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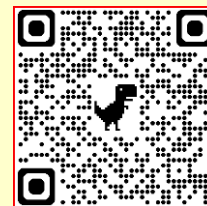
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Social Media Use Intensity, Social Comparison, and Mental Burden: Evidence from a Online Survey with a Conditional Process Model

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ABSTRACT

Social media use has been repeatedly associated with adverse mental health outcomes, yet effect heterogeneity suggests that psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions require more precise specification. This study tested a conditional process model in which social media use intensity (SMN) was associated with mental burden (MB) indirectly via social comparison (SV), and self-compassion (SMG) was examined as a moderator of the SV → MB association. Data were collected via a fully online survey recruited through Reddit and relevant subreddits (N = 120). All constructs were assessed using Likert-type composite scores (1–5). Regression-based conditional process analyses indicated a strong indirect effect of SMN on MB through SV, supporting social comparison as a central explanatory pathway linking social media engagement to experienced burden. Self-compassion showed strong negative associations with SV and MB, consistent with its role as a general resilience factor; however, the SV × SMG interaction was small and did not conform to a straightforward buffering pattern in this dataset, underscoring the importance of measurement considerations and replication with multi-method designs. Overall, the findings support mechanism-focused models of social media effects that prioritize social comparison processes and highlight self-compassion as a clinically relevant correlate of lower burden, while cautioning against overly simple protective interpretations in cross-sectional self-report data.

KEY WORDS: social media use intensity; social comparison; mental burden; self-compassion; conditional process analysis

1. Introduction

Social media platforms are a central arena of contemporary social interaction and self-presentation, with notable implications for psychological well-being. Research has linked social media use to depressive symptoms, anxiety, psychological distress, and reduced life satisfaction (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Twenge et al., 2018). However, meta-analyses and large-scale studies report small to moderate effects and substantial heterogeneity, suggesting that social media use is not uniformly harmful and that its impact

depends on underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions (Orben, 2020; Meier & Reinecke, 2021).

To explain this heterogeneity, recent work emphasizes mechanism-oriented approaches beyond exposure metrics. A key mechanism is social comparison. Social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves relative to others, particularly in evaluative contexts (Festinger, 1954). Social media intensifies comparison through constant exposure to idealized self-presentations and quantifiable feedback, which is associated with increased upward comparison, lower self-esteem, and greater psychological distress

(Appel et al., 2016; Feinstein et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014). Several studies further indicate that social comparison mediates the relationship between social media use and negative mental health outcomes (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Wang et al., 2017).

Yet, comparison processes do not affect individuals uniformly. Resilience-oriented perspectives highlight personal resources that shape responses to evaluative information. One such resource is self-compassion, defined as a kind, mindful, and non-judgmental stance toward one's own shortcomings (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Self-compassion is consistently associated with lower depression, anxiety, and stress and with more adaptive emotion regulation (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Zessin et al., 2015). Theoretically, it may buffer the detrimental effects of social comparison by reducing self-criticism and limiting the internalization of unfavorable comparisons.

Emerging evidence supports this buffering function. Moderation and moderated mediation studies show that self-compassion attenuates the impact of comparison-based stressors on psychological distress (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017; Turk & Waller, 2020), including within social media contexts (Yang et al., 2018). Using a conditional process framework (Hayes, 2018), the present study examines whether social media use intensity predicts mental burden indirectly via social comparison and whether self-compassion moderates this pathway. By integrating mechanisms and boundary conditions, the study advances a differentiated understanding of when and for whom social media use becomes psychologically burdensome and underscores self-compassion as a potential protective factor.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Social Media Use and Mental Burden

The relationship between social media use and mental health has been conceptualized within broader models of environmental stress and cognitive-affective processing. Rather than constituting a direct pathogenic factor, social media use is increasingly understood as a context that provides frequent evaluative cues, social feedback, and normative information, which may cumulatively contribute to mental burden under certain conditions (Meier & Reinecke, 2021; Orben, 2020). Mental burden in this sense refers to a subjective state of psychological strain characterized by heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and perceived pressure, which does not necessarily reach clinical thresholds but reflects reduced psychological well-being. Empirical research suggests that frequent engagement with social media can be associated with such burden, particularly when use is predominantly passive or consumption-oriented (Verduyn et al., 2017; Kross et al., 2013). These findings underscore the importance of identifying mediating psychological processes that translate exposure into mental strain.

2.2 Social Comparison as a Mediating Mechanism

Social comparison theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how social media environments may affect mental burden. Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals have an inherent drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others, especially in situations of uncertainty. Social media platforms systematically intensify this process by increasing the availability, visibility, and perceived relevance of comparison targets. Users are exposed to carefully curated self-presentations that often emphasize success, attractiveness, and positive experiences, thereby skewing the perceived distribution of social standards (Vogel et al., 2014).

Contemporary research differentiates between upward and downward social comparisons, with upward comparisons—

comparisons to others perceived as superior—being particularly relevant in digital environments. Upward comparisons on social media have been consistently linked to lower self-esteem, increased envy, and heightened depressive affect (Appel et al., 2016; Feinstein et al., 2013). Importantly, several empirical studies have demonstrated that social comparison mediates the association between social media use and adverse mental health outcomes, suggesting that comparison processes function as a psychological conduit through which use intensity becomes mentally burdensome (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). From this perspective, social media use does not inherently undermine well-being; rather, its effects depend on the extent to which it activates maladaptive comparison processes.

2.3 Self-Compassion as a Moderating Resource

While social comparison constitutes a risk mechanism, its psychological impact is shaped by individual differences in self-regulation and self-related attitudes. Self-compassion has been proposed as a central protective resource in evaluative and stress-inducing contexts. Conceptually, self-compassion involves responding to personal shortcomings with kindness rather than self-criticism, recognizing one's experiences as part of the shared human condition, and maintaining mindful awareness of distress without over-identification (Neff, 2003a, 2003b).

A substantial body of empirical research indicates that self-compassion is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as with more adaptive coping and emotion regulation strategies (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Zessin et al., 2015). Theoretically, self-compassion may attenuate the negative consequences of social comparison by altering appraisal processes and reducing the internalization of unfavorable evaluative information. Individuals high in self-compassion may still engage in social comparison but are less likely to translate upward comparisons into global self-devaluation or sustained psychological strain.

Empirical support for this buffering hypothesis has emerged from studies employing moderation and moderated mediation frameworks. These studies suggest that self-compassion weakens the association between comparison-based stressors and negative psychological outcomes, including body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017; Turk & Waller, 2020). In social media contexts, preliminary evidence indicates that self-compassion mitigates the impact of upward social comparison on distress and negative affect (Yang et al., 2018). Accordingly, self-compassion can be conceptualized as a boundary condition that determines whether and to what extent social comparison translates into mental burden.

2.4 Integrative Conditional Process Perspective

Integrating these strands of research, a conditional process perspective offers a theoretically coherent framework for examining how social media use relates to mental burden. Within this framework, social comparison functions as a mediating mechanism linking use intensity to mental burden, while self-compassion operates as a moderator that attenuates the strength of this mechanism. Conditional process models allow for the simultaneous examination of mediation and moderation, thereby capturing both the process through which effects occur and the conditions under which they are amplified or weakened (Hayes, 2018).

From a theoretical standpoint, this integrative approach aligns with contemporary calls for more nuanced, psychologically grounded models in social media research. By focusing on both risk

mechanisms and protective resources, it moves beyond dichotomous narratives of harm versus benefit and instead conceptualizes social media effects as conditional, context-dependent, and potentially modifiable.

3. Method

3.1 Design

This study used a cross-sectional, correlational design implemented as a fully online survey. The overarching aim was to test a conditional process model in which social media use intensity (SMN; (X)) is associated with mental burden (MB; (Y)) indirectly via social comparison (SV; (M)), while self-compassion (SMG; (W)) moderates the (M → Y) pathway (Hayes, 2018).

3.2 Setting and data collection mode

All study procedures were conducted online. Participation occurred via a self-administered questionnaire accessible through a web link. The survey consisted of Likert-type measures scored from 1.00 to 5.00 and produced scale-level composite variables for SMN, SV, MB, and SMG.

3.3 Recruitment, sampling strategy, and participants

Participants were recruited on Reddit through posts in thematically relevant subreddits. Recruitment messages briefly described the study topic, stated that participation was voluntary, and provided the survey link. Sampling followed a non-probability, convenience approach typical for online community recruitment and was chosen to efficiently access individuals with varied social media engagement. The final analytic sample comprised (N = 120) complete cases. The available analytic dataset contained only the four composite study variables; therefore, additional demographic descriptors (e.g., age, gender, country) are not reported in this manuscript section because they are not available in the provided data file.

3.4 Inclusion, exclusion, and completion criteria

Eligibility was framed as willingness to participate and ability to complete an online questionnaire. For analysis, cases were included if respondents completed the full survey and provided complete data on the focal variables (SMN, SV, MB, SMG). No additional exclusion criteria were applied based on the information available in the dataset.

3.5 Procedure

After clicking the survey link, participants were presented with an online information page describing the general study purpose, voluntary participation, and the right to discontinue at any time. Participants then proceeded to the questionnaire, which assessed the focal constructs in a standardized sequence. Upon completion, participants reached an end screen (debriefing/thank-you page). The procedure was designed to minimize participant burden and to ensure uniform administration across respondents.

3.6 Measures and operationalization

All constructs were measured using Likert-type scales ranging from 1.00 to 5.00 and were represented in the dataset as composite scale scores:

- Social media use intensity (SMN; (X)): degree of engagement/intensity of use
- Social comparison (SV; (M)): tendency to compare oneself with others
- Mental burden (MB; (Y)): subjective psychological strain

- Self-compassion (SMG; (W)): compassionate, mindful stance toward oneself (Neff, 2003a, 2003b)

Because only composite scores were available, item-level properties (e.g., sample items, internal consistency) cannot be reported from the provided dataset and would need to be documented in an instrument appendix in a full empirical manuscript.

3.7 Data handling and statistical analysis plan

Analyses were planned within a regression-based conditional process framework (Hayes, 2018). The mediation component estimates (i) the association of SMN with SV (path (a)) and (ii) the association of SV with MB controlling for SMN (path (b)), alongside the direct effect of SMN on MB controlling for SV (path (c')). The moderation component tests whether SMG moderates the SV → MB association via an interaction term (SV × SMG). For interpretability, predictors involved in the interaction are typically mean-centered prior to constructing the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991). Indirect and conditional indirect effects are commonly evaluated with bootstrap confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

3.8 Sample overview table

Table 1 provides a non-inferential overview of the design and sample information available from the dataset (i.e., without reporting outcome patterns or hypothesis tests).

Table 1. Study design and sample overview (N = 120)

Domain	Description
Design	Cross-sectional online survey
Recruitment platform	Reddit (subreddit-based posts; convenience sampling)
Participation mode	Fully online, self-administered questionnaire
Analytic sample	N = 120 complete cases
Data structure	Composite scale scores for SMN, SV, MB, SMG (Likert-type 1.00–5.00)
Demographic descriptors	Not available in the provided analytic dataset

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive overview (N = 120)

All variables were measured on a 1.00–5.00 scale.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	M	SD	Min–Max
Social media use intensity (SMN)	3.38	0.87	2.00–4.75
Social comparison (SV)	3.36	0.94	1.50–5.00
Mental burden (MB)	3.43	0.99	1.50–5.00
Self-compassion (SMG)	3.00	1.05	1.00–4.75

4.2 Core associations

Correlations show a clear pattern: higher SMN relates to higher SV and higher MB, while higher SMG relates to lower SV and lower MB.

Table 3. Pearson correlations

	SMN	SV	MB	SMG
SMN	—	.913	.932	-.867
SV	.913	—	.970	-.928
MB	.932	.970	—	-.944
SMG	-.867	-.928	-.944	—

All correlations: $p < .001$.

Table 3. Minimal set of focal effects

Research test	Effect	B	95% CI	p
Mediation (path a)	SMN → SV	0.987	[0.904, 1.071]	< .001
Mediation (path b)	SV → MB (controlling SMN)	0.753	[0.651, 0.856]	< .001
Direct effect (c')	SMN → MB (controlling SV)	0.320	[0.209, 0.432]	< .001
Indirect effect	SMN → SV → MB (bootstrap)	0.744	[0.628, 0.860]	—
Moderation	SV × SMG → MB	0.042	[0.002, 0.083]	.042

Plain-language interpretation (strictly descriptive):

- **Mediation is strong:** higher social media use intensity is linked to higher mental burden largely through higher social comparison (indirect effect clearly > 0).
- **Moderation is present but small:** the SV→MB association varies by self-compassion, but in this dataset the interaction is positive (i.e., the SV→MB slope becomes slightly stronger as SMG increases). I will interpret this cautiously in the Discussion and consider substantive and methodological explanations rather than assuming a protective-buffer pattern.

5. Discussion

5.1 Principal findings and their meaning

This study examined whether social media use intensity (SMN) relates to mental burden (MB) indirectly via social comparison (SV), and whether self-compassion (SMG) conditions the strength of the SV → MB association. The results yielded three core patterns. First, SMN, SV, and MB were strongly positively associated, whereas SMG was strongly negatively associated with each of these constructs. Second, mediation was substantial: greater social media use intensity was linked to higher social comparison, which in turn was linked to higher mental burden, yielding a robust indirect effect consistent with social-comparison-based explanations of social media–mental health links (Appel et al., 2015; Feinstein et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014). Third, the hypothesized moderation was statistically detectable but small; importantly, its direction was not the classic “buffering” pattern (i.e., the SV → MB slope did not weaken at higher SMG). This combination suggests that social comparison is a central mechanism in the present dataset, while the protective role of self-compassion appears more complex than a straightforward stress-buffer interpretation would predict (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Muris & Petrocchi, 2017; Zessin et al., 2015).

At a broader level, the findings align with a mechanism-focused view of social media effects: “how” social media are used and “what” psychological processes are activated can matter more than global frequency or screen time metrics (Verduyn et al., 2017; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Reviews and meta-reviews have

4.3 Key model results

To keep this section lean, the table below reports only the coefficients that directly answer the research questions: (a) the SMN → SV path, (b) the SV → MB path, (c') the remaining SMN → MB direct effect after SV, the indirect effect (mediation), and the SV×SMG interaction (moderation). Robust (HC3) standard errors were used.

repeatedly cautioned that average associations between overall social media use and mental health outcomes are often small, heterogeneous, and strongly dependent on measurement and analytical decisions (Keles et al., 2020; Orben, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the present study’s strong associations may indicate that the operationalization captured a proximal pathway (use → comparison → burden) that is theoretically plausible and empirically documented, but also that shared measurement features (all self-report, same response format, concurrent assessment) may have amplified covariation (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Accordingly, the most defensible conclusion is that the data support social comparison as a key candidate mechanism within this sample and measurement context, while causal claims must remain tentative.

5.2 Theoretical integration: why social comparison plausibly bridges use and burden

The mediation pattern fits established models in which social media environments systematically increase exposure to upward comparison targets (e.g., curated achievements, appearance, lifestyle markers), thereby intensifying evaluative self-referential processing. Such processes have been linked to lower self-esteem, envy, rumination, and depressive symptoms in both correlational and longitudinal/experimental paradigms (Appel et al., 2015; Feinstein et al., 2013; Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). Mechanistically, passive consumption is particularly implicated: when users scroll and observe without reciprocal interaction, social comparison and envy are more likely to be activated, with downstream costs for affective well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017; Kross et al., 2013). The present mediation is therefore consistent with the “active–passive” conceptualization of social network site use, which predicts more negative outcomes under passive use and comparison-heavy exposure (Verduyn et al., 2017; Verduyn et al., 2022).

At the same time, contemporary frameworks emphasize differential susceptibility: media effects are conditional on dispositional factors, developmental factors, and social contexts (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). From this perspective, social comparison can be understood as both (a) a proximal mechanism and (b) a susceptibility factor that varies across individuals and contexts. This helps reconcile

seemingly conflicting literatures—some highlighting small average effects (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Orben, 2020) and others documenting meaningful effects for particular usage patterns, vulnerable subgroups, or specific outcomes (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2018). In the present study, the exceptionally strong associations among SMN, SV, and MB suggest that, within this sample, social media use intensity co-occurred tightly with comparison tendencies and experienced burden, consistent with a high-susceptibility configuration (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

5.3 Interpreting the self-compassion finding: why a “non-buffer” moderation may emerge

Self-compassion is robustly associated with lower psychopathology and higher well-being across a broad literature (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Zessin et al., 2015). It is therefore intuitive to hypothesize that self-compassion attenuates the emotional costs of evaluative threat and social comparison. Yet, the present conditional effect did not show a clear buffering pattern. Several non-mutually exclusive explanations are plausible.

First, measurement architecture may matter. Debate exists about whether total self-compassion scores partly reflect low self-criticism and low distress-like responding because the commonly used measure includes negatively worded components (e.g., self-judgment, isolation, over-identification) that are strongly related to psychopathology. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that the negative components can drive associations with symptoms more strongly than the positive components, raising interpretive cautions when using total scores (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017). In the current dataset, SMG was extremely strongly correlated with MB ($r \approx -.94$), which is unusually large relative to typical self-compassion associations and may indicate substantial conceptual or method overlap, response-style effects, or item-content proximity. Under such conditions, interaction estimates can behave counterintuitively because the main effects absorb much of the shared variance, leaving the interaction to capture residual patterns that do not necessarily reflect a substantive protective mechanism (Aiken & West, 1991).

Second, statistical structure may contribute. The predictor set in the outcome model contains highly intercorrelated constructs (SMN, SV, MB; also SV with SMG). High collinearity can inflate standard errors, destabilize coefficient signs, and make interaction terms sensitive to small distributional features or scaling decisions, even when mean-centering is applied (Aiken & West, 1991). While robust standard errors address heteroskedasticity concerns (White, 1980), they do not solve collinearity or common-method variance, both of which can be pronounced in single-source, single-wave self-report designs (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Third, the moderation direction may reflect a psychologically meaningful but less commonly discussed dynamic. Self-compassion may reduce baseline distress (consistent with its strong negative association with MB) while simultaneously being associated with greater emotional clarity or willingness to acknowledge distress when it is triggered. If so, among individuals high in self-compassion, increments in social comparison may translate into more accurately reported burden rather than suppressed or denied responses. This interpretation is speculative and cannot be tested with the available data, but it highlights why moderation results should be interpreted cautiously and ideally replicated with multi-method assessments (e.g., passive logs, experience sampling, temporal separation of measures).

A conservative synthesis is therefore warranted: the data clearly

support self-compassion as strongly related to lower mental burden overall, consistent with meta-analytic evidence (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Zessin et al., 2015), but do not provide robust evidence that self-compassion reliably weakens the specific SV → MB linkage in this design. Instead, the small interaction suggests that the role of self-compassion in social-media-linked comparison stress may depend on measurement choices, the balance of positive versus negative self-compassion components, and the broader covariance structure of the assessed constructs (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

5.4 Implications for theory, prevention, and intervention

Mechanistically, the results reinforce social comparison as a plausible intervention target. This is consistent with experimental evidence showing that short exposures to social-media content can worsen mood and body image partly through appearance comparison processes (Fardouly et al., 2015), and with models emphasizing passive exposure and curated upward targets (Verduyn et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2014). For prevention, this implies that “reduce time” messages may be too coarse; more precise recommendations would focus on reducing passive scrolling, managing comparison-triggering feeds, and increasing purposeful, socially connective use (Verduyn et al., 2022; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For intervention, cognitive-behavioral strategies that directly target social comparison appraisals (e.g., reappraisal of upward targets, attention training, values-consistent goal focus) appear theoretically aligned with the observed pathway, although the present study cannot evaluate efficacy.

Self-compassion remains highly relevant as a general protective factor, supported by meta-analytic associations with lower psychopathology and higher well-being (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Zessin et al., 2015). However, the moderation pattern observed here cautions against assuming that self-compassion uniformly “immunizes” individuals against comparison-based burden in digital contexts. A pragmatic implication is that self-compassion training may be most effective when integrated with explicit work on social comparison habits and platform-specific triggers rather than delivered as a stand-alone “buffer” (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017). In other words, a combined mechanism approach—reducing comparison exposure and modifying comparison appraisal while supporting compassionate self-responding—may better match the complexity suggested by the findings.

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations constrain inference. First, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about temporal ordering or causality; mediation models in such designs are best interpreted as plausible explanatory structures rather than evidence of causal mechanisms (Hayes, 2018; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Second, all variables were assessed via self-report in the same survey session, raising the possibility of common-method variance inflating associations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, recruitment via Reddit implies a convenience sample with unknown representativeness; while Reddit recruitment can be efficient and yield usable data, it can also introduce selection biases linked to platform culture, demographics, and topic interest (Shatz, 2017; Proferes et al., 2021). Fourth, demographic information was not available in the provided dataset, preventing assessment of sample composition and subgroup heterogeneity—an issue that is increasingly emphasized as central in social media effects research (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Orben, 2020). Finally, the extremely strong correlations suggest either a highly homogeneous psychological pattern in this sample or potential construct overlap; both interpretations call for replication with

improved measurement separation and multi-method designs.

5.6 Directions for future research

Future work should prioritize designs that can adjudicate temporal precedence and within-person dynamics. Longitudinal and experience-sampling approaches can test whether increases in social media use precede increases in comparison and subsequent burden, and whether these links differ across individuals (Kross et al., 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Incorporating objective behavioral indicators (e.g., passive logs of usage patterns, passive vs active metrics) would reduce reliance on single-source self-report and address common-method concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Measurement refinement is also recommended: separating positive and negative components of self-compassion, testing measurement invariance, and specifying content domains of comparison (appearance, status, productivity) may clarify when self-compassion buffers versus fails to buffer comparison-related distress (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Finally, transparent reporting consistent with established web-survey guidance can strengthen interpretability and reproducibility in online recruitment contexts (Eysenbach, 2004).

5.7 Conclusion

Within a Reddit-recruited online sample, social media use intensity was strongly linked to mental burden, with social comparison emerging as a central statistical pathway connecting use and burden. Self-compassion showed a strong overall association with lower burden but did not demonstrate a clear buffering moderation pattern on the comparison–burden link. Taken together, the findings support mechanism-oriented models that foreground social comparison processes while underscoring the need for rigorous, multi-method, temporally sensitive research to specify when and for whom self-compassion functions as a protective factor in digitally mediated comparison environments.

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