

SOCIAL COMPARISON, VALIDATION SEEKING, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed social interaction among young adults, increasing exposure to social dependence on external validation. The processes of seeking comparison and seeking validation can negatively impact mental well-being through the means of these different states of being a young adult. The current research examined the relationships between social comparison, validation seeking, and psychological distress in young adults. Using a correlational research method, the researchers collected data from 327 participants through convenient sampling, from age range 18 to 25 using self-report survey tools designed to assess the Social Comparison Orientation, Validation Seeking, and Psychological Distress. Pearson Correlational Analysis showed significant positive correlation between social comparison and psychological distress and Validation seeking also showed a significant positive correlation with psychological distress. Additionally, social comparison was significantly positively correlated with validation seeking among young adults. Regression Analysis on the dependent variables to evaluate their predictive value, which showed that social comparison was a stronger predictor of psychological distress than validation seeking. The results indicate that young adults who depend on outside evaluations of themselves as well as engaging in frequent self-comparisons may be more likely to experience an increased level of emotional vulnerability. The findings indicated that steps should be taken to apply preventive measures and implement interventions that support young adults by promoting the use of adaptive self-evaluative methods in order to regain control of their mental health status.

Keywords: *Social comparison, validation seeking, psychological distress, young adults, mental health*

INTRODUCTION

Young Adulthood is the transitional phase of development which focus on growth, independence, and exploration of identity as well as one's relationship to society through social evaluation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). During this period, youngsters are required to navigate academic pressures, interpersonal relationships, and career-related uncertainties, which may place them at an increased risk for psychological distress (Freeman, 2022). Recent studies indicate a global rise in psychological distress for young adults, particularly in light of increased use of digital and social media platforms to interact with others and evaluate themselves. (Twenge et al., 2020). Young people are particularly influenced by social comparison to others, as evidenced by survey that reveal a very high frequency of social comparisons made by young people (Keles et al., 2019), especially on online platforms, in which they tend to show themselves in idealized versions of their lives as being successful, attractive, healthy, and happy. (Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Yang et al., 2021). Researches consistently shows that frequent heightened social comparison is associated with increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional exhaustion (Samra et al., 2022).

People may perceive themselves to be inferior or unsuccessful in relation to their peers due to exposure to curated online material and how they themselves compare to their peers on social media platforms (Mougharbel et al., 2023).

Social comparisons are one of the cognitive vulnerabilities in relation to mental distress. Young adults who regularly compare their successes, physical attractiveness, and social activities with those of their peers have higher levels of stress and less psychological health (Tian, 2024). More recent studies conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that increased use of the internet led to an increase in the tendency to compare oneself with others, leading to increased levels of distress among young adults. (Sun et al., 2023; Xing et al., 2025).

Validation-seeking is the act of looking to others to provide reassurance, support, and acceptance to help manage self-worth and our emotional states. Current literature describes validation-seeking behaviour as maladaptive since it makes self-esteem dependent on validation from outside sources (validation-seeking behaviour) if the individual seeks reassurance excessively. (Kim et al., 2022; Kelly & Carter, 2022). Young adults who seek validation from others are more likely to become emotionally unstable and develop fears of rejection and sensitivity to interpersonal relationships. (Marshall et al., 2020; Li & Samp, 2023).

Validation-seeking behaviour is significantly associated with psychological distress related to anxiety and depression. Those who regularly rely on external sources of validation experience distress when they do not receive compliance due to either delay, inconsistency, or lack of compliance. The result of these behaviours is often ruminative thought processes and poor emotional regulation (Kim et al., 2022; Yoon, 2024). In addition, the search for validation has been shown to interact with the social comparison process, such that individuals who view themselves negatively relative to others will increase their search for validation in an attempt to mitigate feelings of inadequacy (Sun, 2025).

Psychological distress encompasses a variety of different types of emotional pain or discomfort as well as stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms associated with an individual's difficulty functioning from day to day. According to reports issued about global mental health statistics, currently, younger adults are at greater risk for psychological distress due to both the transitional periods of development and the growing number of societal pressures placed upon them. (World Health Organization, 2022). From empirical research completed, it has been determined that two maladaptive cognitive as well as interpersonal behaviours have contributed significantly to emotional distress. Excessive social comparison and excessive validation-seeking behaviours have impaired an individual's ability to regulate their emotions, leading to a decrease in their level of health, happiness, and self-worth (Ye et al., 2025).

Social comparison behaviors and validation-seeking behaviors are related to higher levels of psychological distress. However, only a limited number of studies have examined the combined predictive effects of these two behaviours on young adult populations who are not in clinical care. In order to create a better preventive mental health intervention for this age group, we must first understand how the behaviours of social comparison and validation seeking together impact on psychological distress. As such, this current study wishes to explore the impact or relationship of social comparison, validation seeking, and psychological distress in young adult community-based populations.

Rationale of the Study

Young adulthood is an important stage of life marked by identity development, growing independence, and greater concern about how others view them. During this time, individuals often compare themselves with others and seek approval as they try to understand who they are and

where they belong. Although these behaviors are common, relying too much on comparison and external validation can increase emotional sensitivity and psychological distress. In Pakistan, cultural values such as collectivism, strong family expectations, and the importance of social approval may further increase self-evaluation, making young adults more sensitive to others' opinions. Although international research has shown that social comparison and validation seeking are linked to psychological distress, very little research exists in the Pakistani context. Cultural values, gender expectations, and social relationships in Pakistan may shape how young adults compare themselves with others, seek approval, and manage emotional problems. Studying these processes within a local setting is important to avoid relying only on findings from Western cultures. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between social comparison, validation seeking, and psychological distress among young adults in Pakistan. The findings may help guide culturally appropriate mental health interventions and support strategies for young adults.

Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the connection between social comparison, validation seeking, and psychological distress among young adults
2. To evaluate the predictive role of social comparison, validation seeking in explaining psychological distress among young adults.

Hypotheses

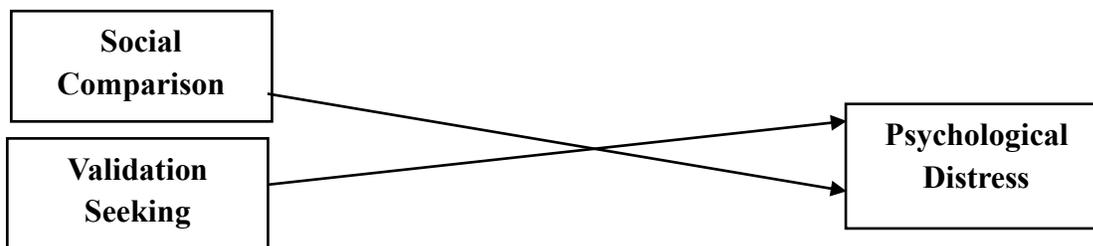
Based on the evidences, the present research hypothesizes that:

1. There would be significant relationship between social comparison, validation seeking, and psychological distress among young adults.
2. Social comparison and validation seeking are significant predictors of psychological distress among young adults.

Conceptual Model

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Research



RESEARCH METHODS

Sample

The sample consisted of 223 young adults aged 18–25 years, recruited from universities using convenience sampling. Both male and female participants were included.

Demographic Information Sheet

A self-report demographic information sheet was used to obtain data regarding participants' age, gender, educational level, marital status, and family system, and residence. These variables were included to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' background characteristics and contextual factors relevant to psychological distress.

Instruments

Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure [INCOM; (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999)]

Social Comparison Orientation refers to a stable individual difference in the extent to which people compare their abilities, opinions, and personal characteristics with those of others in order to evaluate themselves. The INCOM was designed to assess how frequently individuals engage in social comparison in everyday life and how important such comparisons are for self-evaluation. The INCOM consists of 11 items that assess comparison of abilities and opinions. Respondents indicate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher total scores indicate a greater tendency to engage in social comparison. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) reported good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .85$.

Interpersonal Dependency Inventory [IDI, (Hirschfeld et al., 1977)]

Validation seeking was assessed using the Validation Seeking subscale of the Interpersonal Dependency Inventory (IDI) developed by Hirschfeld et al. (1977). Validation seeking is a maladaptive form of interpersonal dependency characterized by an excessive need for reassurance, approval, and acceptance from others in order to maintain self-esteem and emotional security. The Validation Seeking subscale consists of 8 items that specifically assess the extent to which individuals rely on others for affirmation and reassurance. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). Higher scores indicate a stronger tendency toward validation seeking. Hirschfeld et al. (1977) reported acceptable internal consistency for the validation seeking subscale, with Cronbach's alpha values approximately .78.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale [K10, (Kessler et al., 2002)]

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) is a standardized scale that measures emotional distress. Psychological Distress includes all types of negative emotional states, including anxiety, depression, anxiousness, hopelessness, restlessness, and fatigue (Kessler et al., 2002). The scale is intended for use in the community or non-clinical population and was designed to assess an individual's psychological distress in a quick and easy manner. The K10 consists of ten items that cover how often an individual experienced symptoms of psychological distress over the previous four weeks. Each of these items can be rated on a five-point Likert scale from none of the time (1) to all of the time (5). Higher total scores indicate greater psychological distress. The scale is unidimensional and does not contain formal subscales. Kessler et al. (2002) reported excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .88.

Procedure

After obtaining institutional ethical approval, data were collected from students enrolled in different universities and higher learning institutions. Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained through an official authority letter issued by the Department of Psychology to seek approval from the respective academic administrators. To allow participants to access the study in as many ways as possible, the researchers used both direct contact within university classrooms and indirect contact through online platforms. Participants were told the study's purpose and had the opportunity to participate voluntarily in this study. Each participant was informed that the responses on their questionnaires would only be used to help the researchers understand this topic and was guaranteed that all of the responses provided by each participant would remain confidential. Before the researcher provided the questionnaire to each participant, each participant had to sign a written informed consent document. The only participants who participated in the study were those undergraduate students aged 18-25 who agreed to the research. Participants were provided with a demographic information sheet followed by the Social Comparison Orientation

Scale, Validation Seeking Scale, and Psychological Distress Scale. The questionnaires were administered in both paper-and-pencil and online formats to accommodate participants' convenience. Clear instructions were given, informed consent was taken and participants were encouraged to respond honestly. The researcher remained available to address any questions or concerns raised during data collection. The average time required to complete the questionnaires was approximately 15–20 minutes.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographics Profile (N= 223)

Respondent's Characteristics	N	%	M (SD)
Age (years)			24.18 (1.63)
Gender			
Male	110	49.3	
Female	113	50.7	
Educational Level			
BS	169	75.8	
MS	54	24.2	
Marital Status			
Single	197	88.3	
Married	26	11.7	
Family System			
Nuclear	103	44.2	
Joint	120	55.8	
Residence			
Rural	89	39.9	
Urban	134	60.1	

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

Table 1 shows that the average age of the participants was about 24 years (SD = 1.63), which indicates that the sample represented young adults well. Female participants made up slightly more of the sample (50.7%) compared to males (49.3%). Most participants were enrolled in BS programs (75.8%), while only a small number were studying at the MS level (24.2%). The majority of participants were single (88.3%), and a smaller group was married (11.7%). Most participants came from joint families (55.8%), followed by those from nuclear family systems (44.2%). Most participants lived in urban areas (60.1%), while fewer lived in rural areas (39.9%).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Sr.	Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1	Social Comparison	43.12	7.68	—	.49**	.58**
2	Validation Seeking	29.36	6.05	—	—	.53**
3	Psychological Distress	32.41	8.74	—	—	—

Note. $p < .01$

The Pearson correlation analysis is given in Table 2. Results indicated a significant positive association between social comparison and psychological distress. There was also a significant positive relationship between validation-seeking and psychological distress. Additionally, social comparison was found to be positively correlated with validation-seeking. Overall, the findings of this study support hypothesis one.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Psychological Distress among Young Adults (N = 223)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	CI
Social Comparison	0.74	0.09	0.46	8.22	.000**	0.56 – 0.92
Validation Seeking	0.52	0.08	0.34	6.31	.000**	0.36 – 0.68
R ²	.45**					
ΔR^2	.44					
F	132.87					

Note. $p < .01$; CI = Confidence Interval

Table 3 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis used to examine social comparison and validation seeking as predictors of psychological distress among young adults. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 324) = 132.87, p < .001$. The model explained 45% of the variance in psychological distress, which indicates a strong model fit. Social comparison was a significant positive predictor of psychological distress ($B = 0.74, \beta = 0.46, p < .001$). This shows that higher levels of social comparison are linked to greater psychological distress. Validation seeking also emerged as a significant positive predictor ($B = 0.52, \beta = 0.34, p < .001$), indicating that greater dependence on external approval is associated with increased distress. A comparison of standardized beta values shows that social comparison is a stronger predictor of psychological distress than validation seeking. These findings suggest that young adults who often compare themselves with others and rely on validation are more likely to experience emotional distress.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored how social comparison and validation seeking are related to psychological distress among young adults. The results clearly supported all three hypotheses. Overall, the findings align with existing psychological research, suggesting that self-evaluation and interpersonal factors play an important role in emotional well-being during young adulthood. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, social comparison showed a significant positive relationship with psychological distress. This indicates that young adults who often compare themselves with others tend to experience greater emotional difficulties. Previous studies have also shown that frequent social comparison, especially comparing oneself to people perceived as better off, is linked to

higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress in young adults (Samra et al., 2022). Social media further increases these comparison tendencies by constantly presenting idealized images of others' lives, which can negatively influence self-view and increase feelings of inadequacy (Fioravanti et al., 2022). The strong association found in this study supports cognitive perspectives suggesting that social comparison can act as a risk factor for psychological distress by encouraging negative self-judgments and repetitive negative thinking (Beck & Haigh, 2014).

In line with Hypothesis 1, social comparison and validation seeking showed a significant positive association with psychological distress. This means that young adults who depend too much on others' approval tend to experience more emotional problems. Research shows that validation seeking is linked to self-worth that depends on external feedback. When approval is missing or inconsistent, individuals become emotionally vulnerable (Kelly & Carter, 2022; Park & Baumeister, 2023). Previous studies also report that high validation seeking is related to anxiety, fear of negative judgment, and depressive symptoms, especially in situations where people feel evaluated by others (Rosenfeld et al., 2021; Li & Samp, 2023). The findings of the present study support the idea that excessive validation seeking weakens emotional control and increases psychological distress during young adulthood.

The hierarchical regression analysis further supported Hypothesis 2. It showed that social comparison and validation seeking together predicted psychological distress, even after controlling for age. The final model explained a large amount of variance in psychological distress, which shows a strong predictive relationship. Social comparison appeared as the strongest predictor, indicating that comparison with others plays a more important role in emotional distress than validation seeking alone. This finding is in line with recent studies showing that comparison-based self-evaluation has a strong and direct effect on emotional well-being (Sun et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). The combined effect of social comparison and validation seeking suggests that these processes may reinforce each other. Young adults who compare themselves with others often develop negative views about themselves. This can lead them to seek reassurance from others. Over time, this dependence on validation may increase sensitivity to comparison, which further increases emotional distress (Ye et al., 2025). This pattern supports self-determination theory, which suggests that reliance on external approval weakens autonomy and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

These findings also reflect broader research showing a global rise in psychological distress among young adults, partly due to increased social pressure and digital exposure (Pera, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). The present study adds to this literature by highlighting social comparison and validation seeking as key psychological factors linked to distress during young adulthood. From a clinical point of view, these results have important implications. Interventions should help young adults reduce unhealthy comparison and build self-worth from internal sources. Cognitive-behavioral techniques, along with education about social media use, may help lower distress. Promoting self-compassion and emotional independence may also reduce the need for external validation.

The study has some limitations. Its cross-sectional design limits causal conclusions, and self-report measures may affect accuracy. Future research should use longitudinal methods to better understand these relationships over time. Despite these limits, the study offers valuable insight into young adult mental health and identifies clear targets for prevention and intervention.

Conclusion

People who use social comparison and seek validation from others often experience psychological distress as young adults. Those who often compare themselves negatively with peers are also likely

to experience higher levels of psychological distress than individuals that do not rely on this Method to measure how good or bad they feel about themselves. In particular, early adulthood is the most impactful time that emotional well-being has to be developed as a result of unhealthy social comparisons. In addition, these findings add support to the theory that promoting internal sources of self-esteem in our society should be an integral component of the development of Positive Mental Health. In order to change maladaptive comparison tendencies, mental health services should include a psychoeducational component.

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