RESEARCH PAPER

Social Media Use and Self-Esteem Among Emerging Adults in India: A Theoretical Model Integrating Social Comparison, Fear of Missing Out, and Gendered Digital Experiences

Amandeep Kaur[1], Dr. Aditya Pareek[2]
[1]Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, NIMS University Rajasthan, Jaipur, India
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, NIMS University Rajasthan, Jaipur, India

Abstract
Background: Social media has transformed interpersonal communication among emerging adults, raising concerns about its influence on self-esteem. Social comparison and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) have been identified as key psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship.
Objective: To synthesise current evidence on the relationship between social media use and self-esteem among emerging adults, focusing on the roles of social comparison and FOMO.
Methods: A structured narrative review was conducted using major electronic databases. Following identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and full-text review, 30 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026 were included. Data were analysed through a structured qualitative assessment.
Results: The reviewed studies indicated that passive and problematic social media use is generally associated with lower self-esteem. Social comparison and FOMO emerged as interconnected pathways linking social media engagement to negative self-evaluation. Gender differences were observed, particularly in appearance- and achievement-related comparison domains. Limited evidence from India suggests that sociocultural factors such as academic competition, family expectations, and social norms may shape these relationships.
Conclusion: Social media influences self-esteem primarily through social comparison and FOMO rather than exposure alone. Future research should examine these mechanisms within culturally specific contexts, particularly among Indian emerging adults.
Keywords: Social media, self-esteem, social comparison, Fear of Missing Out, emerging adults, India.
How to cite this article: Amandeep Kaur. Social Media Use and Self-Esteem Among Emerging Adults in India: A Theoretical Model Integrating Social Comparison, Fear of Missing Out, and Gendered Digital Experiences. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(87s):1338-1349. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.87s.140.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has changed how emerging adults communicate, present themselves, maintain relationships, obtain information, and evaluate their social position. Social media is therefore better understood as a psychological environment rather than simply a communication tool. Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Snapchat, X, and other platforms provide opportunities for connection, entertainment, learning, identity expression, professional networking, and social support, but they also expose users to continuous streams of selectively presented information about other people. The psychological consequence of this environment depends on what users do online, why they do it, what content they encounter, and how they interpret that content.

India provides an especially important setting for this discussion because of the scale and speed of digital adoption. Current digital estimates indicate that India had approximately 1.03 billion internet users and about 500 million social-media user identities in late 2025, while Instagram alone had an estimated 481 million users. These figures underline the size of the digital environment in which Indian emerging adults are developing identities and social relationships, although platform-based user estimates should not be interpreted as counts of unique individuals. □cite□turn0search0□

The developmental period of emerging adulthood, broadly covering the late teens through the twenties, is characterised by identity exploration, increasing independence, relationship formation, educational and career decisions, and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation. These features make external feedback particularly relevant to self-evaluation. Social media intensifies this process because social approval, popularity, appearance, achievement, and participation can become highly visible and continuously comparable. Self-esteem may consequently become vulnerable when online experiences repeatedly signal that others are more attractive, successful, socially connected, or included.

The central argument of this review is that social media use should not be treated as a single undifferentiated exposure. Passive browsing, active interaction, identity presentation, social monitoring, and purposeful learning can have different psychological consequences. The reviewed evidence suggests that social comparison and FOMO are two important pathways through which maladaptive engagement may translate into lower self-esteem. The task is therefore not simply to establish that social media is associated with self-esteem, but to explain why and how the association may occur and why it may differ across individuals and social contexts.

The present review addresses this problem by integrating multiple psychological theories into one explanatory framework and by explicitly placing the evidence within an Indian context. Rather than presenting the literature as a sequence of isolated studies, the review synthesizes

convergent and divergent findings into mechanisms, identifies the conditions under which effects may become stronger or weaker, and proposes an original conceptual model for future empirical testing.

2. Theoretical Integration

Theories relevant to social media and self-esteem are most useful when they are connected into a sequence. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains the entry point: individuals choose social media to satisfy needs such as belonging, information, entertainment, identity expression, or validation. Self-Presentation Theory then explains the digital environment that results from these choices: users selectively display desirable aspects of themselves, while platforms make the curated performances of others highly visible. Social Cognitive Theory adds an observational mechanism because repeated exposure to peers, influencers, and aspirational lifestyles can shape perceived norms and standards. Together, these perspectives explain why the social media environment is saturated with socially meaningful comparison targets.

Social Comparison Theory provides the next link in the chain. When users encounter highly favourable portrayals of others, they may compare their own appearance, achievements, relationships, or lifestyle with those portrayals. Because the comparison target is often selectively presented, the comparison is asymmetrical: the individual compares an ordinary, unedited self with another person's highlight reel. Self-Discrepancy Theory explains why this can be emotionally costly. Repeated upward comparison may enlarge the gap between the actual self and an idealised or socially expected self, producing dissatisfaction, inadequacy, or self-criticism. Thus, comparison is not simply an observable behaviour; it is a cognitive evaluation process through which digital content becomes personally meaningful.

Self-Determination Theory connects social media engagement to FOMO. When relatedness, competence, or autonomy are insufficiently satisfied offline, digital environments can become especially attractive because they provide rapid social information and opportunities for participation. Seeing others participate in rewarding activities may signal that one's own relatedness need is threatened. FOMO can then motivate repeated checking, monitoring, and re-engagement. Compensatory Internet Use Theory further suggests that individuals may use online activity to regulate loneliness, insecurity, boredom, or dissatisfaction; the coping behaviour may temporarily reduce discomfort while maintaining dependence on the same environment that generates comparison and exclusion cues.

Sociometer Theory explains the final link to self-esteem. If self-esteem functions partly as a gauge of perceived social acceptance, visible online indicators such as likes, comments, follower counts, invitations, and evidence of social participation can become repeated signals of inclusion or rejection. Positive feedback may temporarily strengthen self-worth, whereas perceived exclusion or unfavourable comparison may signal a loss of relational value. Cognitive-Behavioural perspectives add an important appraisal layer: the effect of an online event depends partly on the meaning assigned to it. Thoughts such as “everyone else is doing better” or “I am being left out” can amplify the emotional effect of comparison and FOMO.

Gender-related theories complete the framework. Gender Socialization Theory suggests that social environments teach different expectations concerning appearance, achievement, relationships, and social behaviour. Objectification Theory provides a more specific explanation for why appearance-focused content may be particularly consequential for women: repeated evaluation of the body can increase self-surveillance and appearance comparison. These perspectives should not be interpreted as biological determinism. Rather, they suggest that culturally patterned expectations may shape which online cues are most salient and how strongly users respond to them. In India, these processes may intersect with family expectations, academic and career competition, peer approval, appearance norms, and differences in digital literacy and access.

Taken together, the theories form a single pathway: motivations shape social media use; self-presentation and platform content shape the comparison environment; comparison and threatened belonging generate cognitive and emotional responses; FOMO and comparison increase monitoring and external validation; and repeated evaluative experiences influence self-esteem. This theoretical chain directly informs the conceptual model presented below.

3. Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed model treats social media use as the initiating behavioural condition and self-esteem as the psychological outcome. Social comparison and FOMO are positioned as complementary mediating mechanisms rather than unrelated variables. Social comparison captures the evaluative pathway, whereas FOMO captures the belongingness and exclusion pathway. The model also allows the two mediators to reinforce one another: comparison can increase concern about one's social position, while FOMO can increase monitoring of others and thereby create more opportunities for comparison. Gender and Indian sociocultural conditions are proposed as contextual influences that may strengthen or weaken these pathways.

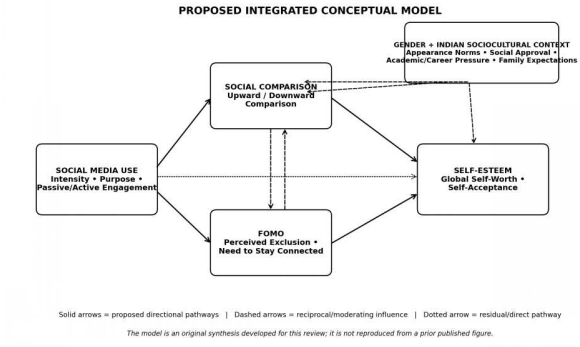


Figure 1. Proposed original conceptual model linking social media use, social comparison, FOMO, self-esteem, gender, and Indian sociocultural context.

4. Review of Literature: Thematic Synthesis

The reviewed literature included 30 original empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026. Instead of treating each investigation as an isolated finding, the evidence is synthesized below around the principal psychological relationships in the proposed model. This approach makes it possible to identify recurring mechanisms, explain inconsistencies, and connect empirical patterns with theory.

4.1 Social Media Engagement and Self-Esteem

Across the literature, the most consistent pattern is that intensive, passive, or problematic social media engagement is associated with lower self-esteem, but the relationship is not uniform. Evidence from comparison-focused, experience-sampling, and experimental work suggests that the psychological quality of exposure matters more than screen time alone. Passive browsing can increase exposure to idealised achievements, appearances, relationships, and lifestyles without providing the reciprocal interaction that makes active communication psychologically rewarding. By contrast, active and meaningful engagement may provide social support, belonging, information, and opportunities for self-expression. This distinction explains why some studies report weak or neutral direct associations while others report negative relationships. The common mechanism appears to be the type of psychological experience generated by use rather than duration of use in isolation (Midgley et al., 2021; Triệu et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2021; Miljeteig & von Soest, 2022; Han & Yang, 2023; Desjarlais, 2024; Wang et al., 2026).

4.2 Social Comparison as the Central Evaluative Pathway

Social comparison is one of the strongest and most coherent mechanisms in the reviewed evidence. Social media increases both the number of comparison targets and the frequency with which users encounter them. More importantly, digital content is often selectively positive, making upward comparison especially likely. The resulting comparison can create a perception that others possess better appearance, relationships, achievements, finances, or lifestyles. Experimental and mediation evidence indicates that this process can reduce state self-esteem and can account for part of the association between social media exposure and poorer psychological outcomes (Midgley et al., 2021; Molina-Ruiz et al., 2022; Ardiany & Ardi, 2022; Rüther et al., 2023; Taylor & Armes, 2024; Le Blanc-Brillon et al., 2025).

The mechanism is important because the comparison target is usually not a neutral representation of reality. Self-Presentation Theory suggests that users select and edit what they show, whereas the viewer often sees the resulting content without access to the failures, uncertainty, or ordinary experiences that were omitted. The comparison therefore occurs between unequal information sets. Self-Discrepancy Theory predicts that repeated exposure to idealised standards increases the perceived distance between the actual self and the ideal or ought self. The emotional result may be dissatisfaction, envy, shame, or perceived inadequacy, which can gradually weaken self-evaluation. This helps explain why appearance-oriented content is particularly consequential on image-heavy platforms.

4.3 Fear of Missing Out as a Belongingness Pathway

FOMO represents a different but complementary mechanism. Whereas social comparison asks, in effect, "How do I compare with others?", FOMO reflects concern that "others are participating in rewarding experiences without me." The reviewed literature links higher FOMO with compulsive checking, monitoring of social activities, problematic use, and lower self-esteem. The process is consistent with Self-Determination Theory because perceived exclusion threatens the need for relatedness. Checking social media may temporarily reduce uncertainty about what others are doing, but the same monitoring exposes the individual to additional evidence of social activity, creating a self-reinforcing cycle (Weaver et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2021; Kim, 2023; Packer & Flack, 2023; Servidio et al., 2024; Piko et al., 2025; Long et al., 2026).

FOMO can also connect comparison to behaviour. A person who perceives others as more socially successful may become more concerned about being left behind, and that concern can motivate further monitoring. Increased monitoring generates more comparison opportunities, which can further undermine self-worth. The literature therefore supports conceptualising social comparison and FOMO as interacting processes rather than completely independent mediators. This is one of the main reasons the proposed model includes a reciprocal link between the two mechanisms.

4.4 Gendered Patterns of Social Comparison and FOMO

Gender differences appear in the literature, but they should be interpreted as patterns shaped by socialisation and platform behaviour rather than as fixed psychological properties of males and females. Female participants are more often described as experiencing appearance-based comparison, body dissatisfaction, and stronger sensitivity to idealised beauty content, whereas male participants are more often exposed to achievement, status, financial success, athletic performance, or professional comparison. Some studies also suggest higher FOMO or lower self-esteem among female participants, while other evidence indicates that gender differences become smaller after accounting for usage patterns. The overall implication is that gender may shape the content and meaning of comparison, but active versus passive engagement and individual vulnerability can remain more important than sex alone (Tandon et al., 2021; Rüther et al., 2023; Ma'rof & Abdullah, 2024; Le Blanc-Brillon et al., 2025).

The "why" behind greater appearance-related comparison among women can be explained through

gendered social expectations. When appearance is repeatedly treated as an important marker of social value, appearance-related content becomes more self-relevant. Objectification Theory predicts that repeated exposure to evaluative standards encourages self-surveillance: individuals may monitor how they look, compare their appearance with others, and judge themselves from an imagined observer's perspective. Social media can intensify this process because images are abundant, easily edited, publicly evaluated, and continuously ranked through visible engagement. This combination can make appearance discrepancies psychologically salient and may contribute to lower self-esteem. The same logic can operate for men through achievement- and status-related standards, although the specific content and emotional consequences may differ.

4.5 Interrelationship of Social Comparison, FOMO, and Self-Esteem

A major contribution of the reviewed evidence is the recognition that social comparison, FOMO, and self-esteem are interconnected. Studies examining these variables together suggest that comparison can increase FOMO, FOMO can increase monitoring, and repeated monitoring can create additional comparison opportunities. At the same time, low self-esteem may increase sensitivity to both processes, creating a potential feedback loop. This means the relationship should not be conceptualised only as a simple one-way sequence from social media use to low self-esteem. A more plausible account is a dynamic system in which social media exposure activates comparison and belongingness concerns, those concerns influence behaviour, and the resulting experiences feed back into self-evaluation (Kim, 2023; Servidio et al., 2024; Dinh & Lee, 2025; Piko et al., 2025; Long et al., 2026).

4.6 Indian Context

Although the reviewed evidence is international, India cannot be treated as merely another geographic location. The digital environment in India combines very large-scale smartphone and internet adoption with substantial cultural, linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic diversity. The present review identified only limited representation of Indian studies within the included evidence, making direct generalisation from Western or other Asian samples inappropriate. This scarcity itself is an important research gap.

The proposed Indian interpretation is therefore contextual rather than deterministic. In some Indian settings, emerging adults may simultaneously navigate family expectations, academic competition, career uncertainty, peer approval, appearance norms, and rapidly changing ideas about independence. Social media can bring these domains into the same comparison space: educational achievements may be displayed alongside lifestyle, travel, appearance, relationships, and professional success. For a young adult already uncertain about career or identity, repeated exposure to peers who appear to be progressing faster may increase upward comparison and self-discrepancy. Similarly, highly visible social gatherings and peer networks may make exclusion more salient and intensify FOMO. These mechanisms provide plausible reasons why cultural context should be examined as a moderator rather than treated merely as background.

At the same time, social media can provide important benefits in India, including educational access, professional networking, peer communities, entrepreneurship, health information, and social connection across geographic distance. The appropriate conclusion is therefore not that Indian youth should simply reduce social media use, but that digital literacy should include the ability to recognise curated content, interpret social feedback critically, regulate comparison, and distinguish meaningful connection from compulsive monitoring.

4.7 What the Literature Suggests About Passive versus Active Use

A recurring explanation for apparently contradictory findings is the difference between passive and active engagement. Passive browsing exposes the user to other people's selected achievements and experiences while providing little control over the comparison process. Active engagement, such as messaging, commenting, learning, collaborating, or maintaining close relationships, can provide reciprocal interaction and social support. This distinction is consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory: the same platform can produce different outcomes depending on the need being pursued and whether that need is actually fulfilled. It also explains why time-based measures alone may obscure meaningful differences between users.

5. Methodology

5.1 Review Design

A narrative theoretical review was undertaken to synthesise recent empirical evidence on the relationship between social media use and self-esteem among emerging adults, with particular emphasis on social comparison and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as potential explanatory mechanisms. The review followed a structured literature-identification and screening process to enhance transparency and consistency in study selection. Rather than summarising individual studies separately, the eligible literature was subsequently synthesised thematically around the principal constructs and theoretical pathways relevant to the proposed conceptual model.

5.2 Literature Search Strategy

A systematic and broad literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed literature published between January 2021 and June 2026. The search strategy combined terms related to the primary constructs using Boolean operators. Core search combinations included *"social media" AND "self-esteem"*, *"social media" AND "Fear of Missing Out"*, *"social media" AND "FOMO"*, and *"social comparison" AND "self-esteem"*. Additional searches incorporated platform-specific terms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok,

Snapchat, and social networking sites, together with population terms including *emerging adults*, *young adults*, and *university students*.

Reference lists of relevant articles were also examined to identify potentially eligible studies that may not have been retrieved through the primary database searches. The search process was designed to capture both international evidence and available literature relevant to the Indian context.

5.3 Identification and Screening of Records

All records retrieved from the selected databases and supplementary searching were initially compiled into a single reference set. Duplicate records identified through overlapping database searches were removed before screening. The remaining records were subjected to title and abstract screening based on the predefined focus of the review.

During this stage, records were excluded when they were clearly unrelated to social media use, self-esteem, social comparison, FOMO, or the target population. Studies focusing exclusively on children, older adults, clinical populations unrelated to the review objectives, or outcomes outside the scope of the conceptual framework were also excluded.

Articles that appeared potentially relevant after title and abstract screening were retrieved for full-text assessment. The full texts were examined against the eligibility criteria, with particular attention to population, exposure or social media-related construct, psychological outcome, study design, publication period, and relevance to the theoretical framework. Studies that did not adequately address the review objectives or did not provide sufficient empirical information were excluded at this stage.

Following completion of identification, duplicate removal, title/abstract screening, and full-text eligibility assessment, 30 studies met the predefined criteria and were retained for the final narrative synthesis. The complete study-selection pathway should be presented using a PRISMA-style flow diagram to provide a transparent account of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

5.4 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were considered eligible when they met the following criteria:

- Peer-reviewed empirical research published between January 2021 and June 2026.
- Studies involving emerging adults or young adults, principally within the 18–29-year age range.
- Studies examining social media use in relation to self-esteem, social comparison, FOMO, or combinations of these constructs.
- Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal, experimental, experience-sampling, or observational research designs.
- Studies providing sufficient information to interpret their findings in relation to the objectives and theoretical framework of the review.

Conference abstracts, editorials, commentaries, letters, dissertations, book chapters, duplicate publications, studies without accessible full text, and studies focused exclusively on populations outside the target age group were excluded.

5.5 Data Extraction

For each included study, information was extracted on publication year, country or geographical setting, study design, participant characteristics, sample size, social media exposure or engagement pattern, psychological constructs assessed, measurement approaches, principal findings, and relevance to the proposed theoretical pathways.

Particular attention was given to evidence concerning the relationships between social media use and self-esteem, social comparison and self-esteem, FOMO and self-esteem, and the potential mediating or interacting roles of social comparison and FOMO. Information concerning gender differences and culturally relevant factors was also extracted where reported.

5.6 Structured Qualitative Assessment

Because the review did not employ a formal risk-of-bias or methodological appraisal instrument, a structured qualitative assessment was undertaken instead. Each included study was considered in relation to the clarity of its research objectives, appropriateness of study design, characteristics and relevance of the sample, measurement of key constructs, transparency of analytical procedures, consistency between reported findings and conclusions, and relevance to the present theoretical framework.

This assessment was used to guide interpretation of the evidence rather than to generate a numerical quality score or formal risk-of-bias rating. Greater interpretive consideration was given to longitudinal, experimental, and experience-sampling evidence when discussing temporal relationships and potential mechanisms, while findings from cross-sectional studies were interpreted primarily as associations.

5.7 Data Synthesis

A thematic narrative synthesis was conducted after completion of the screening and structured qualitative assessment. Rather than presenting the literature as a sequence of individual study summaries, findings were grouped according to the major conceptual relationships emerging from the evidence. The synthesis focused on (i) patterns of social media engagement and self-esteem, (ii) social comparison as an evaluative mechanism, (iii) FOMO as a belongingness mechanism, (iv) the interaction between social comparison and FOMO, (v) gendered patterns of digital experience, and (vi) the relevance of the Indian sociocultural context.

The findings were subsequently integrated with the theoretical perspectives underpinning the review to develop an original conceptual model. Convergent, divergent, and context-dependent findings were considered when interpreting the proposed relationships.

6. Results of the Narrative Synthesis

6.1 Study Selection and Characteristics of the Evidence

The literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed studies published between January 2021 and June 2026. The search combined terms related to social media use, self-esteem, social comparison, FOMO, specific social media platforms, and emerging or young adults. Reference lists of relevant publications were also examined to identify additional potentially eligible studies.

Retrieved records were consolidated and duplicate publications were removed before screening. Titles and abstracts were then screened against the review objectives. Records that were unrelated to the principal constructs, outside the target population, or inconsistent with the eligibility criteria were excluded. Potentially relevant articles underwent full-text assessment, during which their population, study design, variables, publication period, and relevance to the proposed theoretical framework were examined. Following this selection process, 30 empirical studies met the predefined eligibility criteria and were included in the final narrative synthesis.

The included evidence covered the period 2021–2026 and represented diverse geographical settings. Most studies used cross-sectional survey designs, while a smaller proportion employed longitudinal, experimental, or experience-sampling approaches. University students and other emerging adults were the predominant populations. Sample sizes varied considerably, ranging from small experimental samples to large population-based samples exceeding 5,000 participants. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and WeChat were among the most frequently investigated platforms. The most frequently reported psychological measures included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS), Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), and Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS).

Figure 2. Global distribution of studies investigating social media use and self-esteem (world map).

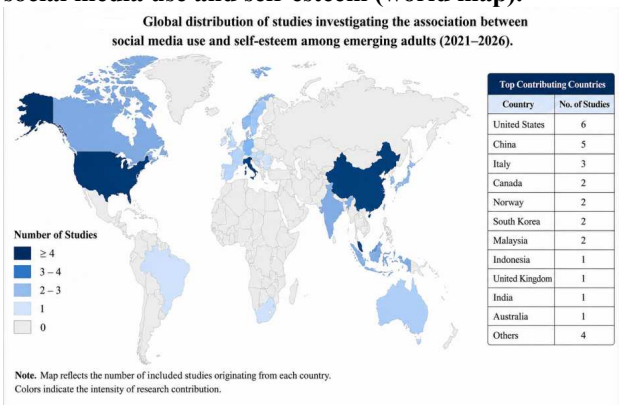


Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Characteristic	Findings
Total studies included	30
Publication period	2021–2026
Study designs	Cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, experience sampling
Databases	PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Google Scholar
Predominant participants	University students / emerging adults (18–29 years)
Most investigated platforms	Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, WeChat
Frequently used psychological measures	RSES, FoMOS, INCOM, SMUIS

6.2 Geographic Distribution of Studies

The included studies originated from multiple geographical regions, demonstrating broad international interest in the psychological consequences of social media use. Asia contributed the largest proportion of studies, followed by Europe and North America. Oceania, Africa, and South America were comparatively underrepresented. Although studies from several Asian countries were identified, the number of studies specifically conducted in India remained limited.

This distribution is important when interpreting the findings because the psychological meaning of social media engagement may be influenced by cultural expectations, social norms, family structures, educational systems, and patterns of digital use. Therefore, the international evidence provides a broad theoretical foundation but does not necessarily establish that the observed relationships operate with identical magnitude or meaning among Indian emerging adults.

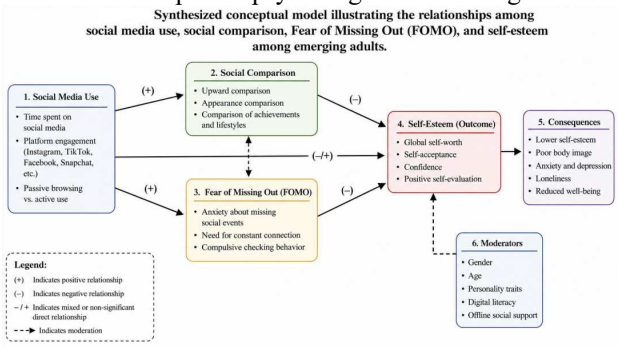
Table 2. Distribution of Studies by Geographic Region

Region	Number of Studies	Percentage
Asia	11	36.7%
Europe	8	26.7%
North America	7	23.3%
Oceania	2	6.7%
Africa	1	3.3%

South America	1	3.3%
Total	**30**	**100%**

The geographical distribution demonstrates that 36.7% of the included studies originated from Asia, while India remained comparatively underrepresented. This supports the identification of Indian evidence as an important research gap rather than assuming that international findings are directly generalisable to India.

Figure 3. Conceptual synthesis of findings illustrating how increased social media use promotes social comparison and Fear of Missing Out, leading to reduced self-esteem and poorer psychological well-being.



6.3 Relationship Between Social Media Use and Self-Esteem

Across the included literature, the predominant pattern was a negative association between intensive, passive, or problematic social media engagement and self-esteem. Greater exposure to social media was commonly associated with increased exposure to idealised content, appearance-related concerns, upward comparison, and reduced self-evaluation. Evidence from longitudinal and experience-sampling studies provided additional support for temporal associations, although the predominance of cross-sectional research limits definitive conclusions regarding causality.

The negative relationship was not universal. A smaller group of studies indicated neutral or potentially beneficial associations when social media was used primarily for maintaining interpersonal relationships, obtaining social support, education, professional networking, or purposeful communication. This variation indicates that engagement pattern and purpose of use are important when interpreting the relationship between social media and self-esteem.

The evidence therefore does not support the interpretation that social media exposure inherently reduces self-esteem. Instead, the findings indicate that psychological outcomes vary according to whether engagement is passive or active, comparison-oriented or purposeful, and whether online activity provides meaningful social connection or primarily exposes users to evaluative information.

6.4 Social Comparison as a Mediating Mechanism

Social comparison emerged as one of the most consistently supported psychological mechanisms in the reviewed evidence. Studies examining this pathway generally reported that exposure to curated social media content increased opportunities for upward comparison and was associated with poorer self-evaluation. Appearance-related comparison was particularly prominent on image-focused platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, with several studies identifying significant mediating effects between social media engagement and self-esteem.

The evidence suggests that the relationship is not necessarily explained by social media use directly lowering self-esteem. Rather, online exposure may increase the frequency and salience of comparison with others, which subsequently influences self-evaluation. This indirect pathway was demonstrated particularly clearly in studies examining appearance-based or upward comparison.

The reviewed evidence also indicates that comparison effects extend beyond appearance. Academic achievement, professional success, financial status, relationships, lifestyle, popularity, and social participation may all function as comparison domains. The psychological effect therefore appears to depend partly on the domain being compared and its importance to the individual's identity.

Table 3. Summary of Major Findings Across Included Studies

Variable Examined	Evidence Across Studies
Social media use → Self-esteem	Predominantly negative association
Social comparison → Self-esteem	Strong negative association
FOMO → Self-esteem	Strong negative association
Social media use → Social comparison	Positive association
Social media use → FOMO	Positive association
Social comparison as mediator	Frequently supported
FOMO as mediator	Frequently supported
Gender differences	Females generally reported stronger effects

6.5 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

FOMO emerged as a second important psychological mechanism. Higher FOMO was generally associated with more frequent or problematic social media engagement and lower self-esteem. Studies examining mediation indicated that FOMO may partly explain how

social media engagement is associated with poorer psychological outcomes.

The evidence further suggests that FOMO may operate as both a psychological response and a behavioural driver. Individuals concerned about missing rewarding social experiences may monitor social media more frequently, while increased monitoring provides additional exposure to information about activities in which they are not participating. This creates the possibility of a reinforcing cycle in which greater engagement increases awareness of social exclusion, which subsequently increases the motivation to remain connected.

The reviewed studies also indicate an association between FOMO and problematic social media behaviours. Consequently, FOMO may occupy an important position between social media exposure and self-esteem, rather than functioning solely as a parallel psychological outcome.

6.6 Gender Differences

Gender differences were reported across a subset of the included literature. Female participants were generally more likely to report appearance-related social comparison, higher FOMO, and lower self-esteem. In contrast, male participants were more frequently described as engaging with social media for information sharing, gaming communities, professional networking, achievement, and status-related content.

The evidence nevertheless showed that these differences were not universal. Some studies reported that gender differences became smaller or statistically nonsignificant after accounting for social media-use intensity or behavioural patterns. This suggests that gender may influence the content, meaning, and salience of online comparison, but may not independently determine psychological outcomes.

The observed pattern therefore supports a gender-sensitive rather than gender-deterministic interpretation. Appearance-related standards may be particularly salient for women, while achievement, professional status, athletic performance, financial success, or lifestyle may constitute important comparison domains for men. These differences require further investigation, particularly within the Indian sociocultural context where family expectations, academic and career competition, peer approval, and appearance norms may intersect with digital experiences.

6.7 Trends in Research Methodology

The methodological characteristics of the evidence base provide important context for interpreting the findings. Most studies employed cross-sectional survey designs, which are useful for identifying associations but provide limited evidence concerning temporal or causal relationships. A smaller number of longitudinal, experimental, and ecological momentary assessment studies provided stronger evidence regarding temporal patterns and momentary psychological changes.

The predominance of self-report methodology also means that reported social media exposure may not always correspond precisely with actual digital behaviour. Nevertheless, the repeated use of validated psychological instruments provides some consistency across studies.

Table 4. Frequently Used Psychological Assessment Instruments

Construct	Common Instrument
Self-esteem	Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)
Social comparison	Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM)
Fear of Missing Out	Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS)
Social media use	Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), platform-specific questionnaires

6.8 Emerging Research Gaps

Several important gaps emerged from the synthesis. First, the predominance of cross-sectional research limits conclusions regarding causality and the directionality of associations. Second, evidence from India and other low- and middle-income settings remains comparatively limited despite rapid growth in digital engagement. Third, relatively few studies have examined social comparison and FOMO simultaneously as interconnected mechanisms. Finally, differences in platform, engagement pattern, gender, culture, and comparison domain make it difficult to assume that one universal pathway explains the relationship between social media and self-esteem.

These gaps support the need for longitudinal, cross-cultural, experimental, and intervention-based research. In particular, future Indian studies should examine whether family expectations, academic and career pressure, appearance norms, social approval, digital literacy, and socioeconomic context modify the proposed relationships.

7. Discussion

The present review suggests that the relationship between social media use and self-esteem is conditional rather than uniformly negative. The psychological consequences appear to depend on the pattern and purpose of engagement, the content encountered, and the way users interpret online experiences. Passive and problematic engagement is more consistently associated with poorer self-evaluation, whereas active and purposeful use may provide opportunities for social connection, information exchange, learning, and self-expression. Thus, social media exposure alone may be insufficient to explain variations in self-esteem.

Social comparison provides a central explanation for this relationship. Social media increases the frequency and availability of comparison targets, while curated self-presentations may make others appear consistently more attractive, successful, socially connected, or fulfilled. Through the combined perspectives of Self-Presentation Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Self-Discrepancy Theory, repeated upward comparison may increase the perceived gap between the actual and ideal self, particularly when appearance, achievement, relationships, or lifestyle are personally salient. The psychological effect therefore depends not simply on whether users compare themselves with others, but on whom they compare with, what they compare, and how important that domain is to their self-worth.

FOMO represents a complementary pathway centred on belonging and perceived exclusion. Continuous visibility of peers' activities and achievements may increase concern about being left behind, encouraging repeated checking and monitoring. This can create a reinforcing cycle in which FOMO increases monitoring, monitoring increases exposure to comparison cues, and comparison further intensifies concerns about social position. Self-Determination Theory helps explain the role of threatened relatedness, while Compensatory Internet Use Theory helps explain why monitoring may persist despite negative consequences. FOMO and social comparison should therefore be considered interconnected psychological processes rather than isolated mediators.

The integration of these mechanisms also explains why the relationship with self-esteem may become self-reinforcing. Individuals with lower self-esteem may be more sensitive to unfavourable comparisons and perceived exclusion, while repeated comparison and exclusion experiences may further undermine self-evaluation. Sociometer Theory provides an additional explanation by suggesting that perceived acceptance and rejection can influence self-esteem. The proposed framework consequently moves beyond a simple direct pathway from social media use to self-esteem and instead positions comparison and FOMO within a dynamic psychological process.

Gender differences should similarly be interpreted in terms of socially salient comparison domains rather than inherent psychological vulnerability. Appearance-related standards may make appearance comparison particularly consequential for women, while achievement, professional status, financial success, athletic performance, or lifestyle may represent important comparison domains for men. Objectification and gender-socialisation perspectives help explain why particular forms of content may become more self-relevant for different groups. At the same time, evidence that gender differences may diminish after accounting for patterns of social media engagement suggests that behaviour and content exposure may be more informative than gender alone.

Indian Sociocultural Context: The Indian context represents a theoretical extension rather than simply another geographical setting. Rapid digitalisation in India intersects with academic and career competition, family expectations, peer evaluation, appearance norms, and socially valued markers of achievement. These overlapping influences may shape not only how emerging adults use social media but also what they compare themselves against and what they perceive as being missed.

Consequently, social comparison in the Indian context may extend beyond appearance or lifestyle to culturally meaningful indicators of educational attainment, career progression, social mobility, relationships, and family-related expectations. For example, exposure to a peer's academic or professional achievement may become relevant not only as an individual comparison but also as a perceived indicator of one's broader life progress. Similarly, FOMO may encompass concerns about missing educational, professional, or socially valued opportunities in addition to conventional social experiences. This provides a potentially important extension of existing models of comparison and FOMO.

Importantly, these propositions should not be interpreted as evidence that Indian emerging adults necessarily experience stronger effects than international populations. The present review does not provide sufficient India-specific evidence to establish such differences. Rather, the Indian sociocultural environment may alter the content, salience, and interpretation of comparison and exclusion experiences. This distinction is important because it avoids simply generalising international findings to India and instead identifies culturally specific mechanisms that can be empirically tested.

The Indian context should also not be framed exclusively in terms of vulnerability. Social media can support education, professional networking, entrepreneurship, peer learning, social connection, and access to information. From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, these positive functions may satisfy important psychological needs and potentially support self-esteem. The relevant question is therefore not whether social media is beneficial or harmful to Indian emerging adults as a whole, but under what conditions particular forms of engagement become psychologically beneficial or detrimental.

Theoretical Integration and Conceptual Contribution: The reviewed theories can be understood as complementary components of a single explanatory framework. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why individuals enter digital environments and the needs they seek to fulfil. Self-Presentation Theory explains the curated content encountered within those environments, while Social Cognitive Theory helps explain the influence of repeatedly observed social models. Social Comparison Theory then explains how users evaluate themselves against these models, and Self-Discrepancy Theory explains why perceived differences between the actual and desired self may influence self-esteem. Self-Determination Theory explains the role of belonging and

relatedness in FOMO, Compensatory Internet Use Theory explains continued monitoring, and Sociometer Theory links perceived social acceptance with self-evaluation.

The resulting pathway can therefore be conceptualised as:

Social media engagement → curated social exposure → social comparison/FOMO → self-evaluation → self-esteem

with gender and the Indian sociocultural environment influencing the salience and interpretation of these pathways. Social comparison and FOMO may also interact reciprocally through repeated monitoring. This integrated framework provides a more coherent explanation than treating each theory or psychological construct independently.

Implications

The findings suggest that interventions should focus less on total screen time and more on maladaptive patterns of engagement, particularly passive browsing, upward comparison, validation seeking, and FOMO-driven monitoring. Digital-well-being interventions could strengthen awareness of curated online presentations, promote critical interpretation of comparison targets, and develop alternative sources of belonging and self-worth.

For Indian educational settings, universities and colleges could incorporate digital-well-being programmes addressing social comparison, academic and career comparison, appearance-related pressures, online validation, and FOMO. Such interventions should not promote complete withdrawal from social media because digital platforms also provide substantial educational, professional, and social benefits.

Overall Contribution

The principal contribution of this review is the integration of social comparison and FOMO as interconnected pathways linking social media engagement with self-esteem, while distinguishing passive/problematic engagement from active and purposeful use. A further contribution is the positioning of gender and sociocultural context within the explanatory framework rather than treating them merely as demographic characteristics.

Most importantly, the Indian component of the model is not based on the assumption that international findings automatically apply to Indian emerging adults. Instead, it proposes that Indian sociocultural conditions may influence which online cues become self-relevant, what constitutes meaningful comparison, and what forms of exclusion are perceived as consequential. The resulting framework provides a focused basis for future longitudinal and culturally specific research examining not simply whether social media affects self-esteem in India, but how, why, and under what sociocultural conditions these effects emerge.

12. Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports a shift from asking whether social media is good or bad for self-esteem to asking which patterns of engagement produce which psychological processes for whom and under what conditions. Passive and comparison-oriented engagement is more consistently associated with lower self-esteem, while active and purposeful engagement can support connection, learning, and social support. Social comparison and FOMO provide complementary explanations: comparison changes how individuals evaluate themselves, whereas FOMO changes how they experience belonging and exclusion. These mechanisms can reinforce one another and may be shaped by gendered expectations and cultural context.

For India, the need for culturally grounded research is particularly important because digital expansion is occurring across a highly diverse social environment. The original conceptual model proposed here integrates motivational, cognitive, interpersonal, and sociocultural theories into one framework that can be empirically tested. Its central proposition is that social media use affects self-esteem indirectly through social comparison and FOMO, with gender and Indian sociocultural conditions influencing the strength and meaning of these pathways. Future longitudinal and intervention research should test this model and identify practical strategies for promoting healthier digital engagement and more stable self-esteem among Indian emerging adults.

References

1. Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
2. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227–268.
3. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations, 7*(2), 117–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202
4. Gibbons, F. X., & Buunk, B. P. (1999). Individual differences in social comparison orientation: Development of a scale of social comparison orientation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*(1), 129–142.
5. Jenkins-Guarnieri, M. A., Wright, S. L., & Johnson, B. (2013). Development and validation of a social media use integration scale. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 2*(1), 38–50.
6. Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of Fear of Missing Out. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(4), 1841–1848. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014
7. Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.

8. Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 3*(4), 206–222. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047
9. Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J., & Kross, E. (2017). Do social network sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being? An umbrella review. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 11*(1), 274–302.
10. Valkenburg, P. M., Meier, A., & Beyens, I. (2022). Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: An umbrella review of the evidence. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 44*, 58–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017
11. Midgley, C., Thai, S., Lockwood, P., Kovacheff, C., & Page-Gould, E. (2021). When every day is a high school reunion: Social media comparisons and self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 121*(2), 285–307. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000336
12. Triệu, P., Ellison, N. B., Schoenebeck, S. Y., & Brewer, R. N. (2021). Implications of Facebook engagement types and feed's social content for self-esteem via social comparison processes. *Social Media + Society, 7*. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211042400
13. Miljeteig, C., & von Soest, T. (2022). An experience sampling study on the association between social media use and self-esteem. *Journal of Media Psychology, 34*(6). https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000333
14. Chou, H. T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.
15. Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. *Sex Roles*.
16. Tandoc, E. C., Ferrucci, P., & Duffy, M. (2015). Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is Facebooking depressing? *Computers in Human Behavior*.
17. Sherman, L. E., et al. (2016). The power of the like in adolescence: Effects of peer influence on neural and behavioral responses to social media. *Psychological Science*.
18. Woods, H. C., & Scott, H. (2016). #Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence, 51*, 41–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.05.008
19. Nesi, J., Choukas-Bradley, S., & Prinstein, M. J. (2018). Transformation of adolescent peer relations in the social media context: Part 1—A theoretical framework and application to dyadic peer relationships. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*.
20. Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour*.
21. Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2020). A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*.
22. Chou, H. T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 15*(2), 117–121. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324
23. Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*(4), 1143–1168. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x
24. Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2020). A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 25*(1), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851
25. Nesi, J., Choukas-Bradley, S., & Prinstein, M. J. (2018). Transformation of adolescent peer relations in the social media context: Part 1—A theoretical framework and application to dyadic peer relationships. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 21*(3), 267–294. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-018-0261-x
26. Nesi, J., Choukas-Bradley, S., & Prinstein, M. J. (2018). Transformation of adolescent peer relations in the social media context: Part 2—Application to peer group processes and future directions for research.

Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 21(3), 295–319. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-018-0262-9

27. Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour, 3*, 173–182. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1
28. Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. *Sex Roles, 71*, 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6
29. Sherman, L. E., Payton, A. A., Hernandez, L. M., Greenfield, P. M., & Dapretto, M. (2016). The power of the like in adolescence: Effects of peer influence on neural and behavioral responses to social media. *Psychological Science, 27*(7), 1027–1035. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616645673
30. Tandoc, E. C., Ferrucci, P., & Duffy, M. (2015). Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is Facebooking depressing? *Computers in Human Behavior, 43*, 139–146. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.10.053
31. Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (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. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003
32. Valkenburg, P. M., Meier, A., & Beyens, I. (2022). Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: An umbrella review of the evidence. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 44*, 58–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017
33. Valkenburg, P. M., Peter, J., & Schouten, A. P. (2006). Friend networking sites and their relationship to adolescents' well-being and social self-esteem. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 9*(5), 584–590. https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2006.9.584
34. Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J., & Kross, E. (2017). Do social network sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being? A critical review. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 11*(1), 274–302. https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12033
35. Weinstein, E. (2018). The social media see-saw: Positive and negative influences on adolescents. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 44*, 58–68.
36. Woods, H. C., & Scott, H. (2016). #Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence, 51*, 41–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.05.008