# Social media social comparison and identity distress at the college transition: A dual-path model

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

*Introduction:* Social media provide a convenient platform for social comparison, an activity that should play an important role in youth's identity development at the transition to college. Yet, the identity implications of online social comparison have not been thoroughly explored. Drawing on the theories of social comparison, introspective processes, and identity distress, we examined a dual-path model. The paths from two types of social media social comparison (i.e., comparison of ability and comparison of opinion) to two introspective processes (i.e., rumination and reflection) and finally to identity distress were tested.

*Methods:* Short-term longitudinal survey data were collected from 219 college freshmen at a state university in the United States of America ($M_{age}$ = 18.29, *S.D.* = 0.75; 74% female; 41% White, 38% Black).

*Results:* Social comparison of ability on social media had a positive association with concurrent rumination, which predicted higher identity distress. In contrast, social comparison of opinion on social media had a positive relationship with concurrent reflection, which, however, did not predict identity distress.

*Conclusion:* Results indicate that different types of online social comparison yield distinct implications for young people's identity development. Largely, the study reaffirms the recently rising call for distinguishing the competition-based social comparison of ability from the information-based social comparison of opinion. At the same time, the study expands current knowledge of why these forms of social comparison may lead to differential outcomes, namely through the type of introspection they induce.

Identity development is a major developmental task for adolescents and emerging adults (Arnett, 2014; Erikson, 1968). The task seems particularly challenging in modern society, where major socio-cultural changes make it a more complicated issue (Berman & Weems, 2011). For instance, scholars have discussed how globalization and economic recessions may require more time for identity exploration and delay youth's identity commitment and integration (Arnett, 2002; Sica, Sestito, & Ragozini, 2014). This study turned to the growth of social media as another contributor to the complexity of identity negotiation in the digital age. Specifically, it explored the identity implications of a widely experienced behavior on social media—social comparison, the process of comparing oneself with others as a way to understand and evaluate oneself (Festinger, 1954).

Identity development in the social media context is typically studied through the lens of online self-presentation (e.g., Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015; Yang & Brown, 2016). Research of online

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social comparison, on the other hand, mostly focuses on its relationship with psycho-emotional rather than identity outcomes. Yet, social comparison has been described as an important component in the construction of self-concept and attainment of self-knowledge (Harter, 2012; Rosenberg, 1979), making the lack of attention to the identity implications of social comparison on social media surprising. In particular, social comparison can provide a vital tool for identity development by fostering adolescents' knowledge of themselves, but it can also undermine adolescents' sense of self-adequacy, particularly as they evaluate themselves relative to their peers' positive self-presentation on social media.

The act of social comparison can be divided into two forms: the judgmental, competition-based social comparison of ability and the non-judgmental, information-based social comparison of opinion (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2000, 2002). The two appear to involve different introspective processes, rumination and reflection (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999), which may exacerbate or alleviate the distress young people experience in their identity exploration and construction. Drawing on the theories of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), introspective processes (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999), and identity distress (Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004), this study examined a dual-path model, in which the two types of social comparison (ability and opinion) on social media were hypothesized to predict identity distress through rumination and reflection, respectively.

Based on our short-term longitudinal survey data, the model was tested with a sample of college freshmen, as the transition to college presents a heightened need for identity construction (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Thomas, Briggs, Hart, & Kerrigan, 2017) and can cause identity distress when college freshmen become too overwhelmed to develop a coherent sense of self. The goal of the study was to clarify how the two types of social comparison may relate to young people's identity experience in the digital age at a major developmental transition.

# 1. Background

## 1.1. Identity distress

Identity distress is defined as "severe subjective distress regarding inability to reconcile aspects of the self into a relatively coherent and acceptable sense of self" (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 65). Identity distress is associated with low self-esteem, more mental health issues (Samuolis, Barcellos, LaFlam, Belson, & Berard, 2015; Sica et al., 2014), and greater severity of psychological symptoms (Berman, Weems, & Petkus, 2009). Originally, this experience was conceptualized as the core feature of broader psychological disorders associated with identity, such as the Identity Disorder mentioned in the DSM-III and III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1987). In the DSM-V, although identity distress is no longer listed as a distinct disorder, characteristics associated with identity distress, such as impairment in self-direction, are recognized as key components across personality and dissociative disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The change in the DSM-V implies a more prominent position of identity problems in the current version of the DSM. In addition to its clinical implications, identity distress can also be experienced by those without a clinically diagnosable set of symptoms, and the mild to moderate distress surrounding identity formation can still lead to maladaptive consequences over time (Berman et al., 2004). Given the plethora of pressures and conflicts modern society presents, identity distress appears to be a common problem for today's youth (Berman et al., 2004). Compared to previous generations, individuals are now faced with an ever-increasing number of choices about what they value and how they want to live (Berman et al., 2009), in part because society has become much more complex, diverse, and interconnected (Arnett, 2002; Berman et al., 2004).

Identity distress may be especially salient for those in times of transition, when identity is less firmly defined amidst familiar people and contexts. The college transition presents one such period. This transition often entails a sense of loss and discontinuity, as students leave behind familiar environments and social supports, lose some of their previous sense of belonging, and reconstruct their knowledge of themselves and their contexts (Chow & Healey, 2008; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). This is mirrored by the general identity trajectories mentioned in Kroger, Martinussen, and Marcia's (2010) meta-analysis, in which the authors found that from late adolescence to young adulthood, there was a growing proportion of youth reaching the identity achievement status. The initial lack of identity achievement at the ages of 18 and 19 may coincide with the transition into college, which requires significant individual effort as freshmen make adjustments based on their new context. In the digital age, the transition to college is further complicated by the rich materials for social comparison available on social media. Depending on how students approach these materials, the media may provide opportunities to ameliorate identity distress or present risks that exacerbate it.

## 1.2. Social comparison on social media

In the absence of objective verifications of individual attributes, people seek information about themselves through social comparison, particularly by evaluating their abilities and opinions against comparable others' (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison of ability and that of opinion differ in the manner of how the comparison is performed. The competition-based social comparison of ability is inherently judgmental. When people engage in this type of comparison, they view the comparison targets as competitors (Park & Baek, 2018) and assess whether their own performance or achievement is superior or inferior to the targets' (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). In contrast, during the information-based social comparison of opinion, individuals view comparison targets as informants, consultants, or role models (Park & Baek, 2018). They attend to the similarities and differences (rather than superiority and inferiority) of attitudes, beliefs, and values between themselves and the targets, and determine whether they might make adjustments to their own perspectives (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Suls et al., 2000).