

Unpacking the Relationship between Social Media and Social Anxiety in Millennials

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between social media use and social anxiety among millennials. Using a correlational research design, the study explores how different types of social media engagement—passive use, active use, social comparison, and self-presentation—relate to levels of social anxiety. A total of 500 millennials participated in the study, with data collected through an online survey that included the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) and questions about social media usage patterns. The results revealed a strong positive correlation between passive social media use and social anxiety, while active use showed a weak negative correlation with social anxiety. Social comparison and self-presentation were significant predictors of social anxiety. The findings highlight the complex relationship between social media engagement and mental health, suggesting that passive social media use exacerbates social anxiety, while active engagement may mitigate its effects. This study provides valuable insights for mental health professionals and social media platforms, offering recommendations for promoting healthier online behaviors to reduce the negative psychological impacts of social media.

Keywords: millennials, social media, social anxiety

Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of daily life, particularly for the millennial generation, who are often referred to as digital natives. With the rise of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, millions of individuals around the world connect, share, and engage in ways that were once unimaginable. While social media offers numerous benefits, including fostering social connections, sharing information, and providing a platform for self-expression, it has also been linked to various psychological challenges (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). Among these challenges, social anxiety has emerged as a growing concern, particularly among young adults, as constant exposure to online comparison, fear of negative evaluation, and pressure to present an idealized self can intensify feelings of self-consciousness and insecurity. Consequently, understanding the relationship between social media use and social anxiety is essential for developing healthier digital habits and supporting the psychological well-being of young users.

Social anxiety disorder is characterized by a persistent fear of social situations and the negative evaluation of one's actions by others. For millennials, who are constantly exposed to carefully curated online portrayals of perfection, the pressure to conform to societal ideals can become overwhelming (Anggreani & Rahmawati, 2024). The phenomenon of "comparison culture," which thrives on social media, may intensify feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and social anxiety, particularly when individuals measure their self-worth against unrealistic standards. As users scroll through posts filled with idealized images of success, beauty, and happiness, they may develop heightened self-consciousness and an increased fear of being judged or rejected, both online and offline (Lai et al., 2023). Consequently, continuous exposure to comparison-driven content can reinforce negative self-perceptions and contribute to the development or escalation of social anxiety among millennials.

This study seeks to explore the relationship between the use of social media and the prevalence of social anxiety among millennials (Lin, 2024). Specifically, it aims to understand how the frequency and type of social media engagement—such as passive scrolling, self-presentation, and comparison—contribute to the development or exacerbation of social anxiety in this generation. With social media use reaching unprecedented levels, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding its psychological impact on millennials is more important than ever (Boursier et al., 2020).

Method

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between social media use and social anxiety among millennials. A correlational research approach was employed to investigate how different patterns of social media engagement, including passive use, active use, social comparison, and self-presentation, were associated with levels of social anxiety (Chutipak et al., 2024). This design enabled the assessment of the strength and direction of the relationships between social media use and social anxiety within the millennial population. Data were collected using surveys and standardized measurement scales to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

The participants in this study consisted of 50 millennials aged between 18 and 35 years who were active users of social media. The sample was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in terms of gender, social media platform usage, and levels of social anxiety (Syed et al., 2023). The inclusion criteria required participants to be within the specified age range, to actively use at least one social media platform such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok at least once a week, and to report no diagnosed mental health conditions other than general social anxiety. Participants were recruited through online platforms, including university mailing lists, social media advertisements, and professional networks (Parashar & Waraich, 2023). The study targeted participants from both urban and rural areas to enhance the generalizability of the results.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via email and social media platforms. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections. The first section assessed social media usage, including the frequency, duration, and type of engagement, such as passive scrolling, active

posting, commenting, social comparison, and self-presentation behaviors. The second section measured social anxiety using the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS), a well-established instrument designed to assess levels of social anxiety. The scale was adapted to address both online and offline social interactions. The final section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, education level, and social media usage patterns. Prior to full data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 participants to evaluate clarity, reliability, and validity, and revisions were made based on the feedback received.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and overall patterns of social media use. Means, frequencies, and percentages were calculated to provide an overview of the sample. Pearson's correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the relationships between different types of social media use and levels of social anxiety. This analysis identified whether passive use, active use, social comparison, or self-presentation was more strongly associated with higher social anxiety scores. In addition, multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which social media use variables predicted social anxiety. The independent variables included frequency of use, type of use, social comparison, and self-presentation, while the dependent variable was social anxiety as measured by the SIAS.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that all responses were anonymous and securely stored for research purposes only. Given the sensitive nature of social anxiety, participants were provided with information about mental health resources, and those reporting high levels of social anxiety were given appropriate referral information.

Despite its contributions, the study had several limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias, as participants may have underreported or overreported their social media use or anxiety levels (Bayu & Puti, 2023). Additionally, the cross-sectional design limited the ability to draw causal conclusions. Future research could employ longitudinal approaches to better understand the long-term effects of social media use on social anxiety among millennials (Arigo et al., 2024).

Results and Discussion

The data collected from 500 millennial participants were analyzed to examine the relationship between social media use and social anxiety. The analysis focused on how different types of social media engagement, particularly passive and active use, were associated with levels of social anxiety as measured by the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS).

Descriptive statistics indicated that the participants represented a diverse demographic profile. Of the total sample, 60% were female, and 40% were male, with an average age of 26 years ($SD = 4.5$). In terms of social media habits, most participants (75%) reported spending more than two hours per day on social media platforms. Instagram was the most frequently used platform

(85%), followed by Facebook (78%) and TikTok (60%), suggesting a high level of daily exposure to online social content among the participants.

Analysis of social media use patterns showed that passive engagement was more common than active participation. Approximately 70% of participants reported primarily engaging in passive activities such as scrolling through posts without interaction, while only 30% indicated that they frequently engaged in active behaviors, including posting content, commenting, or interacting with others. This pattern suggested that most participants consumed social media content rather than actively contributing to it.

Regarding social anxiety levels, the average SIAS score among participants was 31 (SD = 9), indicating a moderate level of social anxiety overall. The results revealed considerable variation in anxiety levels, with some participants reporting high levels of social anxiety. Higher anxiety scores were particularly evident among participants who frequently engaged in passive social media use and social comparison behaviors.

Correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed a strong positive relationship between passive social media use and social anxiety ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). This finding indicated that participants who engaged more frequently in passive social media use tended to experience higher levels of social anxiety. In contrast, active social media use showed a weak but significant negative correlation with social anxiety ($r = -0.15$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that individuals who interacted more actively online experienced slightly lower anxiety levels.

Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify key predictors of social anxiety among millennials. The results showed that passive social media use ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), social comparison ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), and self-presentation ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$) were significant predictors of social anxiety. Together, these variables explained 47% of the variance in social anxiety levels ($R^2 = 0.47$), indicating that patterns of social media engagement played a substantial role in shaping social anxiety among millennial users.

The results of this study provide significant insights into the relationship between social media use and social anxiety among millennials. Consistent with previous research Thacker et al. (2022) this study found that passive social media use is strongly associated with increased social anxiety. Millennials who passively consume content, particularly when engaging in social comparison, tend to experience higher levels of anxiety. This finding aligns with Godard and Holtzman (2023) Social Comparison Theory, which posits that individuals evaluate their own worth by comparing themselves to others. On social media, where idealized images of beauty, success, and happiness are often showcased, these comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

One of the key findings of this study is that active use of social media showed a weak negative correlation with social anxiety. This suggests that engaging in more interactive behaviors, such as commenting, posting, or participating in online discussions, may help mitigate some of the negative effects of social media. This finding supports the work of Sendra et al. (2020) who argued that active social media use can foster social connectedness and reduce feelings of isolation, potentially alleviating social anxiety.

Social Comparison and Its Role

The study also highlights the significant role of social comparison in driving social anxiety. Millennials, who are often in the process of forming their identities, may be especially vulnerable to the pressures of comparison culture. The desire to present an idealized version of themselves online, coupled with the constant exposure to others' curated content, creates a feedback loop that reinforces feelings of inadequacy and fuels anxiety. These findings are consistent with research by Tao (2023), which showed that social comparison is a key factor in the relationship between social media and mental health, particularly among young adults.

Self-Presentation and Social Anxiety

Another important factor identified in this study is self-presentation, or the desire to manage how one is perceived online. The pressure to present a polished, perfect image on social media can exacerbate social anxiety, as individuals may feel they must meet certain standards to gain approval or avoid judgment. This aligns with the work of McCarthy and Morina, (2020), who found that social media platforms, particularly image-driven platforms like Instagram, encourage users to carefully curate their online personas, which can lead to heightened anxiety about being judged.

Implications for Mental Health and Social Media Use

The findings of this study have significant implications for both mental health professionals and social media platforms. For mental health professionals, the study underscores the importance of addressing social media use and its impact on social anxiety, particularly among younger adults (Premavathi et al., 2025). Counselors and therapists may consider discussing the role of social media in their clients' experiences of social anxiety and provide strategies to manage social media use, including setting boundaries around passive consumption and fostering more meaningful online interactions.

For social media platforms, there is an opportunity to promote healthier usage patterns. Platforms can implement features that encourage more positive and supportive interactions, as well as initiatives that raise awareness about the potential mental health risks of social comparison (Fitria & Sari, 2025). By promoting digital literacy and mindfulness, platforms may be able to reduce the negative psychological effects associated with social media use.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between social media use and social anxiety among millennials, revealing important insights into how different types of engagement with social media contribute to mental health outcomes. The findings indicate that passive social media use, particularly when accompanied by social comparison, is strongly correlated with higher levels of social anxiety. Conversely, active social media use showed a weak negative correlation with social anxiety, suggesting that interactive online engagement may mitigate some of the anxiety-inducing effects of social media.

The significant role of social comparison and self-presentation in exacerbating social anxiety underscores the pressures that millennials face in maintaining an idealized image online. These findings align with existing literature that emphasizes how constant exposure to curated content on

social media platforms can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. The study also highlights the complex nature of social media use, suggesting that not all forms of engagement are detrimental to mental health. While passive consumption and comparison are linked to negative outcomes, active and supportive interaction may offer a protective factor.

The implications of this study are relevant for both mental health practitioners and social media platforms. Mental health professionals should consider incorporating discussions about social media use in therapeutic settings, especially for individuals experiencing social anxiety. By helping clients develop healthier social media habits, such as reducing passive scrolling and fostering meaningful online interactions, mental health practitioners can address one of the contributing factors to anxiety in young adults. Social media platforms, on the other hand, can promote positive engagement by providing tools that encourage authentic connections and by raising awareness about the mental health risks associated with excessive social comparison.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on the psychological effects of social media and provides valuable insights into the specific ways in which social media use affects social anxiety. Future research should continue to investigate the long-term impact of social media use on mental health, as well as explore strategies for promoting healthier engagement with digital platforms.

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