Social Comparison on Social Media Platforms: A media and communication Perspective

Yue Qiu*

Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, 2006, Australia

Abstract. Many existing studies of social comparison focus on the psychological component, but the reality of users' lived experiences is that most users incorporate multiple platforms into their communication practices in order to access the people and networks they desire to influence. This paper delves into the phenomenon of social comparison on social media platforms, examined through the lens of media and communication studies. Particularly emphasized is the role of algorithmic curation and the emergence of social media influencers as modern benchmarks of success and aspiration. This paper endeavors to offer a comprehensive understanding of the intertwined dynamics of technological affordances, socio-cultural catalysts, and psychological impacts in the realm of digital social comparison. Finally, the paper reflects on potential strategies to navigate this complex terrain, aiming to strike a balance between digital engagement and mental well-being. The overarching aim is to foster a digital environment that, while enabling connection and expression, also ensures the psychological well-being of its users.

1.Introduction

In the era of digitalization, the landscape of human interaction and self-presentation has been significantly transformed. Social media platforms, as one of the chief harbingers of this change, have not merely altered the way individuals communicate but have deeply influenced self-perception and societal values. There is no doubt that social media platforms are exerting a significant influence on interpersonal and sociocultural patterns of interaction. Specifically, social media platforms introduce new possibilities for managing personal networks and social activities. One finds a fascinating, albeit complex, the interplay of technology and human behaviour shaping an environment rife with social comparison. The Straits Times has reported that social media exacerbates feelings of inferiority among young people. The abundance of posts showing personal excellence can trigger feelings of inferiority or inadequacy in young people, especially for those who are unable to separate the world of social media from their real lives [1]. Young people tend to rely on social media to gain self-worth and build their self-image.

Festinger’s theory of social comparison posits that individuals inherently assess their own abilities and attitudes by juxtaposing themselves against others, especially in the absence of objective standards or when faced with uncertainties about their own standing in a particular domain [2]. While the intrinsic human tendency to compare oneself with others has historically been restrained to local or community interactions, or through conventional media, the rise of social media has supercharged this phenomenon, expanding its scale, scope, and implications. Festinger's theory finds new resonance in this digital context; with a deluge of information but lacking clear objective standards on what constitutes 'success' or 'happiness', users find themselves incessantly measuring against the varied metrics of social media—likes, shares, comments, or even the perceived lifestyles of other platform users.

Given the relevance of social media platforms to a variety of social functions, an extensive body of experimental research from the perspective of social psychology has documented detrimental effects on social media users’ mental well-being from exposure to social media posts. For example, Vogel et al. found that individuals with a higher inclination for social comparison orientation who engage in this behaviour on Facebook may experience a range of negative psychological outcomes, including lower self-perceptions, decreased self-esteem, and poorer emotional well-being compared to those with lower social comparison orientation who engage in similar online activities [3]. This finding underscores the potential negative consequences of excessive social comparison on social media platforms like Facebook. Similarly, individuals with a higher frequency of online comparisons tend to have higher levels of depressive symptoms, increased levels of addiction to social media, more negative self-perceptions, and a greater number of maladaptive social media behaviours [4].

Historically, such comparisons might have been limited to face-to-face interactions or through traditional media. However, today, the unceasing stream of updates, life highlights, and achievements presented on social media serve as a comparative backdrop, frequently intensified by algorithmic curation. Social media
platforms, while enabling unprecedented global communication and serving myriad social functions, have also ushered in profound implications for individual and societal mental well-being. This essay aims to unpack the multi-faceted dimensions of social comparison on social media platforms, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between technology—its affordances and algorithms—and the socio-cultural phenomena, particularly the rise of social media influencers.

2. Affordances in shaping social comparison

The notion of affordances is essential for understanding the complex relationship between social comparison and platform features. Affordances have been widely used by scholars in media and communication studies to describe human-technology interactions. Broadly, technological affordances refer to the capabilities and functions a particular technology provides to its users [5]. That is, platforms are designed to contain various technological features that allow users to engage with the digital environment and provide users with opportunities for self-disclosure and self-expression. For example, the functions of social media platforms allow users to curate and present their lives through sharing, posting, and updating content in different forms. Importantly, the technological affordances do not constrain users’ online behaviour, however, they do configure the environment in a way that shapes users’ engagement [6].

Different platform features showcase how affordances are integrated into the architecture of social comparison. Lee found that when people frequently use Facebook to compare themselves to others, they tend to expect positive reactions or responses from others when they post content on the platform [7]. In other words, individuals are more looking forward to receiving likes, comments, or other positive feedback when they share something on social media platforms. The likes, comments and shares that users receive on social media are a feedback mechanism. Users often seek validation and social approval through these interactions. Similarly, many social media platforms provide metrics such as follower counts, likes, and viewer numbers, which serve as benchmarks for comparison. Users may compare their metrics with those of others, leading to self-esteem issues and a sense of competition. These features trigger social comparisons, as users may measure self-worth and popularity based on the number and quality of interactions their posts receive. Essentially, the architecture of the platform matters, and the architecture of social comparison is shaped by affordance.

By utilizing the technological affordances of creating highly curated content on social media platforms, users are able to construct online identities by presenting and performing in a self-conscious way [8]. In particular, users have the ability to filter and select the content they like to display on their accounts for others to view [9]. For example, self-representation on social media takes place through customizing users’ personal homepage using various digital tokens such as nicknames, avatars and fronts to express themselves. Personal profiles present a rich set of information about users themselves, including achievements, viewpoints, daily activities, personalities, relationship status, habits, etc.

Moreover, social media users who produce content vary their self-presentation strategies in patterned ways, based on the platform-specific features [10]. For example, features like “Stories” on platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat can amplify comparison by offering real-time glimpses into people's daily lives. However, this filter and selectively present aspects of the self may not be the full picture of others’ lives, since people tend to show the best side of themselves on social media [9]. Thus, when users position themselves as an observer who is watching other people’s life, they only see a partial representation. People then compare their unfiltered, real lives to the idealized versions they see on social media, leading to feelings of envy or inadequacy. Social comparison behaviours come into play when users constantly compare themselves to others based on their online identities which are only partial representations.

Social comparison can also be facilitated depending on different platforms. Lewin and colleagues studied the relationships between different types of social comparison and the problematic use of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter. The result indicates that when people often compare their abilities to others on all these five platforms, they tend to use these platforms despite continue to use the platform would impair their daily functioning and psychological distress [11]. On the other hand, the problematic use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat is less when people frequently compare their opinions with others [11]. This suggests that people who engage in a greater comparison of abilities are more likely to seek opportunities for comparison in all places, and social media would present an easy opportunity to engage in the behavior of social comparison, while the dimensions of comparison differ depending on the platform.

Technological affordances can be one of the factors that account for this difference in terms of their range of interpersonal connections and audiences of content across platforms. For Goffman, individuals have multiple identities, and the way individuals present themselves depends on the social context in which they live [12]. People construct their identities based on where they are and who they are with [9]. In the realm of social media platforms, the user online identity and the generated content are delivered based on characteristics and functions that vary across different platforms, enabling a variety of public and private communication pathways [6]. Users may perform a public online identity that differs from their private selves across the platforms. Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat primarily focus on personal social connections and sharing moments, emphasis on private connections with friends and acquaintances. Within these platforms, people tend to opt for online identities that are relatively similar to their offline personas performing in front of acquaintances, and seeking for consistency [8]. Whereas TikTok and Twitter have a broader user base, which includes not only close tie relationships but also a wide range of users, such as celebrities and influencers. Users can discover and engage
with content from accounts they don't personally know. This broader reach makes interactions on these platforms relatively more public by default.

In contrast, online identity and self-representation can be constructed in a way that is less constrained by the interpersonal relationship and require less consistency with their offline identity within the platforms that are considered public space of social interaction [13]. Nevertheless, users might still treat other users’ self-representations on these public platforms as if they were the actual and authentic representations of themselves. This dissonance due to differences in the technological affordance of platforms as well as self-representation can lead to social comparison when others perceive the public persona as authentic and compare themselves to it.

Despite the technological affordances of platforms allowing individuals to build online identities, it is not sufficient to explain the cause of the formation of social comparison. Nagy and Neff criticize that the previous notion of technological affordance mainly focuses on what users can do with technology and how technology shapes sociality, while ignoring the affordances as dependent on users’ actions, awareness, and perceptions [14]. They introduce the term ‘imagined affordances’ which highlights that users’ interactions with technology are constructed through users’ perceptions, expectations and emotional experiences of platforms [14]. Initially, users have expectations or imagination of the technological artifact as it has a certain function or property. The designers rely on the users’ imagination to develop the affordance that can fulfill the users’ expectations. Hence, imagined affordances are not simply technologies that only determine what the users passively use on the platforms. Rather, it encompasses an active action of platform users and designers to enable everything that is happening on the platforms. As a result, social comparison on social media platforms is not passively experienced by the users, but the users choose to compare themselves with others based on the content they are viewing. That is, technology only facilitates the behavior of social comparison.

3. Algorithmic facilitation

Social media algorithms act as directors of the digital stage, highlighting content that is deemed attractive and masking content that is not. These complex rules determine which posts are amplified and which are weakened in a user's push, acting as gatekeepers to a user's digital social exposure. Algorithms prioritise content that generates a lot of interaction - often content that is emotional, sensational or enviable - which inadvertently encourages a culture of comparison.

Since functions and features are built within the design of the platforms, social media platforms through their design and algorithms, play a substantial role in shaping individual behavior, including the tendency toward social comparison. Algorithms may unintentionally reinforce social comparison. For the majority of platform users, the algorithm is hidden under the enormous technological structure [14]. Algorithms are designed to show users content that aligns with their interests and beliefs. Without being aware of how algorithms work and influence their content feed, users may be more susceptible to social comparison without understanding why they are seeing certain content. For instance, platform algorithms such as TikTok deliver trendy content based on engagement metrics like likes, comments, and shares on platforms. When platforms consistently show content that receives high engagement, it can create a skewed perception of reality. Users may believe that everyone else is leading more exciting lives or is more successful, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Understanding the properties, affordances, and designs common to social media platforms provides a valuable framework for working out the logic of social comparison.

Social media platforms are engineered to capture and retain user attention; they achieve this through meticulously designed features and algorithms that exploit psychological tendencies. The 'like' button, personalized feeds, and content recommendations are not arbitrary fixtures but are deliberate choices aimed at optimizing user engagement. The algorithms that power these features are adept at learning what content keeps users scrolling, often prioritizing material that incites emotional responses, including content that fosters social comparison. This is because emotional engagement, whether positive or negative, drives more prolonged interaction and deeper platform immersion. For example, when users encounter posts depicting idealized lifestyles or 'highlight reels' of others, it can trigger a comparison against their own lives, an activity that the platform algorithms have learned to promote subtly through content curation based on prior user engagement.

Social media platforms, through their design and algorithms, sculpt the digital environment to which individuals are exposed. As users navigate their feeds, they are not simply consuming content; they are engaging with a system designed to capture their attention and to draw them into comparison. The intricate relationship between user behaviour and algorithmic reinforcement creates a loop whereby social comparisons can be a driver of social media content consumption and production. As users respond to content that elicits comparisons, platform algorithms learn and subsequently surface more such content, creating a feedback loop that perpetuates and intensifies attention to social comparisons. The propensity for social comparison is thus not merely a by-product of user interactions but a phenomenon intricately woven into the fabric of these platforms. In this way, social media platforms, through their algorithmic design, are not passively carrying content, but actively shaping the social dynamics they carry. The result is a digital ecosystem that exploits the human psyche and fuels social comparisons, leading to negative outcomes such as lower self-esteem and increased anxiety among users.

4. Influencers and the escalation of social comparison

Except for the technological constrain that are innate in the platforms, influencers also play a pivotal role in
shaping perceptions, values, and behaviors on social media. In the ecosystem of social media, influencers are the apex dwellers whose lifestyles, opinions, and endorsements shape the dynamics of social interaction and self-perception among users. Influencers, armed with their curated content, exemplify this phenomenon, presenting an idealized portrayal of life that is often far removed from the everyday experiences of their followers. Their meticulously edited images and videos project a standard of beauty, success, and happiness that appears unattainable to the average person. This disparity between the influencer’s online facade and the personal reality of users is a fertile ground for social comparison. Users, especially younger ones, are prone to scrutinizing and contrasting their lives to the polished narratives presented by influencers, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's own life.

Influencers with curated and idealized online personas, set aspirational standards. Their impact on the issue of social comparison is multi-dimensional. Social media influencers emphasize their connection and commonality with their followers by constantly sharing their emotions, thoughts and the things that happened in their life, regardless it is regular and banal, so that they are viewed as more identifiable, similar to users themselves than celebrities [15]. According to the social comparison theory, people tend to compare themselves to others who are alike [1]. While users have a perceived closeness and similarity toward influencers, many influencers curate a version of their life that might seem perfect or aspirational [16]. While many provide positive content and authentic interactions, the selective sharing of their lives – luxury travels, impeccable fashion, flawless skin – can distort perceptions of reality for their followers. Consequently, constant exposure to the users can inadvertently set benchmarks that seem normative but are often unattainable, intensifying feelings of inadequacy among users.

Moreover, the interactive nature of social media allows encourages constant engagement with influencer content. Influencers frequently engage with their audiences through methods that give the illusion of a personal connection and create a sense of digital intimacy, such as responding to comments or sharing details about their personal lives [17]. Likes, comments, shares, and the ability to follow someone’s life in real-time create an illusion of proximity and personal relationship with the influencer. This pseudo-relationship lays the groundwork for upward social comparison, where users measure their own worth against the seemingly superior life of the influencer. The danger of this comparison is twofold: it is not only with a person who may have an entirely different set of life circumstances but also with a carefully crafted persona that may only partially reflect reality. The psychological impact is significant as it can exacerbate feelings of low self-esteem and foster a negative body image among followers. The prevalence of such comparisons can lead to a pervasive sense of underachievement and the belief that one's own life pales in comparison to those idolized online.

The role of influencers in driving social comparison on social media platforms cannot be understated. By setting often unrealistic standards for lifestyle, appearance, and success, they inadvertently become benchmarks against which ordinary users measure their own lives. This incessant evaluation against an influencer’s highlight reel can warp one’s self-image and ambitions. In striving to mirror the opulence and appeal of influencer lifestyles, individuals may engage in detrimental behaviors such as excessive spending or unhealthy dieting, which further entrenches the negative cycle of comparison. As influencers continue to dominate the social media landscape, the challenge becomes finding a balance between inspiration and intimidation, ensuring that the aspirational content does not morph into a source of distress for the impressionable audience they command. The psychological impact is compounded by the sheer volume of influencer content that users are exposed to daily, which can normalize the exceptional and make the extraordinary seem mundane, thus escalating the propensity for social comparison.

5. Conclusion

Social comparison has been vastly amplified in the digital age, particularly through the prism of social media platforms. Through a comprehensive media and communication lens, it is evident that the technological affordances and algorithmic designs of these platforms play a significant role in perpetuating social comparison. Social media, by its very structure, facilitates instantaneous access to highlights of people's lives, often filtered and embellished, leading users to inadvertently juxtapose their everyday lives against these optimized portrayals. Beyond technological intricacies, the phenomenon of social media influencers serves as another catalyst.

Several recommendations are proposed to mitigate the adverse effects of online social comparison. Firstly, platforms could implement educational modules to inform users about the potential pitfalls of constant comparison, promoting a more informed and critical consumption of content. Additionally, social media platforms can take responsibility by offering resources, such as access to mental health professionals or self-help modules, for users who may feel overwhelmed or impacted by online comparison. Furthermore, rather than merely emphasizing popular content, algorithms could be designed to showcase a more diverse range of posts, including those that portray everyday life and its challenges, fostering a balanced view of reality on platforms. Finally, influencers could be encouraged to share and discuss the reality behind their curated feeds. This transparency can help in grounding perceptions and ensuring followers understand the line between online personas and offline realities.

In sum, while the age of digital media offers boundless opportunities for connection and expression, it also harbours challenges that society must navigate judiciously. The ubiquity and design of social media platforms mean that almost everyone, at some point, might find themselves comparing their lives to what they see online. By understanding the technological and sociological
drivers behind online social comparison, stakeholders can collaborate to create a more balanced and psychologically healthy digital ecosystem.

References