

# The Influence of Social Comparison on Psychological Distress Among Users Who Engage in Sarcasm on Social Media

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## Abstract

Social media users are increasingly vulnerable to engaging in social comparison with others, a behavior that may contribute significantly to the emergence of psychological distress. In managing the negative emotions that arise from such comparisons, individuals often resort to sarcasm as a coping strategy. This study aims to examine the influence of social comparison on psychological distress among individuals who exhibit sarcastic behavior on social media, with the expectation that the findings will provide valuable insights into this phenomenon. Utilizing a quantitative research method, the study involved 150 respondents aged 18–40 who engage in sarcastic behavior online. The results revealed a statistically significant effect, with a p-value of  $< 0.001$  and a coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of 0.192, indicating that the social comparison variable accounts for 19.2% of the variance in psychological distress. The remaining variance is attributable to other factors not examined in this study. These findings indicate a significant relationship between social comparison and psychological distress among sarcastic social media users. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of educational initiatives to raise awareness about the negative psychological impacts of social comparison in digital environments and underscore the need to foster more adaptive coping strategies to mitigate these risks.

*Keywords:* Social Comparison, Psychological Distress, Sarcasm, Social Media.

## 1. Introduction

Changes in the field of information systems have significantly influenced people's lives. Sofyan and Arfian (2023) state that developments in technology and information have brought about numerous changes, particularly through the internet. The internet has become the form of technology most widely utilized by society for various purposes (Wardani, Arsanti, Setiana, Azizah, and Turahmat, 2021). It has reached various regions and is used as a means of supporting daily life in education, work, and social interaction through social media. Social media generates both positive and negative effects that have contributed to changes in patterns of social behavior. Yusuf, Rahman, Rahmi, and Lismayani (2023) argue that social media has led to shifts in culture and social norms. Based on Meltwater data (Howe, 2024), 167 million people in Indonesia are active social media users. Data from Goodstats (Yonatan, 2023) indicate that 153 million of them are aged 18 years and older. APJII (2023) also emphasizes that internet users are predominantly individuals aged 18–40 years.

Hurlock (2011) classifies individuals aged 18–40 years as being in the stage of early adulthood. Erikson (Krisnadi & Adhandayani, 2022) explains that early adulthood is characterized by the development of warm, intimate, and open interpersonal relationships. Easy access to the internet can encourage the formation of a communication environment that feels comfortable for each individual (Puspitasari & Aprileny, 2020). This is reflected in the increasing tendency of individuals to access social media in their leisure time (Aslamiyah, Santi, & Ananta, 2024). Howe (2024) reports that, on average, Indonesians spend 3 hours and 46 minutes per session actively using social media. Based on data from Goodstats (Rainer, 2024), the most popular platforms in 2024 include WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. These platforms facilitate the exchange of information and communication without limitations of space and time.

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Exposure to social media content can produce a wide range of emotional effects on individuals who consume such content. Fauziatunnisa (2021) states that social media influences changes in individuals' attitudes, values, and norms. Negative content such as hoaxes, hate speech, and cyberbullying may become triggers of emotional problems in individuals (Pamungkas, Basile, & Patti, 2020). One form of hate speech that is frequently encountered is sarcasm. Sinaga, Mustika, and Tamam (2023) explain that sarcasm is a form of insult, ridicule, or satirical expression that has negative effects on its victims.

Sarcasm may emerge as a form of expression of psychological distress. Sagita, Fairuz, and Aisyah (2021) suggest that individuals with excessive anxiety may display sarcastic behavior. According to Kessler, Andrews, Colpe, Mroczek, Normand, Walters, and Zaslavsky (2002), psychological distress is a condition of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral instability. Mirowsky and Ross (Maharani, 2021) further define psychological distress as significant emotional discomfort manifested in the form of depression and anxiety. Dharma, Yuliadi, and Setyowati (2020) state that psychological distress includes situational and intrapersonal aspects. Sitompul (2021) explains that intrapersonal factors include personality traits, whereas situational factors encompass unfavorable physical, social, and health conditions. Hawkins (Widyawati, 2020; Aulia, Anastasias, Hermansyah, & Murdiana, 2024) argues that technology and social media are among the situational factors that may influence an individual's psychological distress.

Preliminary data collected from 29 netizens who engaged in sarcastic behavior showed that 25 respondents (86.2%) experienced envy, anxiety, and stress when viewing posts from people perceived as more successful. Thirteen respondents (45%) stated that social media content could disturb their mood and mental health, while 10 respondents (34.4%) tended to post critical comments on content that contradicted their personal principles. In addition, 27 respondents (93.1%) reported having the urge to limit their social media use when feelings of discomfort emerged after viewing other individuals' posts.

These preliminary findings indicate a relationship between social media and individuals' emotional responses. Rini, Aji, Paratmaniya, and Kusmayanti (2022) state that individuals who view posts from more successful people tend to engage in self-comparison. Festinger (1954) argues that individuals have an inherent drive to compare themselves with others as a way of evaluating their opinions and abilities when objective data are unavailable. In the context of social media, indicators such as likes, followers, and comments are often used as benchmarks for self-evaluation (Swari & Tobing, 2024). Furthermore, individuals often compare themselves with celebrities and influencers whose life backgrounds differ considerably from their own. This may lead to errors in self-evaluation because differences in context and life conditions make the comparison target not truly comparable to the individual making the comparison (Caliskan, Idug, Uvet, Gligor, & Kayaalp, 2024).

Festinger (1954) explains that social comparison may occur in two directions, namely upward comparison and downward comparison. Upward comparison occurs when individuals focus on others who are perceived as superior, and this may generate negative feelings. In contrast, downward comparison occurs when individuals focus on those perceived as less successful or less advantaged than themselves in order to enhance their sense of self-satisfaction. Research conducted by Jiang and Ngien (2020) shows that social comparison can increase anxiety. Auliannisa and Hatta (2021) state that social comparison may also lead to depression in individuals. Further research by Firdaus, Reza, Salsabila, and Dewani (2023) likewise suggests that social comparison can trigger and exacerbate anxiety and even depression.

Research on the influence of social comparison on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media is therefore important to conduct. Anxiety arising from social comparison affects not only users' well-being, but also the way individuals communicate in online settings. This study seeks to examine the influence of social comparison as a trigger of psychological distress in online interactions. This serves as the basis for the researcher's interest in undertaking a study with the novel title, "The Influence of Social Comparison on Psychological Distress among Individuals Engaging in Sarcasm on Social Media."

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Psychological Distress*

Kessler, Andrews, Colpe, Mroczek, Normand, Walters, and Zaslavsky (2002) argue that psychological distress is a form of instability manifested in disturbances of emotion, cognition, behavior, and individual feelings. Mirowsky and

Ross (Maharani, 2021) describe psychological distress as a disturbing subjective condition with two main forms, namely depression and anxiety. Veit and Ware (1983) state that psychological distress is a condition of unstable mental health in which individuals feel anxious, depressed, and lose control over their behavior or emotions.

Nevid, Rathus, and Greene (2014) define psychological distress as a negative condition experienced by individuals, such as sadness and mental disturbance, involving depression and anxiety. Shintia and Maharani (2021) explain that psychological distress is a negative subjective state that may lead to depression, anxiety, sadness, and a decline in an individual's quality of life. Belay, Guangul, Asmare, and Mesafint (2021) argue that psychological distress is an emotionally unstable state characterized by somatic symptoms in individuals.

According to Kessler et al. (Fananni, 2021), psychological distress consists of two aspects: depression, which is an emotional condition marked by prolonged sadness, feelings of worthlessness, and guilt; and anxiety, which is an emotional state characterized by heightened physiological responses, prolonged feelings of discomfort, and negative thoughts about the possibility of adverse events occurring. According to Mirowsky and Ross (2002), there are two factors that influence psychological distress, namely intrapersonal factors, which include personality traits and self-esteem, and situational factors, which refer to physiological, cognitive, and social factors.

Psychological distress may affect individuals' daily behavior and, consequently, their social interactions. According to Shafira and Nasution (2022), high levels of psychological distress may give rise to behaviors such as aggression, sabotage, interpersonal aggression, and hostility toward others. According to Bressert (Dini, Fitryasari, & Asmoro, 2020), psychological distress may affect four aspects, namely the physical aspect, including sleep patterns, increased heart rate, muscle spasms, dizziness, fever, fatigue, and lack of energy; the cognitive aspect, including loss of focus, forgetfulness, frequent worry, and panic; the behavioral aspect, including loss of interest in socializing, a tendency to withdraw, avoidance of others, and increased laziness; and the emotional aspect, including greater sensitivity, frustration, helplessness, and irritability.

## 2.2. Social Comparison

Social comparison is a form of self-comparative behavior that arises from an individual's need for self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). According to Guyer and Johnston (2018), social comparison is the process by which individuals evaluate their skills, opinions, attitudes, feelings, physical appearance, achievements, and other aspects of themselves in relation to others. Festinger (Arshuha & Amalia, 2019) states that social comparison consists of two dimensions, namely comparison with individuals who are better off and comparison with those who are worse off.

Social comparison on social media also occurs in two different directions, namely upward comparison and downward comparison. According to Festinger (1954), upward comparison occurs when individuals pay greater attention to things or people who display achievement, success, or luxurious lifestyles, which may generate negative feelings. In contrast, downward comparison occurs when individuals focus on things or people perceived as not better than themselves in order to enhance feelings of satisfaction within themselves.

Festinger (1945) also argues that when inconsistency arises in the comparison process, pressure to change will emerge (upward drive) through improving one's abilities or changing one's opinions in order to align with the social environment. When such inconsistency leads to prolonged discomfort, individuals will stop the comparison process, accompanied by behavior that devalues the comparison target. When the opinions or abilities being compared are important to the individual, the person will be driven to adjust in order to reduce the discrepancy. This effort may be carried out by adopting group opinions, influencing others to hold similar views, choosing to stop comparing oneself and shifting to another group that is more similar or suitable.

Festinger (1954) states that there are two aspects of social comparison, namely opinion, which refers to comparing personal opinions with public opinion, and ability, which refers to comparing one's own abilities with those of others. In addition, Schaefer and Thompson (2014) identify five physical aspects of social comparison, namely physical appearance, body weight, body shape, body size, and body fat. Meanwhile, according to Jones (2001), there are five aspects of social comparison, namely body weight, body shape, face, and style.

Social comparison may be caused by many factors. According to Festinger (1954), there are three factors that influence social comparison, namely self-evaluation, which includes individuals' behavior in comparing themselves with others with the motive of evaluating themselves; self-improvement, which includes comparison motives that use

others as models for understanding one's own abilities; and self-enhancement, which includes comparisons aimed at optimizing individuals' self-esteem or self-concept. Meanwhile, according to Garcia, Tor, and Schiff (2013), there are two factors that influence social comparison, namely individual factors, which include various aspects that individuals compare with others, and situational factors, which refer to social comparison factors that affect individuals in similar positions.

### 3. Research Method

This study employs a correlational quantitative method to examine the influence of social comparison on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media. The sample consisted of 150 netizens aged 18–40 years who use social media and demonstrated a sarcasm level with a score of  $\geq 5$  based on the screening results of the Sarcasm Self-Report Scale developed by Ivanko, Pexman, and Olinek (2004).

Data on social comparison were collected using 9 items from the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Measure (INCOM) developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1990), based on the aspects proposed by Festinger (1954). Meanwhile, data on psychological distress were collected using 10 items from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) developed by Kessler et al. (2002) and adapted into Indonesian by Tran et al. (2019). Data analysis was conducted through descriptive analysis to describe the characteristics of the respondents and inferential statistical testing in the form of linear regression analysis to determine the influence of social comparison on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media. The entire data analysis process was carried out with the assistance of JAMOVI software.

### 4. Results and Discussions

The researcher collected data from 150 respondents aged 18 – 40 years who use social media and obtained a score of  $\geq 5$  on the Sarcasm Self-Report Scale, which was used to measure the frequency of sarcasm use. The following are the results of the descriptive analysis of the respondents based on demographic characteristics.

**Table 1.** Description of respondents based on age

Age	Count	Percentage
22	5 respondents	3,33%
23	30 respondents	20%
24	17 respondents	11,33%
25	16 respondents	10,67%
26	10 respondents	6,67%
27	11 respondents	7,33%
28	8 respondents	5,33%
29	9 respondents	6%
30	10 respondents	6,67%
31	6 respondents	4%
32	6 respondents	4%
34	9 respondents	6%
35	4 respondents	2,67%
36	3 respondents	2%%
37	2 respondents	1,33%
39	4 respondents	2,67%
<b>Total</b>	<b>150 respondents</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data in Table 1 show that, of the 150 respondents who participated in this study, the sample was dominated by respondents aged 23 years.

**Table 2.** Description of the most frequently used social media platforms

Social Media	Count	Percentage
Instagram	104 respondents	69,33%
X (Twitter)	127 respondents	84,67%

TikTok	119 respondents	79,33%
Youtube	49 respondents	32,6%

The data in Table 2 show that, of the 150 respondents who participated in this study, the majority most frequently used X (Twitter).

After the assumptions for parametric analysis had been met, hypothesis testing was conducted using simple linear regression analysis. If the significance value was  $p < 0.05$ , then H1 was accepted and H0 was rejected. The hypotheses in this study were as follows:

H0: There is no effect of social comparison on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media.

H1: There is an effect of social comparison on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media.

The results of the simple linear regression analysis in this study are presented as follows.

**Table 3.** Results of simple linear regression analysis

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>
1	0.439	0.192

**Table 4.** Regression coefficients

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	20.211	0.9254	21.84	<.001
Social Comparison	0.851	0.195	5.94	<.001

Based on the results of the simple linear regression analysis, social comparison was found to have a significant effect on psychological distress, with a t value of 5.94 and  $p < 0.001$ . The correlation value (R) of 0.439 indicates a positive relationship between social comparison and psychological distress. In addition, the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) of 0.192 indicates that social comparison accounts for 19.2% of the variance in psychological distress, while the remaining 80.8% is influenced by other factors outside the research model. The resulting simple linear regression equation is as follows:

$$\text{Psychological Distress} = 20.211 + (0.851 \times \text{Social Comparison})$$

**Figure 1.** Regression equation of the research variables

This means that every one-unit increase in social comparison increases psychological distress by 0.851 units. Thus, the higher the level of social comparison experienced by individuals, the higher the level of psychological distress they are likely to feel. This indicates that social comparison has a significant effect on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media. Based on these findings, Ha in this study was accepted.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of McCarthy and Morina (2020), who showed that individuals who frequently compare themselves with others tend to experience higher levels of anxiety and depression. Festinger (1954) emphasized that psychological effects arise when comparisons are made with targets who do not share similar social status, background, or ability. Excessive use of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X contributes to increasing the frequency of social comparison (Samra et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024), thereby increasing the risk of mental health problems. The use of social media for entertainment has also been shown to increase symptoms of psychological distress (Dwaikat et al., 2020), as well as trigger addiction that worsens stress (Buabbas et al., 2021; Gunawan et al., 2022).

These findings are further supported by the study of Auliannisa and Hatta (2021), which showed that university students who use Instagram and frequently engage in social comparison tend to experience depression. A similar conclusion was reached by Tedjawidjaja and Christanti (2022), who found that social comparison increases psychological distress. The majority of respondents in this study were 23-year-old university students, which is in line with Gunawan et al. (2022), who stated that younger individuals with higher levels of education are more vulnerable to mental health problems resulting from social media use. The duration of social media use of more than three hours

found in this study supports the findings of Riehm et al. (2020) and Shiraly et al. (2024), who stated that the longer the time spent on social media, the greater the potential for psychological distress due to excessive information exposure.

Afriana and Virgonita (2024) and Samra and Dryer (2024) stated that high levels of social comparison are associated with increased psychological distress, as indicated by feelings of dissatisfaction, inferiority, and emotional pressure. Xu and Li (2024) also reported that social comparison can significantly increase anxiety. Festinger (1954) explained that when individuals feel left behind by the comparison target, they are driven to adjust themselves. When such pressure creates psychological discomfort, individuals may stop making comparisons and express their frustration through sarcastic behavior (Dionigi et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2021). Hu et al. (2024) and Okano and Nomura (2023) emphasized that social comparison, when carried out in a healthy and moderate manner, may help individuals evaluate themselves without triggering anxiety. The findings of this study, together with those of previous studies, indicate that social comparison plays a significant role in triggering psychological distress and encouraging the emergence of sarcastic behavior among social media users. These results provide an important basis for drawing conclusions regarding the relationship among the three variables examined in this study.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that social comparison has a significant effect on psychological distress among individuals who engage in sarcasm on social media. The behavior of comparing oneself with others has been shown to contribute to the emergence of emotional strain, internal tension, and psychological discomfort. These conditions subsequently influence the way individuals express themselves, including through the use of sarcasm as a response to negative experiences in the digital environment. This finding confirms that the dynamics of online interaction not only shape patterns of communication, but also have a direct impact on users' mental well-being.

This study offers several important implications. Social media users are encouraged to become more aware of their tendency to engage in social comparison and to understand its potential negative effects on psychological conditions. Such awareness is expected to help individuals use social media in a healthier, wiser, and more controlled manner. For future researchers, it is recommended to involve a larger sample size and to consider a wider range of social media platforms in order to obtain a broader understanding of this phenomenon. Future studies are also expected to explore other factors that may influence the relationship between social comparison and psychological distress, so that both theoretical and practical understanding of this issue can develop more comprehensively.

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