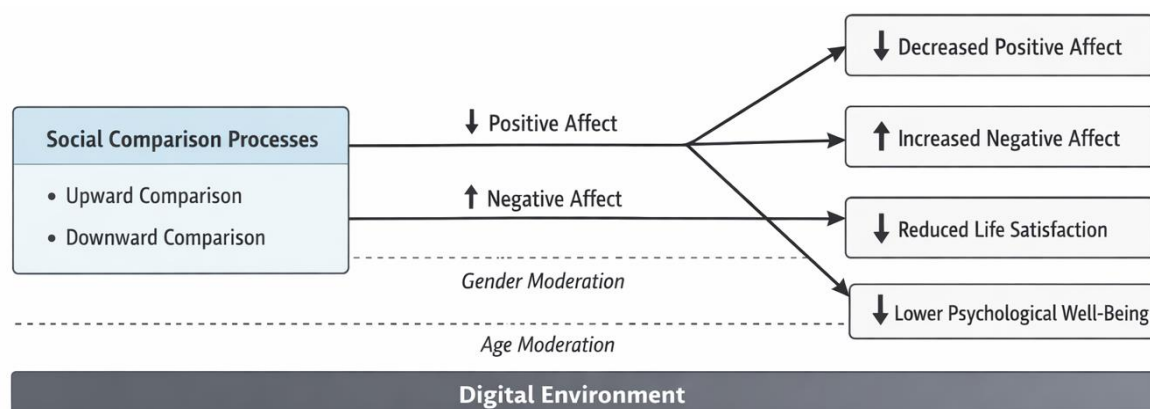
Outcome Variable	Interaction Term (SC × Gender)	B	SE B	β	t	p
Positive Affect	-0.18	0.07	-0.14	-2.57	0.011	
Negative Affect	0.21	0.08	0.16	2.63	0.009	
Life Satisfaction	-0.15	0.06	-0.13	-2.48	0.014	
Psychological Well-Being	-0.19	0.07	-0.15	-2.71	0.007	

The moderation analysis presented in Table 5 indicated that gender significantly moderated the relationship between social comparison orientation and several well-being outcomes. Specifically, the negative impact of social comparison on positive affect, life satisfaction, and

psychological well-being, as well as its positive association with negative affect, was stronger for female participants than for male participants, suggesting gender-based vulnerability in response to social comparison processes in digital environments.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between Social Comparison Processes and Well-Being in Digital Environments



4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between social comparison processes and well-being in digital environments, and the findings provide robust empirical support for the central role of social comparison as a key

psychological mechanism shaping emotional and psychological outcomes in online contexts. The results indicated that higher levels of social comparison orientation were significantly associated with lower positive affect, reduced life satisfaction, diminished psychological well-being, and increased negative affect. These findings align

with a growing body of evidence suggesting that digital environments intensify comparison-based self-evaluation and, in turn, undermine well-being (Steinberger & Kim, 2023; Yaqoob et al., 2025). The consistency of these associations across multiple well-being indicators underscores the pervasive and multifaceted impact of social comparison in digitally mediated social life.

One of the most salient findings of this study was the strong negative association between social comparison orientation and positive dimensions of well-being, including positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being. This pattern supports prior research demonstrating that frequent exposure to upward social comparison cues on social media platforms contributes to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction (Jin et al., 2024; Sayyed Muhammad Mehdi Raza et al., 2025). Digital environments often present highly curated and idealized portrayals of success, appearance, and happiness, which can distort social norms and elevate comparison standards beyond realistic attainability. As a result, individuals who are more prone to social comparison may experience chronic discrepancies between their perceived self and idealized others, leading to reduced subjective well-being (Kato & Virlia, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2023).

The positive association observed between social comparison orientation and negative affect further reinforces the emotionally taxing nature of comparison processes in digital contexts. Elevated levels of negative affect among high comparison individuals are consistent with findings linking social comparison to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional distress (Cao et al., 2025; Ruan et al., 2023). In particular, upward social comparison has been shown to elicit emotions such as envy, shame, and fear of failure, which accumulate over time and erode emotional stability (Galhardo et al., 2024; Kang & Jo, 2024). The current findings extend this literature by demonstrating that these emotional consequences are evident not only in adolescent or student samples but also among adults navigating everyday digital environments.

The regression analyses further indicated that social comparison orientation remained a significant predictor of all well-being outcomes even after controlling for demographic variables and intensity of digital engagement. This suggests that the psychological tendency to compare oneself with others may be more consequential for well-being than mere time spent online. This finding is in line with prior studies emphasizing that qualitative aspects of digital use, such as cognitive and emotional engagement

with content, are more predictive of mental health outcomes than quantitative usage metrics (Safdar Bajwa et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2023). Thus, individuals who engage with digital content in a comparison-driven manner may be particularly vulnerable to negative psychological outcomes regardless of overall usage duration.

The group comparisons between individuals with low and high levels of social comparison orientation provided additional insight into the magnitude of these effects. Participants with high social comparison reported substantially lower positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, alongside higher negative affect, compared to their low comparison counterparts. These findings are consistent with evidence from academic, social, and body image domains, where high comparison tendencies have been linked to poorer psychological adjustment and increased stress (Apare, 2024; Pigart et al., 2024). The magnitude and consistency of these differences highlight social comparison as a meaningful risk factor for diminished well-being in digital environments.

The moderation analysis revealed that gender significantly influenced the relationship between social comparison and well-being, with stronger negative effects observed among female participants. This finding aligns with extensive literature indicating that women may be more susceptible to the harmful effects of social comparison, particularly in visually oriented digital platforms that emphasize appearance, lifestyle, and social validation (Galhardo et al., 2024; Intan & Dhani, 2025). Prior research suggests that sociocultural pressures, internalization of appearance ideals, and heightened sensitivity to social feedback may amplify comparison-related distress among women (Apopei et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that gender-based vulnerability persists across broader well-being domains, not limited to body image alone.

The results of this study can also be interpreted within broader theoretical frameworks linking social comparison to self-regulation, emotion regulation, and identity formation. Digital environments provide constant opportunities for external validation, which may weaken internal self-evaluative processes and increase reliance on comparative feedback. Studies have shown that individuals with lower self-acceptance or emotion regulation capacity are more likely to engage in maladaptive comparison and experience heightened psychological distress (Tedjawidjaja & Christanti, 2022; Yu & Sun, 2024). In this context, social comparison may function as both a cognitive habit and an

emotional coping strategy that paradoxically exacerbates distress rather than alleviating it.

Importantly, the findings of this study also resonate with research examining social comparison as a mediating mechanism between digital engagement and mental health outcomes. Prior studies have demonstrated that social comparison mediates the effects of social media addiction, fear of missing out, and academic stress on psychological well-being (ÇİFÇİ & Kumcağız, 2023; Steinberger & Kim, 2023). The present findings support this mediational logic by establishing a direct and robust link between comparison orientation and well-being outcomes, thereby reinforcing the centrality of social comparison in digital mental health research.

From a contextual perspective, examining these relationships among adults residing in a large metropolitan setting adds important nuance to the existing literature. Urban environments are characterized by high digital connectivity, competitive social climates, and increased exposure to diverse comparison targets. In such contexts, digital comparison processes may interact with offline social pressures related to career success, lifestyle standards, and social status. Research suggests that social comparison in urban digital settings may extend beyond appearance and social popularity to include economic consumption patterns and performance-based evaluations (Azizi et al., 2023; Park & Yun, 2024). The present findings indicate that, regardless of the specific comparison domain, the cumulative psychological cost of frequent comparison remains substantial.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the growing consensus that social comparison is a critical psychological pathway through which digital environments influence well-being. By demonstrating consistent associations across emotional and psychological outcomes, and by identifying gender as a significant moderator, the study offers a nuanced understanding of who is most vulnerable to comparison-related harm and why. These insights have important implications for theory, research, and practice in the fields of digital psychology, mental health, and well-being.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, making it impossible to determine whether social comparison leads to

reduced well-being or whether individuals with lower well-being are more inclined to engage in social comparison. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, including social desirability and subjective interpretation of questionnaire items. Third, the sample was limited to adults residing in Tehran, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or geographic contexts. Finally, the study did not differentiate between specific digital platforms or types of content, which may vary in their comparison-inducing characteristics.

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify the causal directionality between social comparison and well-being in digital environments. Investigating platform-specific dynamics and content characteristics would provide more granular insights into which digital features are most harmful or protective. Additionally, future studies should explore psychological and contextual moderators such as self-compassion, digital literacy, and cultural values to better understand individual differences in vulnerability to comparison. Expanding research to diverse age groups and cultural settings would further enhance the generalizability and applicability of findings.

From a practical perspective, interventions aimed at improving digital well-being should prioritize reducing maladaptive social comparison and promoting healthier self-evaluation strategies. Educational programs can raise awareness about the curated nature of online content and encourage critical engagement with social media. Mental health practitioners may incorporate comparison-focused cognitive and emotion regulation strategies into therapeutic interventions for clients experiencing digital-related distress. At a broader level, platform designers and policymakers can consider features that reduce excessive comparison cues and promote more authentic and supportive online interactions.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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