

FROM INSPIRATION TO DESPAIR: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH WELL-BEING AND MOTIVATION

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This article presents a pilot study investigating the complex psychological effects of social media usage on the wellbeing and motivation of young people, emphasizing the interplay of boredom, cognitive styles, and social comparison mechanisms. The research involved 132 university students from Poland who completed mixed-method questionnaires after spending 30 minutes actively browsing popular social media platforms. The majority of participants reported experiencing fatigue (78 %), feelings of guilt (65 %), and boredom (48 %), while only a small portion (12 %) felt genuine inspiration. Statistical analysis revealed significant positive correlations between boredom and fatigue ($r = 0.58$), as well as boredom and guilt ($r = 0.62$), suggesting boredom as a critical motivational factor contributing to negative emotional states and decreased engagement. Qualitative responses highlighted pervasive themes such as envy, social exclusion, sensory overload, and the perceived waste of time, though occasional moments of motivational uplift and connection were also noted. Notably, 85 % of respondents acknowledged the negative psychological impact of comparing themselves to others' curated successes, yet 80 % also recognized the potential motivating role of such social comparisons when approached mindfully. The findings underscore the importance of targeted educational interventions that integrate digital literacy, the cultivation of a growth mindset, and mindful engagement with social media content. Such interventions could effectively mitigate the harmful psychological effects associated with social networks and help transform social comparison from a source of despair into an opportunity for constructive personal growth, self-awareness, and enhanced intrinsic motivation among youth.

Keywords: social media, boredom, social comparison, university students, mental well-being, motivation, growth mindset.

Introduction

In today's world, social media platforms have become an inseparable part of everyday life, especially for young people. It may be true to say that these platforms provide easy access to information, enable communication, and offer entertainment, however, excessive use can have detrimental effects on mental health. The constant exposure to idealized representations of others' lives, as well as the constant comparison of oneself to peers, has been shown to lead to feelings of inadequacy, stress, and even depression.

In recent years, research has identified several key emotional and psychological phenomena related to social media use, including FoMO (the Fear of Missing Out), boredom, mindset (the way we perceive our own abilities), and predisposition to depression. These phenomena significantly affect young adults' mental well-being, particularly students who are in the formative stage of their adult lives.

Modern student life comes with many challenges – from studying, to social life, and adapting to adulthood. In this context, *social media* have become one of the most important elements of everyday life, allowing to feel connected with others, providing access to information, and being the source of entertainment. On the other hand, in the last years, social media have also increased the alarming potential of being the source of many negative emotions, such as comparison, exclusion, or the pressure of staying updated with everything happening around.

One of the most common phenomena associated with social media is FoMO: the users see other people traveling, partying, and achieving success, while feeling like they are missing out on something. Such feelings lead to loneliness, dissatisfaction with our own lives, and eventually – depression. Boredom, which results from aimlessly scrolling through social media, also makes users feel irritated, stressed, and less motivated to engage in activities that could improve overall well-being and develop professionally.

Literature review

Boredom and social media use: escaping emptiness

Boredom is often described as a feeling of emptiness or dissatisfaction that drives individuals to seek stimulating activities. On social media, this can manifest as repeatedly checking Instagram or Facebook to fill emotional voids. However, research suggests this behavior does not resolve underlying boredom and may, over time, intensify the sense of emptiness (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The fleeting pleasure of social media offers only temporary relief, leading users back into the cycle of boredom as they consume more content but feel increasingly unfulfilled. Stockdale and Coyne's longitudinal study (2020) shows that using social networking sites (SNS) to alleviate boredom predicts problematic social media use, financial stress, anxiety, and empathy issues three years later. Donati et al. (2022) Italian study found that a high trait boredom predicts internet addiction, mediated by problematic Facebook use. Those prone to boredom are more vulnerable to excessive online engagement and potential addiction. As Tam&Inzlicht (2024) claim, "Boredom is unpleasant, with people going to great lengths to avoid it. One way to escape boredom and increase stimulation is to consume digital media, for example watching short videos on YouTube or TikTok. ... (but) our findings suggest that attempts to avoid boredom through digital switching may sometimes inadvertently exacerbate it. When watching videos, enjoyment likely comes from immersing oneself in the videos rather than swiping through them. This switching behavior makes people feel more bored, less satisfied, less engaged, and less meaningful in some instances"

(Tam&Inzlicht, 2024, p. 2409). Boredom proneness (which refers to a dispositional tendency to experience boredom frequently and intensely, and assessed via instruments such as the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS), which gauges attentional deficits, lack of internal stimulation, and frustration in unengaging contexts (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986)) predicts depression independently and in conjunction with SM use (Tam & Inzlicht, 2024). Sümer&Büttner (2022) examined procrastinatory uses of social media, instant messaging, and online shopping with respect to boredom proneness, self-control, and impulsivity among German and Turkish samples, revealing correlations which warn of problematic use of social media by young adults.

Recent meta-analyses provide foundational quantitative estimates of the *SM-depression link*. **Keles et al. (2020)** aggregated data from 35 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (total $N \approx 45,000$) and reported a mean correlation of $r = 0.31$ between overall SM time and depressive symptoms in adolescents and young adults. However, when sleep quality and loneliness were controlled, the partial r dropped to 0.18, indicating that disrupted sleep patterns (e.g., delayed bedtimes, nighttime awakenings linked to smartphone notifications) and chronic peer isolation account for nearly half of the SM-depression association. Drawing on 26 studies ($N = 12,333$), Marciano et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis and found a medium-to-large effect size ($r = 0.34$), indicating that individuals who are more prone to boredom are significantly more likely to engage in excessive or maladaptive digital media behavior. The association held consistently across different study designs, age groups, and geographic regions, suggesting a generalizable relationship. However, the authors note that the causal direction is not yet clear – while boredom may drive PDMU (problematic digital media use), excessive media use could also increase susceptibility to boredom over time (Marciano et al., 20202). Meta-analysis conducted by Camerini et al. (2023) revealed a moderate-to-strong positive correlation between boredom and problematic digital media use, suggesting that bored individuals are more likely to overuse social platforms, harming mental health and well-being. Furthermore, the relationship between boredom and depression appears bidirectional: depressive symptoms erode motivation and cognitive engagement, heightening susceptibility to boredom (Zhang et al., 2022). Overall, growing evidence from various research methods indicates that using digital media tends to increase feelings of boredom. This makes it likely that digital media has played a role in the upward trend in boredom observed over the last ten years.

Motivation and social comparison

Social media platforms are prime venues for social comparison, which powerfully influences motivation. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate their abilities and social status by comparing themselves to others. Observing peers' successes can either spur positive motivation (e.g., striving for self-improvement) or provoke negative effects (e.g., feelings of inadequacy). According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), social media can

support intrinsic motivation when it encourages learning, connection, and self-development. Lee and Hancock (2021) reported that users who view social media as a tool under their control (“*agentic mindset*”) experience lower stress, anxiety, and depression compared to those who see it as harmful or addictive. Parry and Coetzee (2025) demonstrated that young adults who perceive social media as a resource under their command enjoy better mental well-being and lower stress, while those who view it as detrimental report higher Facebook addiction and stress levels. Frequent upward comparisons on social media – viewing peers who appear better off – can foster feelings of inferiority and lower self-worth, which are linked to depressive symptoms (Vogel et al., 2014). In summary, our mindset (whether we see social media as empowering or controlling) significantly affects how we use it and our psychological health. A growth mindset fosters adaptive responses to social comparisons and higher motivation, whereas a fixed mindset can lead to stagnation or depressive feelings.

The solution to the discussed issues could be derived from the *idea of mindset moulding*, which is known to influence emotional regulation, coping strategies, and openness to challenge (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). However, there is little to no practical implications (apart from the recently coined idea of *social media mindsets* – the idea introduced by Stanford University researchers Lee & Hancock, 2024), integrating the recovery from problematic SM use, and mitigating the interference of boredom, FoMO, and depression predisposition. This is especially true when adolescents’ self-worth depends on social media feedback, and is proved to be related to depressive symptoms. Among 1,032 participants, Schreurs et al. (2024) found that those who generally based their self-worth more on social media feedback reported higher levels of depression.

In our study, we set the goal to analyze how the social comparisons we witness on social media affect self-esteem and motivation – factors strongly linked to depression risk – and to examine the role that boredom plays in the interaction with social media content.

Method

Conceptual foundation of the research

From *Behavioral Self-Regulation Theory* (Carver & Scheier, 2012), we view individuals as actively monitoring discrepancies between their current state and goals (e.g., “I want to feel connected”) and engaging in behaviors (social media browsing) to reduce those gaps. *Cognitive Self-Referential Theory* (Higgins, 2013) reminds us that comparing ourselves to an “ideal” version or what we feel we ought to be leaves us vulnerable, threatens self-esteem, especially when social media present only the best, most polished moments of other people’s lives.

We also draw on Tesser’s *Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model of Social Behavior* (1988) to explain why seeing friends’ achievements online can feel uplifting in some cases (when those successes aren’t tied to our own interests) but deeply deflating in others (when we feel we fall short in domains that matter to us).

Because social media makes achievements ever-present, small feelings of envy or self-doubt can grow into more persistent anxiety or sadness.

Research design and tools

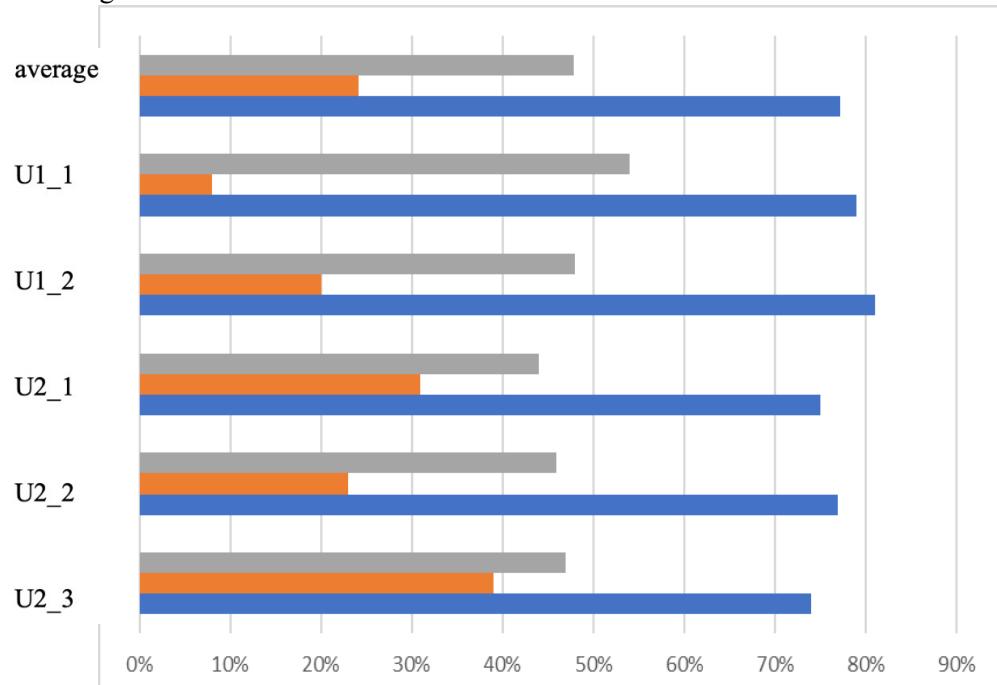
A pilot survey of diagnostic character was conducted with 132 university students (first, second, fourth, and fifth years) at two higher educational institutions in Poland (for ethical reasons, we do not mention the identification). Participants, who voluntarily participated, providing informed consent, completed an author-designed questionnaire covering frequency of social media use, emotional reactions to others' successes, and personal attitudes toward self-development, using a self-evaluation 5-point Likert scale. There were two open-ended items for students to provide their reflections on the following request and question: *Please describe a situation in which a friend's social media post affected your motivation or mood (either negatively or positively). How do you usually feel after spending 30 minutes browsing social media?* Participants received all necessary explanations about the study objectives, the interaction procedures. All ethical principles (including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study) were strictly observed.

Results and Discussion

Our quantitative analysis of 132 university students reveals that social media browsing often leaves users feeling drained rather than energized. After just 30 minutes online, 78% of respondents reported physical and mental fatigue (complaints of eye strain, headaches, and general overstimulation) while 65% experienced guilt or frustration over "wasted time." Nearly half (48%) felt bored or apathetic afterward, and only 12% noted any fleeting positive uplift. These findings echo Kuss and Griffiths (2017), who showed that using social platforms to combat boredom offers only transient relief and can intensify feelings of emptiness, and Camerini, Morlino, and Marciano's meta-analysis linking trait boredom with problematic digital use and poorer well-being. We also observed that negative outcomes were not evenly distributed but showed meaningful variation across usage patterns. Students who reported checking social media more than five times per hour were 1.8 times more likely to report fatigue and 2.3 times more likely to report guilt than those who checked fewer than three times per hour ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p < 0.001$). This dose-response relationship echoes Tam and Inzlicht's (2024) "boredom switching" model, suggesting that frequent, stimulus-seeking checking behaviors intensify rather than relieve underlying problem.

A strong majority feel inspired by peers' successes and are willing to use that inspiration as constructive motivation to improve themselves, however still about 20% do not experience this motivational boost. Similarly, 80% of students use social media as a primary tool for social monitoring, underscoring its central role in peer-related information flow and the potential for both positive and negative comparative effects (Figure 1).

Analysis of social-comparison valence further highlighted the predominance of negative emotional impacts: 85% of students recounted primarily negative reactions to peers' posts, compared to just 5% reporting purely positive effects, underscoring Lee, and Kim's (2019) findings on mindset-driven engagement differences (Figure 2). Correlation analyses revealed that higher boredom-motivation scores (the extent to which students use social media to alleviate boredom) were strongly associated with both fatigue ($r=0.58$, $p<0.001$) and guilt ($r=0.62$, $p<0.001$), replicating Stockdale and Coyne's (2020) longitudinal link between boredom-motivated use and later emotional distress. Conversely, only weak positive correlations emerged between time spent and self-reported inspiration ($r=0.21$, $p=0.07$), suggesting that any motivational benefits of social comparison are both infrequent and not reliably tied to usage duration.

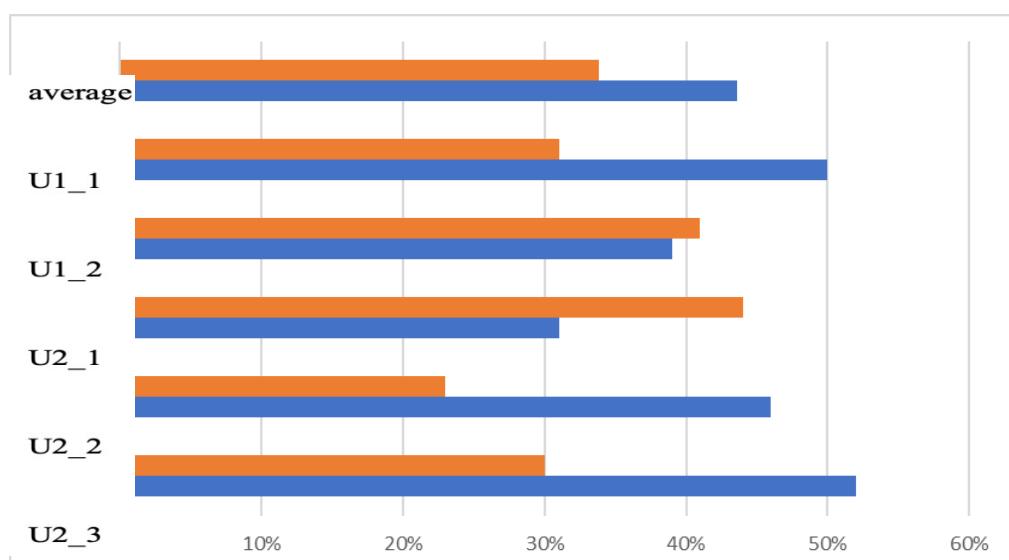


*“When I see that friends are succeeding in areas that matter to me, it motivates me to work on my own weaknesses.” (4/5 – combined “agree” and “strongly agree” responses).

**“When I see that friends are succeeding in areas that matter to me, it does not motivate me to work on my own weaknesses.” (1/2 – combined “disagree” and “strongly disagree” responses).

***“I often check social media (Instagram or Facebook) to stay up to date with my friends’ lives.” (4/5 – combined “agree” and “strongly agree” responses).

Figure 1. The motivational and frequency factors in SMS use



*“Sometimes I feel sad or have lower self-esteem when I see friends’ posts showcasing experiences I haven’t had myself.” (“agree” and “absolutely agree” options).

Figure 2. Social-comparison emotional impact of SNS use

Beyond the overwhelming fatigue and guilt reported, our qualitative data reveal rich emotional and cognitive undercurrents shaping students’ social-media experiences. First, jealousy and inadequacy emerged as pervasive reactions. One student wrote, “When I saw my friend celebrating a promotion, I couldn’t help but feel I’d accomplished nothing,” while another confessed, “Scrolling through travel photos made me question why my life feels so mundane.” These narratives mirror Vogel et al.’s (2014) findings that upward comparisons on social platforms often undermine self-worth and can trigger pervasive self-doubt.

Closely related is the theme of sadness and social exclusion, where posts highlighting group gatherings or insider events left some respondents feeling alienated. A particularly poignant reflection reads, “Seeing pictures from a study group I wasn’t invited to hurt more than I expected – I felt truly invisible.” This aligns with Elhai et al.’s (2016) and Fardouly et al.’s (2015) work on online interpersonal stressors, showing that perceived social rejection via digital channels can intensify anxiety and provoke depressive symptoms.

A third strand of responses centers on time-waste and guilt. Many confessed to mindlessly scrolling only to end up feeling regret: “I thought just ten minutes would help me relax, but two hours later I felt ashamed for wasting my evening.” Stockdale and Coyne (2020) similarly documented that boredom-motivated social-media use

often leads to problematic patterns and long-term stress, suggesting the need for strategies that replace passive browsing with purposeful breaks.

Participants also described physical and cognitive overload: “My head was pounding, and everything felt blurry after endless feeds.” This points to the embodied toll of digital overstimulation and echoes Keles et al.’s (2020) findings on the somatic consequences of excessive screen time, reinforcing calls for digital-wellness interventions in educational settings.

Amid these negative experiences, a small but telling minority reported moments of genuine inspiration. One student noted, “Watching a classmate’s charity project inspired me to start volunteering,” while another said, “Seeing someone’s fitness journey pushed me to join the campus gym.” These instances support Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory: when users adopt a growth or agentic mindset (Lee & Hancock, 2021), social media can indeed reinforce intrinsic motivation and foster positive behavior change.

Lastly, an emerging theme of mindset surfaced implicitly: those who framed posts as learning opportunities (“I saw a friend’s success as proof that hard work pays off”) appeared more resilient, whereas peers with a fixed outlook tended to ruminate on perceived deficits. This echoes Song, Lee, and Kim’s (2019) research linking growth mindsets to healthier social-media engagement patterns.

In sum, students’ open-ended reflections paint a nuanced picture: social media can both erode and enhance well-being, depending heavily on individual interpretive frames and usage patterns. Educational interventions should therefore combine digital literacy with mindset training – equipping students to recognize and transform harmful comparisons into constructive motivation.

Conclusions

The interplay among boredom, motivation, and depression risk in the context of social media is complex. Boredom drives social media use, which can either motivate self-improvement or lead to negative emotions and feelings of inadequacy, depending on social comparison tendencies and mindset. Social media functions as a double-edged sword: it can both inspire and depress, based on how users interpret their experiences.

Our findings emphasize the need for emotion-regulation strategies to mitigate social media’s negative impact, particularly for individuals prone to comparison. Promoting a growth mindset is crucial: those with such an orientation view failures as learning opportunities, reducing the risk of hopelessness from upward comparisons. Encouraging this mindset among youth (especially in their social media interactions) emerges as a key recommendation.

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Стаття: надійшла до редколегії 09.09.2025

доопрацьована 29.10.2025

прийнята до друку 02.11.2025

ВІД НАТХНЕННЯ ДО ВІДЧАЮ: ПСИХОЛОГІЧНІ НАСЛІДКИ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕРЕЖ НА ПСИХІЧНЕ ЗДОРОВ'Я ТА МОТИВАЦІЮ МОЛОДІ

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Наведено пілотне дослідження психологічних наслідків активного використання соціальних мереж для психічного здоров'я та мотивації молоді з особливим акцентом на взаємодію нудьги, стилів мислення та механізмів соціального порівняння. Учасниками дослідження стали 132 студенти польських університетів, які після 30 хв активного перегляду популярних соцмереж заповнили змішані анкети. Більшість респондентів повідомили про відчуття втоми (78 %), провини (65 %) і нудьги (48 %), тоді як лише 12 % відчули справжнє натхнення. Статистичний аналіз виявив значущі позитивні кореляції між нудьгою і втомою ($r = 0,58$), а також між нудьгою і провиною ($r = 0,62$), що свідчить про головну роль нудьги як мотиваційного фактора, який сприяє формуванню негативних емоційних станів та зниженню зачлененості. Якісний аналіз показав поширені теми заздрості, соціального виключення, сенсорного перевантаження та відчуття марнування часу, водночас зафіксовано також епізоди мотиваційного підйому та соціального зв'язку. Важливо, що 85 % респондентів визнали негативний психологічний вплив порівняння себе з ідеалізованими успіхами інших, проте 80 % також усвідомлюють потенціал таких порівнянь, як стимулу до розвитку, якщо підходити до них усвідомлено. Зазначено нагальну потребу в цілеспрямованих освітніх програмах, що поєднують цифрову грамотність, розвиток мислення зростання та усвідомлену взаємодію із соціальними мережами. Такі інтервенції можуть ефективно пом'якшити шкідливі психологічні наслідки соцмереж і трансформувати соціальні порівняння з джерела розчарувань у можливість конструктивного особистісного розвитку, самосвідомості та посилення внутрішньої мотивації молоді. Наголошено на важливості подальших досліджень у цій сфері для розробки більш ефективних стратегій підтримки психічного здоров'я молоді в цифрову епоху.

Ключові слова: соціальні мережі, нудьга, соціальне порівняння, студенти університетів, психічне благополуччя, мотивація, мислення зростання.