

**SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON SOCIAL COMPARISON AND SELF CRITICISM AMONG  
GENZ AND MILLENNIALS**

*Dissertation Submitted to University of Kerala*

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of*

**M.Sc. counselling psychology**

**By**

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## CERTIFICATE



This is to certify that the project report entitled " *Social Media Use on Social Comparison and Self-Criticism Among Gen Z and Millennials*" is an authentic record of research carried out by Athira Sankar B S , a final year postgraduate student of the Department of counselling Psychology, Loyola College of Social Sciences, Thiruvananthapuram, under my guidance and supervision, to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of Master of Science in Counselling Psychology.

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the project work titled " Social Media Use on Social Comparison and Self-Criticism Among Gen Z and Millennials" has been undertaken by me for the award of Master of Science in Counselling Psychology. I have completed my study under the supervision of Anila Daniel, Guest faculty, Department of counselling Psychology, Loyola College of Social Sciences, Thiruvananthapuram. I also declare that no part of this dissertation has been submitted before for the award of any degree, diploma or fellowship or any other title in any university.

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## ABSTARCT

This quantitative study investigates the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among young adults, focusing on generational differences between Millennials and Generation Z. A correlational-comparative research design was adopted, involving a purposive sample of 240 participants (N=120 Gen Z; N=120 Millennials) aged between 13 to 44 years, who are active users of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. The study employed the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS), the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), and the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC) to assess patterns of digital engagement, tendencies toward self-evaluation, and psychological outcomes. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between social media use and social comparison among Gen Z, while no significant relationships were found between social media use and self-criticism or between social comparison and self-criticism in this group. Among Millennials, a significant positive correlation emerged between social comparison and self-criticism, though social media use was not significantly related to either. Furthermore, Mann-Whitney U test results indicated statistically significant generational differences across all three variables, with Gen Z reporting higher levels of social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism than Millennials. These results suggest that social media impacts psychological processes differently across generational lines, highlighting the need for age-specific digital wellness interventions and mental health strategies. The study underscores the importance of understanding generational digital behavior in shaping emotional well-being and self-perception in the era of social media.

*Key words: social media use, social comparison, self-criticism, genz, and millennials*



## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media has emerged as a critical area of concern within the field of mental health, especially among young adults. As digital platforms become increasingly embedded in daily life, they not only facilitate communication and selfexpression but also introduce complex psychological challenges. The curated and idealized content commonly encountered on social media often fosters environments ripe for upward social comparison, where individuals measure their lives against selectively positive portrayals of others. This can lead to distorted self-perceptions, increased self-criticism, and reduced emotional well-being (Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2016). These issues are particularly relevant for Millennials and Gen Z, who represent the most active social media users and are therefore more vulnerable to its psychological impacts. Furthermore, the generational differences in digital exposure and engagement highlight the need for deeper investigation into how social media uniquely affects each group. Understanding these patterns is essential for designing targeted mental health interventions and promoting healthier digital habits among young populations (Burnell & George, 2022).

Social media has become an integral part of modern communication, fundamentally transforming how individuals interact, share information, and perceive the world around them. Broadly defined, social media refers to web-based and mobile technologies that enable users to create, share, and engage with content in real time. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube allow users to build virtual communities, exchange ideas, and maintain social connections across geographical boundaries. Unlike traditional media, social media promotes interactive communication where users are both consumers and producers of content. Over the past decade, the rapid growth of smartphones and internet access has accelerated the global adoption of social media, making it particularly prevalent among

adolescents and young adults. For younger generations, social media has evolved from a mere entertainment platform into a digital space that influences identity formation, social relationships, and emotional expression. However, with its widespread usage, researchers and mental health professionals have increasingly turned their attention to the psychological effects of social media use. As individuals are frequently exposed to curated and idealized representations of others' lives, they may engage in constant comparison and internalize unrealistic standards, potentially leading to negative self-evaluations and emotional distress. In this context, it becomes crucial to understand both the positive and negative implications of social media use, especially among vulnerable populations like Millennials and Generation Z, who are deeply embedded in digital culture.

#### Advantages of Social Media Use

- Facilitates instant communication and connection with friends and family.
- Provides platforms for creative expression and self-presentation.
- Enhances access to information, news, and educational resources.
- Supports networking, professional development, and career opportunities.
- Promotes social awareness, activism, and community engagement.

#### Disadvantages of Social Media Use

- Encourages social comparison and may lower self-esteem.
- Increase the risk of cyberbullying and online harassment.
- Contributes to screen addiction and reduced face-to-face interactions.
- May cause anxiety, depression, or sleep disturbances in excessive users.

- Often presents unrealistic portrayals of life, leading to self-criticism and dissatisfaction.

Social media, as a phenomenon, represents a significant shift in human communication and interaction, enabling individuals to construct, share, and exchange information and experiences in real time through digital platforms. The term “social media” encompasses a broad range of web-based tools and applications—such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and YouTube—that allow users to create personal profiles, connect with others, and participate in online communities. These platforms function as dynamic spaces for socialization, identity exploration, and self-presentation. Theoretically, social media can be understood through several psychological and sociological lenses. For instance, Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that individuals engage with social media to fulfill specific needs such as entertainment, social connection, information seeking, and identity expression. Meanwhile, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) helps explain the psychological impact of viewing idealized content online, as users often evaluate themselves based on how others appear on these platforms. Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959) is also relevant, as it emphasizes how people curate their online identities to influence how they are perceived by others. Social media’s algorithm-driven content personalization further intensifies its psychological effects, reinforcing users’ beliefs, biases, or insecurities through repeated exposure. Additionally, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can be applied to explain how group affiliations and in-group/out-group dynamics develop in digital communities. As a socio-cultural tool, social media reflects both individual behaviors and broader societal values, shaping norms, trends, and public discourse. While it has revolutionized communication and offered numerous benefits, the immersive and competitive nature of social media also raises important questions about mental health, self-esteem,

emotional regulation, and social connectedness in the digital age. Understanding social media through both theoretical and practical perspectives is essential for comprehending its complex role in contemporary life.

Social comparison is a psychological process in which individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, opinions, and attributes with those of others. First introduced by Leon Festinger in 1954, Social Comparison Theory posits that such comparisons are fundamental to self-assessment and play a crucial role in shaping self-concept, self-esteem, and social behavior. People engage in social comparison to reduce uncertainty about themselves and to understand their position relative to others in a given context. Social comparison can be classified into two main types: upward comparison and downward comparison. Upward comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to others they perceive as better or more successful. While this can inspire motivation and self-improvement, it can also lead to feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem. Downward comparison, on the other hand, involves comparing oneself with those perceived as less fortunate or less capable. This can boost self-esteem and provide a sense of reassurance but may also result in complacency or lack of effort toward personal growth.

The rise of social media has significantly amplified the prevalence and intensity of social comparison. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok showcase curated and idealized versions of people's lives, making upward comparison almost unavoidable. Users often compare their appearance, lifestyle, achievements, and social status to others, which can impact their mental health. Research indicates that constant exposure to highly curated content can lead to negative emotions such as envy, self-criticism, and dissatisfaction with one's own life. While social comparison has its drawbacks, it is not inherently harmful. In some cases, upward comparison can act as a source of motivation. Observing someone achieve a goal can

inspire others to set similar goals and work towards achieving them. Similarly, downward comparison can serve as a coping mechanism, providing comfort during difficult times. The impact of social comparison largely depends on individual perception and emotional regulation.

Social comparison is closely linked to self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem are less likely to be negatively affected by upward comparisons, as they are more resilient and confident in their abilities. Conversely, those with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of comparison, as they may internalize feelings of inadequacy and failure. This highlights the importance of fostering a healthy self-concept to mitigate the negative impacts of social comparison.

Several psychological theories explain the mechanisms and outcomes of social comparison. Feininger's Social Comparison Theory emphasizes the human need for selfevaluation through comparisons with others. The Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) explores how comparisons between one's actual, ideal, and ought selves can influence emotions and behavior. Additionally, the Temporal Comparison Theory (Albert, 1977) suggests that individuals compare their current selves with past versions to measure personal growth or decline. Research on social comparison highlights its far-reaching effects. Studies have found that excessive upward comparison on social media can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that frequent comparisons to idealized images on social media contribute to lower self-esteem and heightened self-criticism. On the other hand, research by Buunk et al. (2007) suggests that moderate levels of comparison can enhance personal goals and aspirations.

The concept of social comparison extends beyond the individual and affects societal dynamics. Comparisons based on income, education, or social status can contribute to systemic inequalities, perpetuating feelings of superiority or inferiority among groups. Social

comparison also plays a role in consumer behavior, influencing purchasing decisions and lifestyle choices. For example, advertising often leverages upward comparisons to create aspirational desires among consumers. social comparison is a natural and pervasive aspect of human psychology. While it can foster self-awareness and motivation, excessive or poorly managed comparison can lead to adverse effects on mental health and well-being. Understanding the dynamics of social comparison, along with its theoretical underpinnings and research findings, is crucial for navigating its influence in personal and social contexts. By cultivating self-compassion and a balanced perspective, individuals can harness the benefits of social comparison while minimizing its potential harms.

Self-criticism is a psychological process in which individuals evaluate themselves negatively, focusing on perceived flaws, mistakes, or inadequacies. It is a common form of selfevaluation that can range from constructive feedback aimed at self-improvement to harsh and debilitating judgments that undermine self-esteem. While self-criticism is often driven by a desire for growth and excellence, excessive or unbalanced self-criticism can lead to significant emotional distress and hinder personal development.

Self-criticism can be classified into two main types: adaptive self-criticism and maladaptive self-criticism. Adaptive self-criticism involves constructive evaluation of one's actions, helping individuals identify areas for improvement and take corrective steps. This form of self-criticism is associated with motivation, resilience, and goal achievement. In contrast, maladaptive self-criticism is characterized by persistent negative self-judgment, often leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness. This type of self-criticism is associated with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

The origins of self-criticism are multifaceted and often rooted in early life experiences. Psychodynamic theories suggest that self-criticism may develop from internalized parental or

societal expectations, where individuals adopt harsh self-judgments to meet perceived standards. Cognitive-behavioral perspectives emphasize the role of negative automatic thoughts and dysfunctional beliefs, where individuals magnify their shortcomings while minimizing their achievements. Additionally, cultural and societal norms that emphasize competition and perfectionism can exacerbate self-critical tendencies. While self-criticism has its drawbacks, it is not inherently negative. Moderate self-criticism can serve as a mechanism for self-awareness, helping individuals recognize their limitations and strive for better performance. For example, constructive self-criticism allows individuals to learn from their mistakes, develop new skills, and achieve personal growth. However, the challenge lies in maintaining a balance between constructive feedback and excessive self-reproach.

Excessive self-criticism can have profound psychological and physiological consequences. Research indicates that individuals who engage in frequent self-criticism are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Self-criticism is also linked to higher levels of stress and lower levels of self-compassion. Physiologically, chronic self-criticism can activate the body's stress response, leading to increased cortisol levels and potential long-term health issues such as cardiovascular problems. The relationship between self-criticism and self-esteem is complex and reciprocal. High levels of self-criticism often lead to diminished self-esteem, as individuals internalize negative self-perceptions. Conversely, low self-esteem can make individuals more susceptible to self-critical thoughts, creating a cycle of negativity. This dynamic highlights the importance of fostering self-compassion and positive self-regard to break the cycle of self-criticism and low self-esteem.

Several psychological theories explain the mechanisms and impact of self-criticism. The Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) posits that self-criticism arises from discrepancies between an individual's actual self and their ideal or ought selves, leading to feelings of failure



and inadequacy. The Attachment Theory suggests that individuals with insecure attachment styles are more prone to self-criticism due to unmet emotional needs and fears of rejection. Cognitive-behavioral models focus on the role of negative thought patterns and schemas, emphasizing the importance of challenging self-critical beliefs. Research on selfcriticism has highlighted its prevalence and impact across different populations. Studies by Blatt and Zuroff (1992) identify self-criticism as a core personality trait associated with vulnerability to depression. Gilbert et al. (2004) found that individuals who engage in selfcriticism often struggle with self-compassion, making them more prone to mental health issues. In contrast, interventions such as mindfulness-based therapies and self-compassion training have shown promise in reducing self-critical tendencies and improving overall wellbeing.

Self-criticism is closely related to social comparison, particularly in the age of social media. Constant exposure to curated and idealized content can amplify self-critical thoughts, as individuals compare themselves unfavorably to others. This dynamic is particularly evident in areas such as body image, career achievements, and social relationships. For instance, studies have found that social media users who frequently engage in upward comparisons are more likely to experience heightened self-criticism and dissatisfaction with their own lives. selfcriticism is a complex and multifaceted psychological phenomenon with both constructive and destructive dimensions. While it can serve as a tool for self-awareness and growth, excessive self-criticism poses significant risks to mental health and well-being. By understanding its origins, effects, and theoretical foundations, individuals can develop strategies to manage selfcriticism effectively. Promoting self-compassion, positive self-regard, and balanced selfevaluation is crucial for mitigating the negative impacts of self-criticism and fostering emotional resilience

Generation Z (Gen Z) refers to individuals born approximately between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s. As the first true digital natives, Gen Z has grown up in a world dominated by smartphones, social media, and instant access to information. Unlike Millennials, who experienced the transition from an analog to a digital world, Gen Z has never known a time without the internet. This has profoundly influenced their communication styles, social interactions, and worldview, making them one of the most connected and tech-savvy generations in history.

One of the defining characteristics of Gen Z is their deep engagement with digital platforms. Social media plays a central role in their lives, with platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat serving as their primary sources of news, entertainment, and social interaction. They prefer short-form, visual content over traditional text-based media, contributing to the rise of memes, video-based storytelling, and influencer culture. Their online presence extends beyond mere consumption, as many Gen Z individuals actively create and share content, shaping digital trends and cultural conversations.

Gen Z is also recognized for its strong sense of identity, inclusivity, and activism. Unlike previous generations, they are more open to discussions on gender identity, mental health, climate change, and social justice issues. They tend to support brands, companies, and organizations that align with their values, showing a preference for ethical consumerism and sustainability. This generation values authenticity and transparency, often favoring influencers and brands that present themselves as relatable and socially responsible.

Another key trait of Gen Z is their adaptability and entrepreneurial mindset. Having grown up during periods of economic uncertainty and rapid technological change, they prioritize financial independence and career flexibility. Many Gen Z individuals seek nontraditional career paths, such as freelancing, content creation, and entrepreneurship. They

are also highly skilled at leveraging digital tools for learning and self-improvement, often using online courses, tutorials, and educational apps to acquire new skills. In terms of education and work, Gen Z places a strong emphasis on innovation and efficiency. They prefer interactive and technology-driven learning methods, such as gamified education and virtual classrooms. In the workplace, they seek environments that offer flexibility, diversity, and opportunities for personal growth. Unlike previous generations that prioritized long-term job stability, Gen Z is more likely to switch careers or explore multiple income streams to maintain a balance between work and personal fulfillment.

Despite their strengths, Gen Z also faces unique challenges. Their heavy reliance on technology has raised concerns about mental health, with issues such as anxiety, depression, and digital burnout becoming increasingly common. The pressure to maintain a curated online presence, combined with the constant exposure to social media comparisons, has contributed to self-esteem issues and social anxiety. Additionally, the fast-paced nature of digital culture has shortened attention spans, making traditional learning and work structures less appealing to them. Overall, Gen Z is a generation shaped by digital connectivity, diversity, and social consciousness. They are redefining the way people communicate, work, and engage with the world, influencing everything from marketing strategies to workplace cultures. As they continue to shape the future, understanding their values, behaviors, and expectations will be crucial for businesses, educators, and policymakers looking to connect with this dynamic and influential generation.

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are individuals born approximately between 1981 and 1996. This generation grew up during a period of significant technological advancements, economic fluctuations, and cultural shifts. Unlike Gen Z, who were born into a fully digital world, Millennials experienced the transition from an analog to a digital era. They

witnessed the rise of the internet, social media, and smartphones, which shaped their adaptability, communication styles, and worldview. Their unique position between traditional and modern technology has made them one of the most influential generations in shaping today's digital culture.

Technology plays a crucial role in the lives of Millennials. While they were not born into the era of constant connectivity, they quickly adapted as digital advancements emerged. From the early days of dial-up internet and personal computers to the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Millennials have actively engaged with evolving digital tools. Unlike Gen Z, who prefer short-form visual content, Millennials engage with both long-form and visual media, contributing to the growth of blogging, podcasts, and online forums. They balance their digital lives with real-world interactions, valuing both online engagement and in-person experiences. Education has been a key focus for Millennials, with many pursuing higher education at unprecedented rates. However, this has also led to financial burdens, as many Millennials have faced student loan debt and economic instability. Unlike previous generations, who entered the workforce with stable job prospects, Millennials experienced economic challenges such as the 2008 financial crisis, which influenced their career choices and financial outlook. As a result, they prioritize job security, career development, and meaningful work. They seek purpose in their careers and often gravitate toward industries that align with their values, such as sustainability, technology, and social impact.

Millennials are known for their entrepreneurial mindset and willingness to embrace non-traditional career paths. Many have entered the gig economy, freelancing, and selfemployment, seeking flexibility and autonomy in their professional lives. They value worklife balance more than previous generations, advocating for remote work, flexible schedules, and workplace well-

being. Unlike their predecessors, who often remained in one job for decades, Millennials are more likely to switch jobs in pursuit of personal and professional growth. They prioritize environments that offer diversity, inclusivity, and opportunities for continuous learning. Social consciousness is a defining trait of Millennials. They are more likely than previous generations to advocate for issues such as climate change, gender equality, mental health awareness, and LGBTQ+ rights. Growing up with access to global information, they have developed a broad perspective on social justice, human rights, and sustainability. Their consumer habits also reflect their values, as they tend to support brands that demonstrate ethical responsibility, environmental consciousness, and social activism. Unlike older generations who were influenced by traditional advertising, Millennials rely on online reviews, influencer recommendations, and brand transparency when making purchasing decisions.

Unlike their parents and grandparents, Millennials prioritize experiences over material possessions. They are known for valuing travel, dining, cultural exploration, and personal growth over traditional milestones such as homeownership and long-term financial investments. This preference has contributed to the rise of the “experience economy,” where businesses cater to consumers seeking adventure, wellness, and memorable activities. While some view this as financial irresponsibility, Millennials see it as a way to enrich their lives and create meaningful connections. Despite their adaptability and resilience, Millennials have faced significant financial challenges. Rising living costs, wage stagnation, and job market fluctuations have made financial stability difficult for many in this generation. Unlike Baby Boomers, who often secured stable jobs and bought homes at a young age, Millennials have delayed major life events such as marriage, parenthood, and homeownership. They prioritize financial independence but often struggle with student loan debt, high rent prices, and economic uncertainty, leading to a more cautious approach to spending and saving.

Mental health awareness is another important aspect of Millennial culture. Unlike older generations who often viewed mental health as a private issue, Millennials openly discuss topics such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. They actively seek therapy, wellness programs, and self-care routines to manage stress. This shift has led to a broader societal conversation about mental health, workplace well-being, and the importance of work-life balance. Many Millennials advocate for companies that prioritize employee well-being through mental health support, flexible work arrangements, and wellness initiatives.

As Millennials continue to shape industries, workplaces, and cultural trends, their influence remains undeniable. Their values, digital fluency, and demand for authenticity have transformed the way businesses engage with consumers, how workplaces operate, and how society addresses social issues. While they have faced economic and mental health challenges, their resilience, creativity, and drive for meaningful experiences define their impact on the modern world. Understanding Millennials' behaviors, aspirations, and struggles is essential for businesses, policymakers, and future generations looking to navigate an increasingly interconnected and evolving society.

## **1.1 NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

In the current digital era, social media platforms are not just tools for social interaction but have evolved into spaces where individuals construct and perform their identities. For Generation Z (born approximately 1997–2012) and Millennials (born approximately 1981–1996), these platforms play a central role in everyday functioning. Activities such as maintaining friendships, networking, consuming news, participating in public discourse, and expressing emotions are now largely mediated through social media. This pervasive integration

into daily life makes these platforms significant influencers of psychological processes and behaviours. Users of social media typically post content that reflects the most favourable aspects of their lives, such as celebrations, vacations, career milestones, or physical appearance enhanced by filters and editing tools. As a result, social media feeds often portray an unrealistic and overly positive version of reality. Regular exposure to such content can create a distorted perception that others are happier, more successful, or more attractive, thus fostering harmful upward social comparisons. These comparisons may lead individuals to judge their own lives more negatively in contrast. As individuals compare themselves to the polished, idealized images of others, they may experience dissatisfaction with their own appearance, accomplishments, or lifestyle. This dissatisfaction can contribute to chronic self-evaluation, wherein individuals scrutinize their flaws and shortcomings. Over time, this internal dialogue can turn highly self-critical, impacting emotional well-being, confidence, and even leading to symptoms of anxiety or depression, particularly in younger populations who are still forming their self-concepts.

Social media is highly visual and interactive, with features such as likes, comments, and followers that provide immediate and public validation. These elements not only increase engagement but also reinforce comparisons, especially when individuals view peers receiving high levels of online affirmation. For example, posts highlighting job promotions, relationship milestones, or aesthetic beauty may provoke feelings of inadequacy and competition. This interactive feedback loop can exacerbate pressure to present an ideal self and derive self-worth from external validation. During adolescence and early adulthood—developmental stages common to Gen Z and younger Millennials—individuals are especially sensitive to feedback from peers and society. This period involves forming stable identities, values, and beliefs.

Social media can serve as a mirror reflecting social norms and expectations, which may influence how individuals perceive themselves and their worth. Because these generations have grown up or come of age in a digital environment, their identity development is often interwoven with the feedback and comparisons they experience online.

The core objective of the present study is to investigate how engagement with social media contributes to the processes of social comparison and self-criticism in two closely related but developmentally distinct generations. While both groups are active users of digital platforms, they may differ in how they interact with content, interpret social cues, and manage emotional responses. The study explores whether the frequency and type of social media usage correlate with increased tendencies toward self-critical thoughts and unfavourable comparisons in each group.

Although Generation Z and Millennials share similarities in digital literacy, they differ in the cultural and technological context in which they were raised. Gen Z, being digital natives, are more immersed in online culture from an earlier age, while Millennials transitioned into social media during adolescence or adulthood. These generational differences may influence the degree and manner in which social media affects their emotional well-being and thought patterns. This comparative analysis may uncover whether one group is more vulnerable to selfcriticism or more resilient to online influence. Identifying how each generation responds to social media use not only enhances academic knowledge but also offers practical implications for mental health interventions. Different patterns in self-perception and emotional regulation across generations may indicate the need for tailored strategies in psychological counseling, digital literacy education, and community-based mental health programs.

If the study finds significant generational differences, these insights could inform the creation of targeted interventions designed to mitigate the negative effects of social media. For



example, programs promoting media literacy, self-compassion, and mindful online engagement could be developed with specific age groups in mind, ensuring that the content and delivery are developmentally appropriate and relevant. As digital technologies continue to evolve, understanding the psychological impact of social media is crucial for shaping public policy and educational guidelines. This research adds to the growing body of literature on the psychological effects of digital media and can aid stakeholders in developing evidence-based frameworks that promote digital well-being, particularly for populations at heightened risk for self-comparison and self-criticism.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

- Social media has become a central part of young adults' lives, providing platforms for communication and self-expression.
- Increasing use of social media is linked to adverse psychological effects, particularly through mechanisms like social comparison and self-criticism.
- Young adults frequently compare themselves to the idealized lives and appearances portrayed on social media.
- These comparisons may foster negative self-perceptions and heightened self-criticism, which may reduce self-esteem and well-being.
- Understanding this relationship is critical for addressing the potential negative effects and providing insights into the psychological effects of social media.
- Therefore, this study focuses the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among young adults to better understand how these factors are interconnected.

### 1.3 OBJECTIVES

- To understand the relationship between social media use and social comparison among genz and millennials
- To understand the relationship between social media use and self-criticism among genZ and millennials
- To understand the relationship between social comparison and self-criticism among genz and millennials
- To understand the generational differences in social media use on social comparison and self-criticism Among Gen Z and Millennials

### 1.4 HYPOTHESIS

H01: There will be no significant relationship between social media use and social comparison among Gen Z and Millennials

H02: There will be no significant relationship between social media use and self-criticism among Gen Z and Millennials

H03: There will be no significant relationship between social comparison, and self-criticism among Gen Z and Millennials

H04: There are no generational differences in the levels of social comparison and self-criticism between Gen Z and Millennials.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A systematic analysis of the available data that analyses, assesses, and summarises for clear presentation is referred to as a review of literature (Fink, 2010). An important description and evaluation of the subject may also be defined as a review of literature (Jesson, et al., 2011). This chapter mainly deals with two major reviews, i.e., Theoretical review and Empirical review of literature. A variety of conceptual frameworks and variable models are examined in the theoretical review. The empirical review includes a number of empirical investigations carried out by other researchers that are relevant to the current study. Therefore, the existing literature has been reviewed to understand the concepts and association of the variables of interest.

## **2.1 Theoretical review**

To understand the concepts of social media use, social comparison and self. Criticism it is necessary to review theoretical perspectives associated with the variables. In this section, the conceptual framework and various theories propounded by researchers in the line of study of the current research variables, are reviewed.

### **2.1.1 social media use**

#### **Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973)**

The Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that individuals actively select media sources based on the specific needs and gratifications they seek, such as entertainment, information, personal identity, and social interaction. In the context of social media, this theory explains why users engage with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook to fulfill psychological needs such as validation, connection, or escapism. Unlike passive media

consumption, social media allows users to create and control content, making them active participants. This theory highlights the motivation behind social media use and underscores how different users may be driven by varying psychological or emotional needs, which can influence their mental health outcomes.

### **Self-Presentation Theory (Erving Goffman, 1959)**

Erving Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory proposes that individuals attempt to control how others perceive them by managing their public image, much like performers on a stage. On social media platforms, this is evident in the curation of photos, captions, and posts aimed at portraying an idealized version of oneself. This constant self-monitoring and selective disclosure may lead individuals to focus excessively on external validation, often through likes, comments, or followers. The theory explains how users craft their digital identities to maintain a favorable impression, which may result in anxiety, self-consciousness, or self-criticism when reality does not align with their online image.

### **Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000)**

Social Capital Theory posits that relationships and social networks have value, and that media, including social media, play a vital role in maintaining and building these networks. Social media enhances both bonding capital (close relationships) and bridging capital (broad social connections). While it promotes a sense of connectedness, over-reliance on online relationships can also reduce real-world interpersonal interaction and social trust, thereby affecting psychological well-being.

### **Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976)**

This theory explains how individuals develop a dependency on media for understanding their environment, achieving goals, and social interaction. In today's digital age, many young

people rely on social media not only for entertainment but also for identity formation and social feedback. Increased dependency may lead to compulsive use, disrupted self-concept, and emotional dysregulation, especially when social approval is not received.

### **Networked Publics Theory (boyd, 2010)**

Networked Publics Theory focuses on how digital technologies create new public spaces where communication is persistent, searchable, and replicable. Social media platforms construct “networked publics” in which people participate in identity expression and community engagement. However, these environments also intensify peer visibility, surveillance, and judgment, influencing behavior and self-perception in ways that can increase self-monitoring and anxiety.

#### **2.1.2 social comparison**

### **Social Comparison Theory (Leon Festinger, 1954)**

Leon Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing with others to assess their own abilities, opinions, and worth. In the social media context, this theory becomes increasingly relevant, as platforms provide endless opportunities for comparison—particularly upward comparisons with influencers or peers who present idealized versions of life. Such comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and dissatisfaction. The theory provides a foundational understanding of how viewing curated content can distort self-perception and increase vulnerability to negative psychological states.

**Upward and Downward Comparison Theory (Wills, 1981)**

Wills expanded Festinger's original theory by introducing the concept of directional comparison. Upward comparisons, often seen on social media, can motivate self-improvement but may also trigger feelings of inferiority. In contrast, downward comparisons may provide temporary self-enhancement but can lead to complacency or distorted views of others. The emotional effects of each type depend on users' self-esteem and context.

**Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (Tesser, 1988)**

This model suggests that individuals experience discomfort when close others outperform them in areas relevant to their self-concept. On social media, where peer success is highly visible, this discomfort may be amplified. Users might reduce contact with successful peers or disengage from activities that threaten their self-worth. The model helps explain jealousy, resentment, and the erosion of self-esteem resulting from frequent comparisons.

**Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999)**

Originally developed for body image research, this model identifies media, parents, and peers as primary sources of influence that foster appearance-related comparisons. Social media acts as a convergence of all three, reinforcing unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards. This theory is especially relevant for understanding the impact of social media on body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and low self-confidence in youth.

**Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)**

This theory states that people define themselves based on group membership and compare their in-group to out-groups to maintain positive self-esteem. On social media, individuals often compare themselves to influencers or elite groups, perceiving themselves as

outsiders. These comparisons can reduce group identity, trigger exclusion anxiety, and foster feelings of inadequacy, contributing to negative emotional and behavioral outcomes.

### **2.1.3 self-criticism**

#### **Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)**

This theory posits that individuals compare their actual self to their ideal and ought selves. Discrepancies between these self-representations result in emotional distress. On social media, exposure to idealized lifestyles and appearances amplifies awareness of these gaps, often resulting in self-criticism, guilt, and shame. This theory helps explain how social platforms intensify internal conflicts and reduce emotional well-being.

#### **Cognitive Behavioural Theory (Beck, 1967)**

Cognitive Behavioral Theory asserts that maladaptive thought patterns, such as all-or-nothing thinking or overgeneralization, contribute to negative emotional states. Self-criticism arises when individuals internalize repeated thoughts of failure, inferiority, or unworthiness. Social media interactions that involve rejection, comparison, or lack of validation can reinforce these thought patterns, increasing anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation.

#### **Multidimensional Perfectionism Theory (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991)**

This theory identifies various dimensions of perfectionism, including self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, both of which are linked to self-criticism. Social media promotes perfectionistic standards through filtered images and success stories, often pressuring users to meet unrealistic expectations. When individuals fail to meet these ideals, they may become excessively self-critical, experiencing distress and lowered self-worth.



### **Compassion-Focused Therapy Model (Gilbert, 2009)**

According to this model, self-criticism is a result of an overactive threat system and a lack of emotional soothing. Individuals who lack self-compassion are more likely to engage in harsh self-judgment. In the social media environment, where people often feel exposed to public judgment, fostering self-compassion can help reduce the intensity and frequency of self-critical thoughts.

### **Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)**

Attachment Theory posits that early relational experiences influence emotional regulation and self-perception. Individuals with insecure attachment styles are more prone to self-criticism, especially when faced with perceived rejection or failure. On social media, where interactions are brief and often superficial, the lack of genuine emotional connection can reinforce these insecurities and heighten self-critical tendencies.

## **2.2 Empirical Review**

To understand the concepts of social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among young adults, as well as the generational differences between those born before and after 2000, it was essential to review existing empirical studies. The empirical review presented below highlights research findings that inform the current study and provide insight into the relationship between the respective variables.

### **2.2.1 Social Media Use**

Social media has become a dominant force in shaping how young people communicate, perceive themselves, and interact with the world. Twenge (2012) and Smith & Anderson (2018) noted that adolescents and young adults spend a considerable amount of time on platforms like

Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook. These platforms encourage users to present idealized versions of their lives and seek validation through likes and comments, which often leads to psychological consequences such as increased pressure to maintain an attractive online persona.

According to Anderson and Jiang (2012), social media fosters a culture of constant engagement, where the number of followers or likes contributes to a user's perceived social status. This constant need for online validation can affect how users perceive their self-worth. Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) highlighted that Gen Z, having grown up in the digital era, relies heavily on online spaces for identity formation, social approval, and peer connection, often substituting in-person interactions with digital ones.

The McKinsey Health Institute (2013) conducted a survey focusing on the impact of technology and social media on Gen Z mental health. The findings revealed a complex dynamic: while social media can provide avenues for emotional support and mental health awareness, it also exacerbates feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and social comparison. Erica Coe et al. (2023), in a related study using data from the McKinsey Health Institute, also reported that although Gen Z frequently acknowledges the negative emotional impact of social media, they simultaneously value it for the sense of belonging and access to mental health resources it can offer.

### **2.2.2 Social Comparison**

Social comparison theory, particularly in the context of social media, has been widely studied as a major factor influencing psychological outcomes. Fardouly et al. (2014) investigated how exposure to idealized images on Facebook and Instagram influences body image among young women. They found that these platforms often prompt users to engage in upward social comparisons, leading to decreased self-esteem and increased body

dissatisfaction. The researchers emphasized that the appearance-focused nature of social media amplifies feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.

Vogel et al. (2014) found a strong relationship between Facebook use, social comparison, and lower self-esteem. Their study highlighted that individuals who frequently compare themselves to others online—especially when others appear more successful or attractive—experience more negative emotions, such as inferiority and self-doubt. The curated and selective content seen on these platforms leads users to believe others are living more fulfilling lives, thereby reinforcing negative self-evaluations.

Steers et al. (2014) similarly emphasized that high levels of Facebook engagement are associated with frequent upward comparisons, resulting in feelings of envy and lower selfworth. They concluded that consistent exposure to others' successes, achievements, and curated images can lead users to believe they are underachieving, thus fostering dissatisfaction and emotional distress.

Tiggemann and Slater (2015) focused specifically on Instagram and its impact on young women's body image. Their study demonstrated that Instagram's visual content—particularly related to physical appearance—contributes significantly to upward social comparisons and heightened self-consciousness. These comparisons were linked to increased body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem, especially among users who internalize beauty standards promoted on the platform.

Meier and Gray (2015) conducted a meta-analysis examining the relationship between social comparison on social media and self-esteem across multiple studies. They found consistent evidence that upward comparisons, particularly among adolescents and young adults,

are associated with lower self-esteem. Social media's inherently visual and curated environment was identified as a significant contributor to these negative psychological outcomes.

Verduyn et al. (2017) further supported these findings by identifying that passive social media use—scrolling through others' posts without interaction—enhances the tendency to engage in upward social comparison. This passive consumption often results in negative emotional states such as envy, inadequacy, and sadness, thereby reinforcing lowered self-esteem.

Shaka et al. (2019) focused on Snapchat and Instagram and found that both platforms promoted social comparisons centered around physical appearance and lifestyle. Their findings indicated that young adults who engaged more in such comparisons reported significantly lower self-esteem and greater dissatisfaction with their own lives. This supports the view that social media creates unrealistic standards that users feel compelled to measure themselves against.

Wang and Li (2024) introduced a novel perspective by examining the link between Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), social comparison, and self-esteem. They proposed a serial mediation model where individuals with high FoMO are more likely to engage in frequent social comparison, which in turn leads to decreased self-esteem and problematic social media use.

Their study suggests that FoMO acts as a key driver in the social comparison cycle.

### **2.2.3 Self-Criticism**

In recent years, the role of self-criticism has become central to understanding the psychological effects of social media use. Hwang and Han (2014) explored how social comparison on social media contributes to increased self-criticism among young adults. Their study found that frequent upward comparisons not only lowered self-esteem but also intensified self-critical thoughts, which are closely associated with anxiety, depression, and poor mental

health outcomes. They concluded that self-criticism acts as a mediator between social comparison and mental health, amplifying the negative effects.

Lopez and García (2014) conducted an observational study on Instagram use within the Spanish population, focusing on self-criticism, self-compassion, and body dissatisfaction. The findings showed that individuals with higher Instagram usage exhibited greater self-criticism and body image issues, along with reduced self-compassion. The researchers highlighted that the type of content consumed—particularly beauty and fitness-related posts—plays a crucial role in triggering self-judgment and comparison.

Smith and Brown (2024) examined the impact of body-related content on social media and its role in muscle dysmorphia among young men. They found that frequent exposure to idealized body images leads to extreme self-criticism, strict dietary routines, and obsessive exercising. Their findings emphasized that body-focused self-comparisons are not limited to women and that men are increasingly vulnerable to appearance-based self-judgment, particularly in digital spaces.

Kross et al. (2024) also contributed to the literature by studying emotional well-being in relation to Facebook use. Their research found that greater Facebook engagement correlated with lower happiness and increased emotional distress. A key factor was the passive observation of others' lives, which promoted self-critical thinking and negative selfassessment, especially when users perceived themselves as falling short of others' achievements.

Fox and Moreland (2024) examined how appearance-related content on Instagram can lead to negative self-evaluation and self-criticism. They observed that users who frequently viewed and engaged with such content were more likely to compare their appearance to others and judge themselves harshly. This not only resulted in body dissatisfaction but also in general feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-worth.

### **2.3 Research gap**

While there is growing research interest in the psychological impacts of social media, most existing studies have explored variables like social comparison and self-esteem in isolation. However, the role of self-criticism, a key factor linked to emotional distress and negative self-evaluation, remains underexplored, especially in relation to social media use. Furthermore, prior research tends to focus predominantly on adolescents or college-going youth, often neglecting the nuanced differences between generational groups such as Generation Z and Millennials. These two generations differ significantly in their digital socialization, life experiences, and stages of identity development, which may influence how they engage with and are affected by social media. Yet, they are frequently studied as a single homogeneous population.

There is a lack of studies that investigate these variables using standardized psychometric tools within the Indian socio-cultural context, where family dynamics, peer pressure, and societal expectations might shape experiences of social comparison and selfcriticism differently. Moreover, limited research has examined the interrelationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism together in a single study. This research attempts to bridge these gaps by comparing the two generational cohorts using reliable scales (SMUS, INCOM, and LOSC), thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how social media consumption patterns influence psychological well-being across generations.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Research methodology is a critical component of any study, as the systematic approach to addressing the research challenge. It encompasses a broad array of components, including research design, the identification of target populations, the determination of sample sizes, the selection of sampling techniques, the development of data collection tools, and the implementation of data analysis procedures. According to Kothari (2004), methodologies provide the theoretical foundation for understanding which techniques or combinations of procedures are best suited to a specific research problem, rather than offering direct solutions. This highlights the necessity for researchers to carefully craft a methodology that aligns with the unique requirements of their research question, ensuring that the chosen approach is not only scientifically sound but also relevant to the specific context of the study.

The research process itself involves several essential steps that guide the study toward achieving its objectives. Initially, a hypothesis is formed, which is then tested using appropriate methods such as interviews, observations, or psychological tests. The collection and subsequent analysis of data are critical in determining whether the hypothesis is valid. Researchers must also consider the implications and advantages of the various methods employed to ensure that the results obtained effectively explore the relationships between variables. In psychological research, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and case studies provide nuanced and detailed insights into human behavior, while quantitative methods, including statistical and mathematical modeling, offer more structured and generalizable data. This chapter outlines the methodology used in the present study, detailing the research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and analysis procedures, all of which are tailored to address the specific research objectives.



### 3.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among young adults, specifically focusing on the generational cohorts of Millennials and Generation Z. By exploring these associations, the study seeks to understand how varying patterns of social media engagement influence individuals' tendencies to compare themselves with others and engage in negative self-evaluation. Additionally, the study aims to identify potential generational differences in the impact of social media on these psychological processes, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the mental health implications of digital behavior among young people in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

### 3.2 Variables under study

#### 3.2.1 Theoretical definitions

##### 3.2.1.1 Social media

Social media use refers to the frequency and manner in which individuals engage with digital platforms that allow content sharing, interaction, and networking. It includes activities such as posting, commenting, liking, scrolling, watching, and sharing content across platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat. Social media use can be both active (e.g., posting content) and passive (e.g., browsing others' content), and is considered a major influence on modern social behavior and mental health (Rosen et al., 2013).

### **3.2.1.2 Social comparison**

Social comparison is the psychological process in which individuals evaluate their own abilities, traits, and circumstances by comparing themselves to others. Introduced by Festinger (1954), social comparison can occur in two forms: upward comparison, where individuals compare themselves to someone perceived as better off, and downward comparison, where the comparison is made with someone perceived as worse off. On social media platforms, such comparisons are often triggered by curated, idealized portrayals of others' lives, which may impact self-esteem and self-perception.

### **3.2.1.3 Self criticism**

Self-criticism is defined as a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, often focusing on perceived personal shortcomings, failures, or inadequacies. It involves harsh self-judgment, feelings of inferiority, and chronic dissatisfaction with one's self. According to Thompson and Zuroff (2004), self-criticism can be divided into two dimensions: Comparative Self-Criticism, which involves unfavorable comparisons with others, and Internalized Self-Criticism, which reflects disappointment with oneself based on internal standards and expectations.

## **3.2.2 Operational definition**

### **3.2.2.1 Social media**

In the context of this study, Social media use refers to the measurable frequency and specific activities performed by individuals on social networking platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. It includes quantifiable behaviors such as the number of posts shared, likes given, comments made, time spent browsing, and interactions with other users' content within a specified time frame (e.g., per day or per week).

### **3.2.2.2 Social comparison**

In the context of this study, social comparison refers to the measurable tendency of individuals to evaluate their own traits, appearance, or achievements by comparing themselves to others based on content viewed on social media. This can be assessed through self-report scales that capture the frequency and impact of upward or downward comparisons made while engaging with social media content.

### **3.2.2.3 Self criticism**

In the context of this study, Self-criticism refers to the measurable tendency of an individual to engage in negative self-evaluation, self-blame, or feelings of inadequacy, particularly in response to content viewed on social media. It can be assessed using standardized self-report questionnaires that evaluate the frequency and intensity of self-critical thoughts triggered by social media exposure.

### **3.2.2.4 Genz**

Gen Z refers to individuals born between the years 1997 and 2012. For the purpose of this study, members of Gen Z are identified based on their birth year and are characterized by early and consistent exposure to digital technology, social media platforms, and internet-based communication. Participants are categorized as Gen Z if their date of birth falls within this range.

### **3.2.2.5 Millennials**

Millennials refer to individuals born between the years 1981 and 1996. In this study, participants are classified as Millennials if their birth year falls within this range. This

generation is characterized by experiencing the transition from analog to digital technology and typically adopting social media platforms during their adolescence or early adulthood.

### **3. 3 Research design**

The present study employs a correlational comparative research design to investigate the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among Millennials and Gen Z individuals. This design is appropriate as it enables the researcher to explore naturally occurring associations between variables without manipulating any of them. The correlational aspect allows for the assessment of the strength and direction of the relationship between social media use and the psychological outcomes of social comparison and self-criticism. At the same time, the comparative component provides a framework for analyzing generational differences, specifically between Gen Z (ages 13–28) and Millennials (ages 29–44). By comparing these two cohorts, the study aims to understand how different generational exposures to social media environments may influence patterns of comparison and self-evaluation. This non-experimental design is particularly suitable for psychological research conducted in real-world settings, and it supports the generation of insights that can inform interventions, awareness programs, and further academic exploration in the context of digital behavior and mental health.

### **3.4 participants**

The population for the present study comprises adolescents and adults belonging to two generational cohorts Millennials (aged 29 to 44) and Generation Z (aged 13 to 28) who are active users of at least one social media platform. These individuals are selected from various educational institutions and social networks, representing a demographic that is highly engaged with digital technologies and online social environments. The participants for the study were

selected using the purposive sampling method, which allowed for the deliberate inclusion of individuals who meet specific inclusion criteria: namely, being within the designated age range and actively using social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, or TikTok. Individuals with diagnosed psychological disorders, cognitive impairments, or other mental or physical health conditions were excluded from the study to maintain the focus on general psychological trends within the normative population. To facilitate meaningful correlational and comparative analysis, the sample includes a minimum of 170 participants, equally divided between the two target groups 85 from Gen Z and 85 from the Millennial generation. This balanced sample ensures that comparisons across generations are valid and that generational differences in social media use, social comparison tendencies, and levels of self-criticism can be rigorously assessed. Furthermore, by maintaining demographic consistency particularly in terms of age and digital engagement. The study minimizes the impact of confounding variables, allowing for a clearer understanding of how generational context and social media behavior intersect to influence psychological processes. The purposeful selection of participants from different but comparable environments enhances the ecological validity of the study and provides a solid foundation for generalizing the findings to broader populations within these age groups.

### ***Inclusion criteria***

- Individuals aged 13 to 44 years.
- Must belong to either the Millennial generation (29–44 years) or Generation Z (13–28 years).
- Must be an active user of at least one social media platform, such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, etc.

- Must be able to read and respond to the questionnaire independently, either online or offline.

### ***Exclusion criteria***

- Individuals diagnosed with any psychological disorders or mental health conditions.
- Individuals with cognitive impairments that may interfere with understanding or completing the survey.
- Individuals with physical impairments that limit their ability to participate meaningfully in the study.

## **3.5 Measures**

### ***Socio demographic sheet***

Name

Age

Gender

Year of birth

Educational qualification

Family type

### **3.6 Tools for data collection**

#### **3.6.1 Social media use scale (SMUS)**

The Social Media Use Scale (SMUS) is a recently developed psychometric instrument created by Tuck and Thompson in 2024. Thompson into 2016, aimed at assessing the diverse ways in which individuals engage with social media across multiple platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat, and others. The need for this scale arose due to inconsistencies in prior research that mostly relied on measuring frequency of use or categorizing behaviours into simplistic passive vs. Active frameworks. The developers of SMUS recognized that such binary models failed to capture the complexity of social media behavior and its varying psychological impacts. Through rigorous qualitative and quantitative research involving exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses across three independent studies, they identified a robust four-factor model representing distinct behavioral dimensions: Image-Based Use (focused on impression management and monitoring social feedback like likes and followers), Comparison-Based Use (using social media to compare oneself with others or one's past self), Belief-Based Use (engaging in activities that involve the expression or seeking of moral, political, or personal beliefs), and Consumption-Based Use (browsing entertaining or informative content without necessarily interacting socially). Originally scored on a 9-point scale, the scale can be adapted to a 5-point Likert format, where responses range from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). When converted, the total possible score ranges from 17 to 85, and can be interpreted as follows: 17–34 reflects low social media use, 35–51 indicates moderate engagement, and 52–85 denotes high to very high engagement. Furthermore, the distinct subscale scores allow for psychological profiling—such as identifying those who may be at risk of self-esteem issues due to high comparison-based use or those likely to derive positive stimulation from consumption-based use. The SMUS stands out not just for its

psychometric validity but also for its flexibility across age groups and platforms, making it a relevant tool for both research and clinical settings where the psychological effects of digital behavior are of interest.

### **3.6.2 Iowa Netherland comparison orientation measure (INCOM)**

The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) is a foundational psychological tool developed by Frederick X. Gibbons and Bram P. Buunk in 1999, designed to assess an individual's general tendency to engage in social comparison. Rooted in Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), this scale provides a quantifiable measure of how often individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others in terms of abilities, values, opinions, and attributes. The INCOM consists of 11 items, structured into two meaningful subscales: the Ability Comparison subscale (items 1–6), which captures comparisons related to personal performance, achievements, and competencies, and the Opinion Comparison subscale (items 7–11), which measures the degree to which individuals compare their beliefs, values, and attitudes with others. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with items 5 and 11 requiring reverse scoring. The total score thus ranges from 11 to 55, with higher scores indicating a stronger orientation toward social comparison. Interpretation is typically categorized as: 11–21 for very low comparison orientation, 22–31 for low, 32–41 for moderate, 42–49 for high, and 50–55 for very high. Individuals with high INCOM scores are often more sensitive to others' performance and may be more prone to feelings of inadequacy, competition, or envy, especially in achievement-oriented or appearance-based contexts. Conversely, those with low scores are less influenced by external comparisons and may possess a stronger sense of self-directed motivation or internal validation. The INCOM has been widely validated and used in crosscultural studies, including research in the fields of self-esteem, consumer behavior,



education, and interpersonal relationships. It is considered a reliable indicator of how much one's selfconcept and behavior are shaped by perceived social norms and peer evaluations.

### **3.6.3 Levels of self-criticism scale (LOSC)**

The Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC), developed by Renee Zuroff and Richard A. Thompson in 2004, is a psychometric instrument designed to explore the depth, intensity, and type of self-critical tendencies in individuals. This 22-item scale was developed to assess two distinct but interrelated dimensions of self-criticism: Comparative Self-Criticism (CSC) and Internalized Self-Criticism (ISC). Comparative self-criticism involves the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively in comparison to others, often leading to feelings of inferiority, social inadequacy, and interpersonal anxiety. Internalized self-criticism, on the other hand, involves harsh self-evaluation based on rigid internal standards, resulting in chronic self-blame, perfectionism, and emotional distress even in the absence of external failure. Originally designed with a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all like me, 7 = very much like me), the LOSC can be adapted to a 5-point Likert scale for consistency with other assessments. In the 5-point version, the total score ranges from 22 to 110, with higher scores indicating more pervasive and intense self-critical thought patterns. Based on adapted interpretation: 22–44 suggests low selfcriticism, 45–77 reflects a moderate level, and 78–110 signifies high or clinical levels of selfcriticism. High scores on CSC typically correlate with social comparison, low self-worth, and heightened sensitivity to rejection, whereas high scores on ISC are associated with internal distress, depressive symptoms, and a tendency toward self-directed hostility. The LOSC is widely used in clinical research and therapy settings, especially in cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic approaches, to assess vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Its dual-factor structure allows clinicians and researchers to distinguish between interpersonal

and intrapersonal sources of negative self-evaluation, making it a powerful tool for targeted psychological interventions.

### **3.7 Procedure of data collection**

The data for the present study was collected through an exclusively online data collection method using Google Forms, a widely used platform for administering structured questionnaires. This mode of data collection was chosen due to its practical benefits, especially considering the study's target demographic young adults who are familiar with digital tools and are active users of social media. Given that the research focuses on online behaviors such as social media engagement and social comparison, collecting responses through a digital medium also ensured ecological validity, allowing participants to respond in an environment that aligns with the subject matter being explored. The online format allowed participants to engage with the questionnaire in a comfortable and flexible manner, removing geographical and logistical constraints and increasing accessibility for a broader sample.

The questionnaire was designed to be self-administered and comprised three validated psychological scales: the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS), the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), and the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC). These instruments were presented in a user-friendly and organized format, with clear instructions provided before each section to minimize confusion and enhance the quality of responses. The Google Form was carefully structured to avoid item-order effects and included appropriate spacing and labeling to maintain participant engagement and ensure accurate completion of items. The form was shared with potential participants through various digital channels, including email, WhatsApp, and social media platforms, to ensure wide reach and participation.

To facilitate a smooth and ethical data collection process, the Google Form included an informed consent section at the beginning, followed by the main questionnaire. The digital

format also allowed for efficient collection and storage of data, minimizing manual error and enabling immediate access to responses for analysis. Moreover, the use of Google Forms supported real-time tracking of responses, ensured compatibility across devices (such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops), and allowed for convenient submission at the participant's own pace and privacy. This online data collection approach not only promoted inclusivity and convenience but also maintained uniformity in the administration of the instruments, contributing to the reliability and consistency of the data gathered for the study.

### **3.8 Ethical Consideration.**

#### **1. Informed Consent:**

An informed consent form was presented at the beginning of the Google Form. It clearly explained the nature and purpose of the study, ensuring that participants understood what their involvement would entail before proceeding.

#### **2. Voluntary Participation:**

Participants were explicitly informed that their participation was completely voluntary. They had the freedom to decline or withdraw from the study at any point without facing any penalties or negative consequences.

#### **3. Confidentiality and Anonymity:**

No personally identifying information was collected through the form. Participants were assured that all responses would be anonymous and treated with strict confidentiality throughout the research process.

#### **4. Academic Use Only:**

Participants were made aware that the data collected would be used exclusively for academic purposes, specifically for research and analysis related to the study topic.

#### 5. Secure Data Storage:

All data were stored in a password-protected digital environment accessible only to the researcher, ensuring that participants' privacy and information security were maintained at all times.

### **3.9 Statistical techniques used for Data analysis**

The data was analyzed using various statistical techniques with the help of SPSS-22 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. These techniques were selected to suit the nature of the data and to rigorously test the study's hypotheses. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used, including tests for normality, correlation, and group comparisons. As some of the variables were not normally distributed, non-parametric tests were applied to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the findings (IBM Corp., 2013).

#### **3.9.1 Shapiro-Wilk Test**

The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess whether the data followed a normal distribution. It is a commonly used test for checking normality, especially suitable for small to moderate sample sizes. In this study, the test was applied to the three major variables: Social Media Use (SMUS), Social Comparison (INCOM), and Self-Criticism (LOSC). The results revealed that the Social Media Use variable was normally distributed ( $p = .218$ ), but Social Comparison and Self-Criticism were not ( $p = .009$  and  $p = .000$ , respectively). These p-values are below the standard threshold of .05, indicating that the data for these two variables significantly deviated from a normal distribution. Therefore, non-parametric statistical methods

were selected for further analysis to accommodate the non-normality of the data and ensure accurate interpretation.

### **3.9.2 Spearman's Rho Correlation Analysis**

Spearman's Rho is a non-parametric test used to examine the strength and direction of association between two variables. Unlike Pearson's correlation, it does not assume normal distribution and is suitable for ordinal or non-normally distributed data. In this study, Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was conducted separately for Gen Z and Millennials to explore relationships among Social Media Use, Social Comparison, and Self-Criticism. This test helped identify whether higher or lower levels of one variable were related to increases or decreases in another. The significance level was set at  $p < .05$ . This method provided valuable insights into how social media usage correlates with tendencies toward comparison and selfcritical thoughts within each generational group.

### **3.9.3 Mann-Whitney U Test**

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the average scores of Gen Z and Millennials on Social Media Use, Social Comparison, and Self-Criticism. This non-parametric test is an alternative to the independent samples t-test and is appropriate when data does not meet the assumption of normality. The test works by ranking all values and assessing whether the ranks differ significantly between the two groups. In this study, the Mann-Whitney U test was chosen because the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated non-normal distribution for two of the three variables. A p-value less than .05 was considered statistically significant. This analysis was crucial to identify generational differences in the experience and psychological effects of social media usage.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The present study aims to examine the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among Millennials and Gen Z individuals. The sample comprised 240 participants, with 120 individuals from Gen Z (ages 13–28) and 120 individuals from the Millennial generation (ages 29–44). Participants were selected through purposive sampling from various colleges and social networks, ensuring representation from both generational groups. The key variables—social media use, social comparison, and selfcriticism—were measured using standardized scales: the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS) developed by Rosen et al. (2013), the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) by Gibbons and Bunk (2005), and the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC) developed by Thompson and Zuroff (2004).

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS-22 software. The analysis began with a Shapiro-Wilk test to assess the normality of the data. The results indicated that while social media use followed a normal distribution, both social comparison and self-criticism did not. Given this, the study employed non-parametric tests for further analysis. Descriptive statistical techniques such as frequency distribution, percentage, and the computation of mean and standard deviation were used to summarize the data.

To examine the relationships among the three key variables, Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was applied separately to Gen Z and Millennial groups. This helped identify whether and how strongly the variables were associated within each generation. Furthermore, a MannWhitney U test was conducted to assess generational differences in social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism. The test allowed for a comparison of mean ranks between the two groups and revealed significant differences across all three variables.

The results were systematically organized and presented in tables for clarity. The findings were interpreted in light of the research objectives and hypotheses, offering a detailed understanding of how social media engagement is related to self-comparison and self-critical thinking. This study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the generational dynamics of social media’s psychological effects and underscores the need for targeted mental health interventions for digital-age adolescents and young adults.

4.1 Normality of distribution

Table 1

*Shapiro wilk test conducted for the normality of the population*

	DF	Sig
SMUS	240	.218
INCOM	240	.009
LOSC	240	.000

SMUS – social media use scale, INCOM – Iowa Netherland social comparison measure,  
LOSC – levels of self-criticism scale

The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the data. The results showed that Social Media Use (SMUS) was normally distributed ( $p = .218$ ), while Social Comparison



(INCOM) and Self-Criticism (LOSC) were not ( $p = .009$  and  $p = .000$ , respectively). Since two variables violated the assumption of normality, non-parametric test have been used for the further study

4.2 social media use, social comparison and self-criticism among genz

Table 2

*The correlation between social media use, social comparison and self-criticism among genz*  
*(N = 120)*

		SMUS	INCOM	LOSC
Spearman rho	SMUS	—	—	—
	INCOM	-.206*	—	—
	LOSC	.023	-.111	—

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)

The correlation analysis was conducted using Spearman’s Rho to examine the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among Gen Z

participants. The analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between social media use and social comparison, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = -0.206$  and a p-value less than 0.05. Based on this result, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between social media use and social comparison is rejected. In contrast, there was no significant correlation found between social media use and self-criticism, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.023$  and a p-value greater than 0.05, indicating the absence of a statistically meaningful relationship between these two variables. Similarly, the correlation between social comparison and self-criticism was also not significant, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = -0.111$  and a pvalue greater than 0.05. As a result, the hypotheses stating that there is no significant relationship between social media use and self-criticism, and between social comparison and self-criticism, are both accepted.

4.3 social media use, social comparison and self-criticism among millennials

Table 3

*The correlation of social media use, social comparison and self-criticism among millennials (N=120)*

		SMUS	INCOM	LOSC
Spearman rho	SMUS	-	-	-
	INCOM	.034	-	-
	LOSC	.075	-.190*	-

**\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)**

Correlation analysis using Spearman's Rho was conducted to examine the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among Millennial participants. The results **revealed** no statistically significant relationship between social media use and social comparison, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.034$  and a p-value of  $0.707$  ( $p > 0.05$ ).

This suggests that for Millennials, the extent to which they use social media is not directly related to how much they compare themselves to others online. Consequently, the hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between social media use and social comparison is accepted.

The correlation between social media use and self-criticism was also not significant, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.075$  and  $p = 0.403$  ( $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between social media use and self-criticism is also accepted. A significant positive correlation was found between social comparison and selfcriticism, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.190$  and a p-value of  $0.034$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). As a result, the hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between social comparison and self-criticism is rejected.

**4.4 Generational difference****Table 4**

*Mean, standard deviation and significance of genz and millennials*

population						
Variables	Genz		Millennials		sig	Decision
	M	SD	M	SD		
SMUS	48.52	11.015	41.30	16.734	.000	Reject the null hypothesis
INCOM	42.08	9.092	35.03	8.158	.000	Reject the null hypothesis
LOSC	58.90	19.174	46.00	16.734	.000	Reject the null hypothesis

To examine whether there were significant differences between Gen Z and Millennials in social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The results, presented in Table 4, indicated statistically significant differences across all three variables, with p-values of .000 for each. These findings suggest that generational group membership plays a meaningful role in shaping how individuals experience and respond to social media engagement and related psychological constructs.

Gen Z participants reported significantly higher mean scores for social media use ( $M = 48.52$ ,  $SD = 11.015$ ) compared to Millennials ( $M = 41.30$ ,  $SD = 10.841$ ). This confirms that Gen Z is more engaged with social media. In terms of social comparison, Gen Z also scored higher ( $M = 42.08$ ,  $SD = 9.002$ ) than Millennials ( $M = 35.03$ ,  $SD = 8.158$ ), indicating that younger users are more inclined to evaluate themselves based on others' online content. selfcriticism scores were notably higher among Gen Z ( $M = 58.90$ ,  $SD = 19.174$ ) than among Millennials ( $M = 46.00$ ,  $SD = 16.734$ ), highlighting a significant generational difference in how individuals engage in self-evaluation. Given that all three p-values were below the .05 threshold

( $p = .000$ ), the hypothesis stating that there are no generational differences in social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism was rejected

#### **4.5 Discussion and Interpretation of Results**

The findings of the present study reveal important generational differences and psychological dynamics in the way individuals interact with social media. Among Gen Z, a significant negative correlation was observed between social media use and social comparison. This counterintuitive result suggests that increased social media use does not necessarily heighten comparison behaviors in this generation; in fact, it may slightly reduce them. One possible explanation is that Gen Z, having grown up immersed in digital environments, may have developed greater media literacy, critical thinking, or emotional detachment when engaging with curated online content. Their frequent exposure to social media may have normalized idealized portrayals, thus reducing their comparative impact. Additionally, Gen Z may engage more in active social media behaviours (e.g., content creation, authentic expression) rather than passive consumption, which has been shown to lessen the psychological risks associated with online comparison (Verduyn et al., 2017). However, no significant relationship was found between social media use and self-criticism, or between social comparison and self-criticism in this group. This implies that for Gen Z, self-critical tendencies might be influenced more by factors such as academic pressure, family dynamics, personality traits (e.g., perfectionism), or offline social interactions, rather than social media alone.

In contrast, among Millennials, the pattern of associations was different. While no significant relationship was found between social media use and either social comparison or self-criticism, a significant positive correlation emerged between social comparison and selfcriticism. This indicates that Millennials who tend to compare themselves more frequently

with others on social media are also more likely to experience heightened levels of negative self-evaluation. This could be attributed to several generational and psychological factors. Millennials, unlike Gen Z, adopted social media in adolescence or early adulthood at a developmental stage where identity formation and social status are highly salient. The pressure to achieve conventional life milestones (career, family, financial independence) combined with constant exposure to others' successes online may intensify feelings of inadequacy, especially when one perceives themselves as falling short. Furthermore, Millennials may be more susceptible to upward comparison, which has been linked to lower self-esteem and increased self-criticism (Appel et al., 2016). The lack of significant associations between social media use and the other two variables in Millennials also suggests that how one uses social media—rather than how often—is more psychologically relevant, especially in the context of social evaluation.

The intergenerational comparison further strengthens these insights by showing that Gen Z scored significantly higher than Millennials on all three variables—social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism. These differences likely reflect broader shifts in digital habits, psychological development, and socialization. Gen Z's higher engagement with social media is expected, given their exposure to digital platforms from early childhood. Their higher scores in social comparison and self-criticism may also indicate greater psychological vulnerability, perhaps fueled by the pressures of constant connectivity, the need for social validation, and exposure to algorithm-driven idealized content. On the other hand, Millennials may use social media more selectively or professionally and might have better emotional boundaries due to age, maturity, or life experience. The higher self-criticism in Gen Z, despite no direct correlation with social media in this group, suggests the possibility of a cumulative psychological burden arising from academic stress, appearance norms, and the desire for online

relevance. These findings imply that while social media affects both generations differently, its psychological impact cannot be generalized and must be understood within each group's developmental and cultural context.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of generation-specific approaches in addressing the mental health consequences of social media use. For Gen Z, interventions might focus on building emotional resilience and reducing internalized pressures from social comparison, even in subtle or passive forms. For Millennials, therapeutic strategies could prioritize reducing the impact of upward comparisons and reframing personal narratives in the context of social media content. Most importantly, digital literacy programs tailored to each age group can empower individuals to critically engage with online platforms while safeguarding their self-worth and emotional health.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**



The primary aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among two generational groups: Gen Z (ages 13–28) and Millennials (ages 29–44). The study also aimed to assess intergenerational differences in these psychological variables to understand how digital behavior and mental health outcomes vary across age groups. The sample consisted of 240 participants (120 from each generation), selected using purposive sampling from various colleges and online platforms.

## **5.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

To assess the core constructs, three standardized tools were used: the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS) by Rosen et al. (2013), the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) by Gibbons and Buunk (2005), and the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC) by Thompson and Zuroff (2004). Informed consent and personal data were collected from all participants through an online survey format. The study was guided by seven hypotheses, each addressing potential relationships between the variables within the generational groups, as well as potential generational differences.

The research design was correlational-comparative in nature, and data were analyzed using SPSS-22 software. The statistical techniques employed included the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, Spearman's Rho correlation to assess relationships between variables, and the Mann-Whitney U test to examine intergenerational differences. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were also used to describe the data.

The findings revealed that, among Gen Z, there was a significant negative correlation between social media use and social comparison, while no significant correlations were found between social media use and self-criticism or between social comparison and self-criticism. Among Millennials, no significant relationships were found between social media use and the other two variables; however, a significant positive correlation was identified between social comparison and self-criticism. Furthermore, the Mann-Whitney U test results indicated significant generational differences across all three variables, with Gen Z scoring higher than Millennials in social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism.

## 5.2 MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Among the total sample of 240 participants, Gen Z reported higher mean scores in social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism compared to Millennials.

- There was a significant negative correlation between social media use and social comparison among Gen Z participants ( $r = -0.206$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that higher usage was associated with lower comparison tendencies.
- There was no significant correlation between social media use and self-criticism among Gen Z participants ( $r = 0.023$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).
- There was no significant correlation between social comparison and selfcriticism among Gen Z participants ( $r = -0.111$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).
- Among Millennials, there was no significant correlation between social media use and social comparison ( $r = 0.034$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

- There was no significant correlation between social media use and self-criticism among Millennials ( $r = 0.075$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).
- A significant positive correlation was found between social comparison and self-criticism among Millennials ( $r = 0.190$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that higher comparison was associated with higher self-criticism.
- Results from the Mann-Whitney U test showed significant generational differences in social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism ( $p = 0.000$  for all), with Gen Z scoring significantly higher than Millennials on all three variables.

### 5.3 CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The results of the study highlight important generational differences in the psychological effects of social media use. The negative correlation between social media use and social comparison among Gen Z suggests a possible shift in how younger users perceive and engage with digital content, potentially reflecting increased media literacy or habituation to online social dynamics. However, the elevated levels of self-criticism in this group, despite the lack of direct correlation with social media behaviors, point to the influence of broader emotional or contextual factors in shaping their self-perception.

Among Millennials, the positive correlation between social comparison and selfcriticism confirms previous findings that suggest a strong link between comparative thinking and negative self-evaluation. This generational group may be more vulnerable to emotional consequences stemming from upward comparisons on social media, possibly due to life-stage pressures or socio-cultural expectations.

The significant differences observed between Gen Z and Millennials in all three variables underline the importance of developing age-specific mental health interventions. Gen Z may benefit from strategies that focus on reducing internalized emotional distress and promoting healthy online expression, while Millennials may need support in managing comparison-based thinking and self-critical tendencies. Overall, the findings underscore the complex psychological impact of social media use and the necessity of tailoring interventions that address the unique emotional and cognitive needs of different generational groups in today's digitally connected world.

#### **5.4 IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY**

The current study offers meaningful implications for both psychological research and practical interventions in the context of digital behaviour and generational mental health. By exploring the relationships between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism across two generational cohorts—Gen Z and Millennials—the study extends our understanding of how online experiences uniquely influence psychological functioning. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of integrating generation-specific mental health strategies into educational, clinical, and community-based programs.

One of the most notable findings was the significant generational differences in all three measured variables, with Gen Z showing higher levels of social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism compared to Millennials. This result underscores the necessity of tailoring psychological support services to address the distinct digital realities faced by different age groups. For Gen Z, who are digital natives and often immersed in highly visual and socially interactive online environments, interventions should focus on developing critical media literacy, emotional regulation, and healthy online engagement habits. Programs that help young

individuals recognize unrealistic online portrayals, reframe comparison-based thinking, and regulate self-evaluation are essential in preventing negative emotional outcomes.

For Millennials, the significant association between social comparison and selfcriticism points to the need for interventions that address internalized pressures and achievement-related stress that may be intensified by social media content. As this generation often encounters milestone-driven comparisons (related to careers, family, and lifestyle), cognitive-behavioral strategies, self-compassion training, and narrative therapy approaches could be integrated into digital wellness workshops and counseling settings to reduce the impact of upward comparison and support healthier self-evaluation patterns.

The study also carries important implications for educational institutions and youth organizations. Schools and colleges should incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) and digital well-being modules into their curricula to promote responsible digital behavior and protect the mental health of students. Educators and school counselors should be trained to identify signs of distress related to social comparison and self-criticism, and to initiate timely interventions. Peer support systems, guided social media detox programs, and psychoeducation sessions on the psychological effects of online behavior can further empower students to engage with technology more mindfully.

Moreover, the findings stress the importance of involving parents, teachers, and mental health professionals in creating an ecosystem that encourages balanced digital use. Parental guidance on screen time, healthy conversations around body image, achievement, and selfworth, as well as emotional support from teachers and counselors, can foster psychological resilience in young users. For Millennials balancing work, family, and digital life, workplace wellness programs can also include modules on managing social media-induced stress and promoting a realistic understanding of personal success.

Finally, the study points to the need for ongoing research and policy-level action. Future research should investigate the long-term psychological effects of specific social media behaviours, such as passive scrolling versus active posting, and explore how these patterns differ across cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, and personality types. Policymakers and developers of digital platforms should also take into account the psychological impact of social media features and consider algorithmic changes or design nudges that reduce comparison triggering content and encourage authentic self-expression.

The study reinforces the critical importance of understanding generational differences in digital engagement and their implications for mental health. By addressing the underlying psychological mechanisms associated with social media use—such as comparison and selfcriticism—researchers, educators, counselors, and policymakers can collectively work toward fostering a healthier and more psychologically informed digital culture, especially for vulnerable and impressionable youth populations like Gen Z.

## **5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

While the present study provides valuable insights into the relationships between social media use, social comparison, and self-criticism among Millennials and Gen Z, several limitations must be acknowledged to accurately interpret the findings and guide future research. Firstly, the study adopted a correlational-comparative research design, which, while effective in identifying associations and generational differences, does not allow for causal inferences. As a result, it cannot be concluded whether social media use directly causes changes in social comparison or self-criticism, or whether other underlying variables may contribute to these psychological outcomes.

The use of a purposive sampling technique further limits the generalizability of the findings. Participants were selected from specific educational institutions and social networks, potentially introducing sampling bias and reducing the representation of broader generational populations. Although the sample size of 240 (120 from each generation) provided a foundation for statistical analysis, it may still not fully capture the diversity of digital behaviours, psychological profiles, or socio-economic backgrounds across the two generations.

Additionally, the study relied solely on self-report questionnaires, such as the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS), the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), and the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale (LOSC). While these are standardized and widely used instruments, self-report methods are susceptible to response biases, including social desirability, inaccurate self-assessment, and recall errors. Incorporating objective behavioral data, qualitative interviews, or multi-informant assessments (e.g., from peers or family members) could have added depth and triangulation to the results.

Another limitation lies in the lack of control over the type, context, and content of social media exposure. The study did not differentiate between various platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) or between active versus passive usage patterns. This absence of contextual information may obscure important nuances in how different forms of social media engagement affect individuals' psychological experiences. Future research should consider disaggregating social media activities to better understand which aspects contribute most significantly to social comparison and self-criticism.

Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents the examination of changes in behavior or emotion over time. It captures only a snapshot of participants' experiences, without accounting for temporal fluctuations, life events, or developmental changes. A longitudinal design would allow for the observation of patterns over time and provide more

robust conclusions about the direction and stability of relationships among the variables. The study also did not control for personality factors (e.g., neuroticism, perfectionism), mental health history, or family background, all of which could moderate the relationship between social media use and self-critical tendencies. Including these variables in future studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms at play.

Lastly, while the study focused on two generational groups, it treated them as homogeneous categories, without considering intra-generational differences such as gender, region, digital literacy, or media exposure habits. Exploring these sub-group variations could yield more precise and actionable findings. While the current study offers meaningful contributions to the field of digital psychology and generational mental health, its limitations point to the need for more rigorous, diversified, and contextually enriched future research. Employing experimental or longitudinal methods, expanding sample diversity, and integrating mixed-method approaches would enhance the validity, applicability, and depth of future investigations in this domain.

## **5.6 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY**

To build upon the findings of the present study and address its limitations, several directions for future research are recommended. These suggestions aim to enhance the depth, validity, and applicability of future investigations into the psychological effects of social media use across generational groups.

Firstly, future studies should consider expanding the sample size and incorporating a more diverse and representative population. While the current study included 240 participants selected through purposive sampling, future research could benefit from probability-based sampling techniques, such as stratified or random sampling, to reduce bias and improve



generalizability. Including participants from varied socio-economic backgrounds, urban and rural regions, and different educational levels across India or internationally would allow for a broader understanding of how digital behavior and psychological outcomes vary across contexts.

Additionally, it would be valuable for future studies to explore intra-generational differences within Gen Z and Millennials. For example, examining gender differences, educational streams, or levels of digital literacy could provide deeper insight into how specific subgroups experience and respond to social media exposure. Investigating other age groups, such as Generation Alpha or older adults, could also offer a developmental perspective on how digital experiences and self-perception evolve across the lifespan.

Future research should also consider adopting longitudinal study designs to assess changes in social comparison and self-criticism over time. A longitudinal approach would help determine whether the observed relationships are stable, cumulative, or fluctuating in response to life events or digital trends. This would also allow for the examination of long-term effects of social media use on psychological well-being.

Moreover, researchers could integrate qualitative or mixed-method approaches to enrich the understanding of participants' lived experiences. In-depth interviews, focus groups, or case studies could reveal the subjective meanings behind social media behaviors and how users interpret comparison and criticism in real-world contexts. Such data would complement quantitative findings and provide a more holistic view of the phenomena. Another suggestion is to differentiate between types of social media use, such as active engagement (posting, commenting) versus passive consumption (scrolling, viewing). Examining the content type, platform-specific features, and time spent on social media would enable researchers to identify which patterns of usage are most closely associated with negative or positive psychological

effects.

Future research should also explore the moderating and mediating roles of psychological constructs such as self-esteem, body image, anxiety, perfectionism, and peer pressure. Identifying these factors can help explain why some individuals are more affected by social comparison or self-criticism than others, and can inform targeted mental health interventions.

Finally, researchers and practitioners are encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions such as digital literacy programs, emotional regulation workshops, or cognitive behavioral strategies in reducing the negative impact of social media on self-perception. Intervention studies can provide evidence-based tools to promote healthier engagement with digital environments, particularly for vulnerable groups like adolescents and young adults. future research should strive for methodological diversity, contextual sensitivity, and a multidimensional exploration of social media's psychological effects. By addressing these areas, scholars can contribute to a deeper, more actionable understanding of digital-age mental health and support the development of effective interventions for diverse populations.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Informed consent form**

#### **overview**

I am -----, MSc Counselling Psychology student at .....As a part of my IVth semester syllabus completion, I am conducting a research study among Gen Z and millennials, for which I would like to collect information from your side. I'm grateful to you for taking your time in assisting me with this research.

Please make sure that you fill this form with utmost sincerity and make sure that you don't skip any questions without responding. By participating in this survey, you will help contribute to valuable research that may enhance awareness and future interventions for improving this. Please answer the following questions honestly.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information gathered will be solely in the hands of the researcher. Your response will be kept completely confidential to be used for the research study, and no personal information will be disclosed anywhere. If any reports or publications result from this study, no information will be revealed that will permit readers to identify you. If you would like to know the results of the study, I would be happy to reveal them to you after the data has been completely analysed. All the information obtained in this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law.

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Voluntary participation

You are free to choose the participation in this study. you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason.

### **Questions**

Please feel free to ask about any terms you don't understand

### **Assent form**

I have read and understood what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered.

I voluntarily agree to take part in the research study.

I agree:

### **Personal data sheet**

Name:

Age:

Year of birth:

Gender:

Educational qualification:

Number of siblings:

Family type:

**Social media us scale (SMUS – Tuck and Thompson 2024)**

Directions: Please indicate how frequently you have engaged in each of the following social media activities in the PAST WEEK (7 days). Please only include activities engaged in on social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, etc. Do not include activities related to direct messaging such as Facebook Messenger or Instagram direct messages. For each activity, please use the following scale:

1=Never   2=1-2 times per week   3=3-4 times per week   4=5-6 times per week  
5=Once daily   6=2-5 times daily   7=6-9 times daily   8=10-13 times daily   9=Hourly or more

1. Made/shared a post or story about something positive that was personally about me

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

2. Looked at how many people liked, commented on, shared my content, or followed/friended me

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

3. Read comments to my own content

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

4. Edited and/or deleted my own social media content

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

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5. Played with photo filtering/photo editing

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

6. Compared my body or appearance to others'

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

7. Compared my life or experiences to others'

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

8. Reminisced about the past

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

9. Made/shared a post or story about something negative that was personally about me

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

10. Made/shared a post or story about something negative that was NOT personally about me

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

11. Commented unsupportively or disliked/"reacted" unsupportively on other's post(s)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

12. Sought out content that I morally or ethically disagreed with

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1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

13. Scrolled aimlessly through my feed(s)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

14. Navigated to others' profiles in my social network (e.g. friends or friends of friends)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

15. Looked at others' stories

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

16. Navigated to others' pages who I do not know (c.g., influencers or other famous people)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

17. Watched videos such as memes, news content, how-tos/recipes, etc.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

**Iowa -Netherland comparison orientation measure (INCOM- gibbons and bunk 1999)**

Direction: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Think about how you generally compare yourself to others in daily life. Use the provided scale to rate each statement. There are no right or wrong answers; respond as honestly as possible based on your typical thoughts and behaviors.

1=I disagree strongly    2= I disagree    3= I neither agree nor disagree    4= I agree    5=I agree strongly

1. I often compare how my loved ones (boy or girlfriend, family members, etc.) are doing with how others are doing.

1       2       3       4       5

2. I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.

1       2       3       4       5

3. If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.

1       2       3       4       5

4. I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people.

1       2       3       4       5

5. I am not the type of person who compares often with others. (reversed)

1       2       3       4       5

6. I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life.

1      2      3      4      5

7. I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences.

1      2      3      4      5

8. I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.

1      2      3      4      5

9. I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.

1      2      3      4      5

10. If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it.

1      2      3      4      5

11. I never consider my situation in life relative to that of other people. (reversed).

1      2      3      4      5

**Levels of self-criticism scale (LOSC – Thompson and Zuroff 2004)**

Direction: Please read each statement carefully and rate how much it applies to you. There are no right or wrong answers. Be honest and choose the number that best represents your experience. To do that I would like you to indicate how much you agree with each agree with the statement below, by using the following scale.

1=not at all    2= slightly    3=somewhat    4=moderately    5= fairly well    6= well    7= very well

1. I am very irritable when I have failed.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

2. I have a nagging sense of inferiority

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

3. I am very frustrated with myself when I don't meet the standards, I have for myself.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

4. I am usually uncomfortable in social situations where I don't know what to expect.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7



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5. I don't spend much time worrying about what other people will think of me. (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

6. I often get very angry with myself when I fail.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

7. I get very upset when I fail.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

8. If you are open with other people about your weaknesses, they are likely to still respect you, (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

9. Failure is a very painful experience for me.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

10. I often worry that other people will find out what I'm really like and be upset with me,

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

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11. I don't often worry about the possibility of failure. (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

12. I am confident that most of the people I care about will accept me for who I am. (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

13. When I don't succeed, I find myself wondering how worthwhile I am.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

14. If you give people the benefit of the doubt, they are likely to take advantage of you.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

15. I feel like a failure when I don't do as well as I would like.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

16. I am usually comfortable with people asking me about myself. (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

17. If I fail in one area, it reflects poorly on me as a person.

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1      2      3      4      5      6      7

18. I fear that if people get to know me too well, they will not respect me

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

19. I frequently compare myself with my goals and ideals.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

20. I seldom feel ashamed of myself. (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

21. Being open and honest is usually the best way to keep others' respect. (R)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

22. There are times that it is necessary to be somewhat dishonest in order to get what you want

1      2      3      4      5      6      7