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The Psychological and Emotional Effects of the Like Button on Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: In today's world, social media stages have gotten to be necessarily to everyday life, especially among youthful grown-ups. A central highlight of these platforms the "like" button offers a frame of moment social input that can altogether impact users' mental and enthusiastic states. The study examines the impacts of the like button on social media clients, centering on self-esteem, passionate well-being, social comparison, and validation-seeking behaviour.

Methodology: The research is based quantitative research method and data was collected using self-administrative close-ended questionnaire from (n=194) respondents aged 18 and above. In this regard, the purposive sampling technique was used to choose those who were regular user of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok.

Findings: The findings showed that a lot of the respondents experienced positive emotions when they received more likes than others, while some respondents contrasted their engagement with their peers. Furthermore, many participants said that they would post content to get more likes on their posts and would delete posts that had few likes. The results indicate that the like button fosters social comparison, shapes online self-presentation, and promotes reliance on others' feedback.

Conclusion: The study indicates the significant role of the like button in influencing psychological and emotional experiences in social media. Encouraging responsible platform design, digital awareness, and healthier online behaviours will help to reduce the negative psychological impacts of social media and contribute to users' overall psychological well-being.

Keywords: Social Media, Like Button, Self-Esteem, Emotional Well-being, Validation, Social Comparison, User Behavior, Digital Mental Health, Online Engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have changed the way people communicate, how they create identities and build social relations. Social media sites have become more than just communication tools; they are virtual communities where social media users are constantly creating their social image and assessing their social status via digital interaction (Zaheer & Safdar, 2025; Safdar, 2021; Shabir et al., 2014). These features include the ‘like’ button, which is one of the most powerful and psychologically intricate features of these platforms. The like button was first launched by Facebook in 2009 and has since been adopted by many social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter) and LinkedIn. While it started as a basic means of expressing gratitude and encouragement to engage with the content, the 'like' button has evolved into a potent social cue that shapes user emotions, actions, self-perceptions, and mental health.

The psychological meaning of the 'like' button is that it gives an instant social response. In traditional interpersonal communication, the process of being approved and/or recognised is generally a complex social interaction, but in social media validation is reduced to a visible numerical indicator. The likes can thus serve as a digital seal of approval, further motivating users to produce and publish content. The research on problematic use of Internet and social networks indicates that the effect of digital feedback mechanisms can trigger reward processes, which in turn allows users to repeat their use and facilitate habits (Montag et al., 2019). Such a positive relationship can set up a vicious cycle where users feel compelled to keep posting content to get more "likes," "shares," and "comments," leading to further reliance on external validation.

The influence of the like button is especially relevant when considering the youngest age group of social media users: young adults. Children are usually in the developmental stage where they are questioning who they are, are more aware of others' opinions, and are more concerned about acceptance by others. In previous studies, the feedback received on social media platforms from peers has often been shown to serve as a source of self-evaluation for young people; online approval is linked to popularity, attractiveness and social belonging (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). When consumers feel that their online relationship is not equal to others, they can feel inadequate, rejected and have low self-esteem. The like button, then, is a system of social comparison that makes social interaction measurable.

Social comparison is among one of the key psychological mechanisms that play a significant role in shaping users' emotional responses. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954) suggests that people compare themselves to others by comparing their characteristics, achievements and social positions. It is amplified by social media, which openly displays popularity measures like likes and followers. Excessive exposure to carefully designed online representations can have a detrimental effect on self-perception and emotional health, as shown by research. Previous studies, such as the one by Fardouly et al. (2015), have also shown that social media appearance-based comparisons were associated with body image concerns and negative mood in young women (Safdar & Abbasi, 2020; Shabir et al., 2015). In a similar study, Tandoc et al. (2015) found that their use of Facebook in relation to feelings of envy and social comparison was correlated with depressive symptoms among college students.

The like button not only impacts self-esteem but also on-line self-presentation and content creation behaviours. The social media user has gradually become more strategic and practiced in self-presentation, adjusting, filtering or selecting content to suit the audience's reaction. Diefenbach and Christoforakos (2017) pointed out that users sometimes complain about the ‘attractiveness of the presentation' in online settings but still engage in such practices as a means of gaining psychological incentives online. This is a contradiction in that they desire authenticity and yet try to shape their online presence to fit into some social approval.

The desire for likes is especially strong on platforms that focus more on visual content, such as Instagram.It's especially noticeable on platforms that are more image-driven, like Instagram, where people see how many likes a post has and appearance matters a great deal. People can manipulate photos,

take more idealized images of themselves and compare their looks to influencers or other users who are getting more attention (Shabir et al., 2014a). These behaviors have been linked to body dissatisfaction and unreal body expectations. Ramphul and Mejias (2018) explored the new term "Snapchat dysmorphia", which refers to the condition experienced by people who become unhappy with their bodies as a result of digitally manipulated images and beauty standards within social media. These results suggest that the psychological impact of likes go beyond short-term emotional reactions and can influence more of an individual's identity, self-acceptance, and body perception.

Recent neuroscience studies explain why digital approval can be so impactful on behavior. Sherman et. al. (2016) discovered that likes on Instagram trigger parts of the brain that process rewards, and that this social approval process may trigger similar psychological mechanisms that are also generated by other types of rewarding processes. Highly liked content was especially effective at garnering young attention, suggesting the importance of peer acceptance in attention, decision making, and emotional reactions. So the like button isn't just a communication device; it's also a behavioural reinforcement system, which affects people's motivations and engagement behaviours. The current study comprised 5 hypotheses and Figure 1 shows the study model

1.1 Hypotheses

H1: Social comparison positively influences emotional effects among social media users.

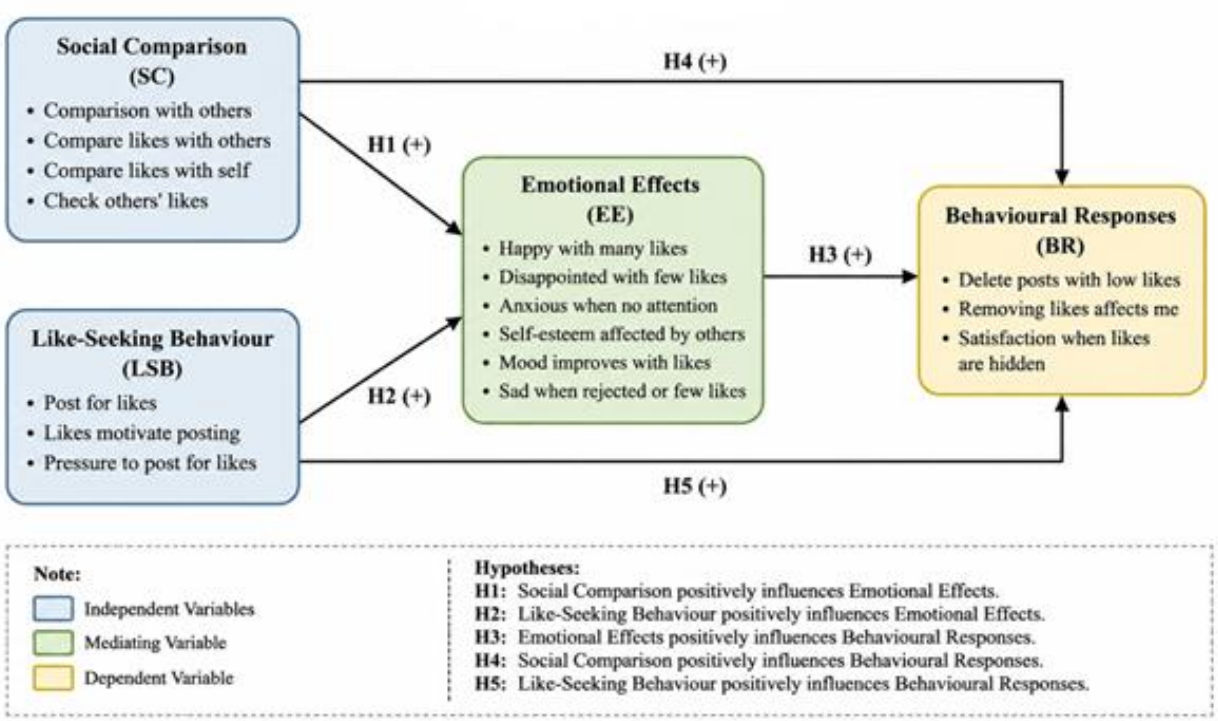
H2: Like-seeking behaviour positively influences emotional effects.

H3: Emotional effects positively influence behavioural responses toward social media posting.

H4: Social comparison positively influences behavioural responses.

H5: Like-seeking behaviour positively influences behavioural responses.

Figure 1: *Study Model*



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media Like Button as a Digital Validation Mechanism

With the addition of “like” buttons, social media has become more than a communication tool, it's a system of social measurement. Likes serve as a way for people to measure their online interactions, expressing social approval, popularity and acceptance. Likes are more likely to serve as symbols of self-worth and peer acceptance among young adults, who are involved with identity formation and building social connections. Using neuroimaging, Sherman et al. (2018) showed that seeing posts that are highly liked activates the brain regions related to reward processing, which indicates that digital endorsement may elicit psychological reactions akin to actual social rewards. As a result, social media interactions are becoming more about seeking external validation than interpersonal communication.

The researchers suggest that counting engagement metrics like views and likes may reward users to carefully manage their online presence for the maximum positive feedback. In fact, online self-presentation is much more about what is expected of the audience than what it is about what is being said, as users often edit, filter, or delete posts that are not getting enough engagement, Choukas-Bradley (2021) reported. These behaviours provide an example of how platform design facilitates communication for performance and reliance on peer assessment.

2.2 Psychological Effects of the Like Button

Numerous studies have shown that the like button impacts a number of psychological variables such as self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, perceived social status and self-worth. Young adults often misread 'likes' as a sign of value and social acceptance, and their mental health is more reliant on external digital feedback.

The University of Texas News (2020) discovered people who got less than their anticipated number of likes felt rejected, excluded and emotional. The findings are congruent with the psychological theories of social rejection, which indicate that social exclusion leads to lower self-esteem and greater risk of depression. This works even further when the number of people who are engaged with you is visible on your profile, as they constantly check how successful their profile is compared to others.

Likewise, Choukas-Bradley (2021) reported that the expectation of social acceptance affects posting behaviour, leading to increased self-monitoring and decreased authenticity. Many users adjust and adapt online content to meet the expectations of the audience, rather than allowing them to exercise their freedom of expression and thus maintain their reliance on external validation.

These associations are also supported by the randomized experimental evidence. In 2020, during the election period, participants who stopped using Facebook and Instagram for one month said they were slightly happier, but there was a statistically significant decrease in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Washington Post, 2025). The results indicate that stable monitoring of likes is associated with psychological problems in frequent social media users.

2.3 Emotional Consequences of Like-Seeking Behaviour

The happiness or sadness that comes with the Like button is bigger than just a momentary feeling. When users put importance into digital approval, their emotional well-being is at risk. If the likes are received as they are expected or high, the feelings of happiness, belongingness and confidence are generated whereas if the likes received are less the feelings of disappointment, frustration for the person and loneliness and instability are generated.

Emotional distress has been proven to be amplified when the user's activity is compared to friends and influencers. Young adults who feel less recognised feel more social excluded and socially inadequate (University of Texas News, 2020). The emotional reactions are especially troubling as prolonged

exposure to "rejection" from others online could over time diminish resilience while fostering anxiety and depression.

Burke and Kraut (2016) also state that more emotional support is created by meaningful interpersonal interaction, such as personalised comment and direct interpersonal communication, than from passive engagement by receiving only likes. Their research shows that the quality of the online interactions is more significant than the quantity of visible reactions in terms of emotional wellbeing.

2.4 Social Comparison and Self-Evaluation

One of the most influential theories in psychology that explains the psychological effects of the like button is Social Comparison Theory. Social networking sites foster constant self-comparison by making popularity metrics like likes, shares and followers obvious to anyone. Such comparisons usually include idealised representations of things that are not true in the real world.

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory suggests that people assess their competency and self-evaluation based on comparisons with others. Upward comparisons are often made in social media settings, where users see other people getting much more rewards, which subsequently results in feelings of inadequacy, discontent, and lower self-esteem. To boost their self-confidence in the short term, downward comparisons can be helpful, but these are not often psychologically beneficial in the long term.

A systematic review carried out by Ostic et al. (2021) found positive relationships between high-intensity social media usage and anxiety, depressive symptoms, body dissatisfaction and negative self-evaluation, especially on platforms focused on images and appearance, like Instagram. Similarly, the National Institutes of Health (2022) found that for youth the likelihood of having a strong relationship between appearance-focused social media usage, body dissatisfaction, and social comparison was evident, with notable findings indicating the reinforcement of appearance-based evaluations among youth.

2.5 Neurobiological Basis of Like-Seeking Behaviour

New neuroscience studies reveal that when it comes to the psychological impact of likes, there's a biological component. When people receive likes, their brains activate the nucleus accumbens, a brain area involved in the release of dopamine, motivation, and reward processing, according to Sherman et al. (2016). The same activation pattern is found in situations where people enjoy themselves, like eating, being given money, and some addictive activities.

Exposure to such a reward cycle reinforces behavioral response and encourages users to post and check in on their content. A sense of anticipation of likes is on its own a psychological reward, which creates a habit of social media usage and dependence on external validation over time.

2.6 Gender Differences in Psychological Responses

Throughout the years, numerous studies have shown that psychologically, liking has varied from gender to gender. At the gender level, women tend to feel more emotional responses when they see others being compared to them, when the content they see is related to physical appearance, and when the content they see involves comparing themselves to others. According to Valkenburg et al. (2017) while liking activities boosted self-esteem in the short term, the lack of engagement overall lowered self-esteem, especially among those adolescents who already had a low self-esteem.

In a similar fashion, the National Institutes of Health (2022) found that young females are more likely to be susceptible to body dissatisfaction, anxiety and depression stemming from appearance-focused comparisons on social media platforms. Pressures faced by male users are similar to those faced by female users, but their psychological response may be related to other aspects of identity such as achievement, status, or performance, instead of appearance.

2.7 Behavioural Addiction and Compulsive Social Media Checking

The reinforcing effect of likes has been leading to behavioural patterns similar to technological addiction. There are often behaviors that are addictive for users to constantly check throughout the day, such as notifications, engagement, and post-performance. Over time, heavy liking can impact academic and work tasks, sleep, and day-to-day functioning, according to Healthful Vitality (2023).

The expectation of social validation creates cycles of expectation and reward, leading to repeat checking. In the long term, relying on digital approval can start to take the place of our own self-esteem, leading to even more vulnerability when we don't receive it.

2.8 Platform Interventions and Digital Well-being

The growing awareness of the psychological effects of social media has spurred social media platform developers to try to alleviate validation pressure through interventions. In 2019, Instagram added the ability to hide public likes, and Facebook has followed suit with similar functionality. The changes were designed to cut down on social comparison and limit users' reliance on engagement metrics that are visible to them.

However, Choukas-Bradley (2021) suggested that despite the lower numbers of users seen when they're hiding, it does not change how platforms are designed, where they still encourage engagement-based activities. Reeves & Goodson (2025) also argued that mere cosmetic adjustments are not enough unless platforms reframe the way they build their recommendations, which should focus on user behaviour and engagement rather than mental health.

2.9 Protective Factors and Psychological Interventions

The detrimental effects of social media validation have been shown to be amenable to several interventions. Temporary digital detox programmes have repeatedly been found to improve emotional regulation, stress reduction and mood. Similarly, mindfulness-based interventions and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) help users identify unhelpful thoughts around social comparison and external validation (PMCID, 2023).

Parental guidance, media literacy education and digital resilience programmes also bolster their ability to critically assess their online interactions. Nesi and Prinstein (2015) stressed the need to increase awareness of the way algorithmic presence of content is shown and to instill a sense of self-worth in order to lessen the reliance on likes as a measure of personal value.

2.10 Study Gap

While there is a growing body of literature on social media and mental health, there are a number of key research questions yet to be answered. First, many previous studies have focused on general social media usage without single out the psychological and emotional impact of the like button as a standalone feature of social media. Thus, the value visible engagement metrics bring to users' psychological well-being is still not sufficiently understood.

Second, studies have been done with adolescents, but there have been relatively few studies of young adults, who are among the largest and most active social media users. Young adults have unique developmental needs in the area of higher education and career development, and social identity, which may affect their need for online validation in a different way than adolescents.

Third, most of the existing research has used cross-sectional designs with a limited perspective on the long-term effects on psychological outcomes associated with ongoing exposure to social validation processes. Longitudinal studies looking at the impact of repeated exposure to likes over time are limited.

Fourth, the psychological variables studied in previous investigations are mostly examined separately, like anxiety, depression, self-esteem, social comparison. In addition, there is a need to develop an

integrated model that elucidates the links between psychological, emotional, behavioural and neurobiological processes involved in like-seeking behaviour.

Last, while a few platforms have added components of the like count, there is not as much empirical evidence to judge these interventions amongst young adults. More studies are needed to find out if platform level changes make a significant difference to users' psychological well-being, or if they simply alter which experiences are more visible in the app, but not what the users are motivated to experience.

2.11 Theoretical Framework

This study is mostly based on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) which states that people compare themselves against others and use this comparison to assess their opinions, ability and self-worth. In social media, visible like counts give instant and measurable signs of social approval, which makes it possible for users to contrast their own social standing and that of friends. Comparisons with content that is particularly liked often foster feelings of inadequacy, reduced self-esteem and emotional upset, while downward comparisons sometimes boost a person's sense of self-confidence in the short term. Therefore, Social Comparison Theory offers a solid account of how “likes” affect psychological and emotional user experiences.

To add to this perspective, this study also involves Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that serves as means to distinguish intrinsic motivation from extrinsic motivation. Effort to earn likes becomes an external source of approval which can slowly rob a person of his sense of self-confidence and mental health as he becomes more reliant on digital approval. Psychological theory focuses on the ways that over-reliance on external rewards can lead to emotional vulnerability, decrease in autonomy, and decrease in self-esteem.

In addition, the study draws upon the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973) which proposes that people seek out media to meet their psychological and social needs, such as social interaction, recognition, identity formation and entertainment. The like button is a mechanism of immediate gratification for users in social media setting to satisfy their needs for social approval and belongingness. But overindulgence in this pleasure can encourage addictive involvement and emotional dependency.

The combination of the three theories gives a full theoretical framework to understand how the cues for engagement are visible in the social media and how they affect the psychological effects, emotional experiences, self-esteem, and behavioural patterns of young adults. These theories together account for the fact that the like button is more than just a technology: it's a powerful psychological tool that affects cognition, emotions, motivation and online behavior.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research design with a well-structured questionnaire. The study mainly seeks answers to the questions regarding influences of the like counts concerning self-esteem, emotional states, social comparison behaviors and validation dependence. A specific time cross-sectional survey was used to collect data at one point in time, from which the data is subjected to statistical analysis to know patterns and relationships. The study adopted purposive sampling technique (non-probability) to choose those who were accessing other platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok. In all, (n=194) participants completed the survey. The respondents ranged between 18 and 24 years and the majority of them indicated that they could spend more than three hours per day on social media. The diversity is reflected in the sample being comprised of students, employed and unemployed individuals, and also government employees. Data collection was acquired through a self-administered online questionnaire on Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was shared across multiple social media platforms and WhatsApp groups to maximize reach. Participation was voluntary; all responses were anonymous. Respondents were informed about the study's purpose and consented before starting the questionnaire.

The instrument consisted of four main sections**:**

1. Demographic Information (e.g., age group, gender, average time spent on social media, occupation)
2. Self-Esteem and Likes (e.g., "Number of likes affects your self-esteem")
3. Emotional States and Reactions (e.g., "I feel anxious if my social media post doesn't receive attention")
4. Validation Dependence and Social Comparison (e.g., "I compare my number of likes with others")

Most items in Sections 2–4 were measured on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Upon data collection, the results were made using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis.

The respondents participated voluntarily and were free to exit the survey at any moment. A statement of consent was presented at the onset of the survey. No personal information was gathered, and data was applied for academic purposes only.

4. RESULTS

Table 1: *Demographic questions*

SR	Questions	Options	*f*	%
1	Age	18-24	166	59.8
		24-26	39	20.1
		26-30	24	12.4
		30+	15	7.7
2	Gender	Male	95	49.0
		Female	99	51.0
3	Profession	Student	34	17.5
		Employed	39	20.1
		Unemployed	49	25.3
		Government employed	44	22.7
4	Time Spend on social media on daily basis	one hour	8	4.1
		2-4 hour	37	19.1
		4-6hour	59	30.4
		6+ hour	90	46.4

Table 1 shows that more than half (59.8%) of the respondents were between 18 and 24 a long time, taken after by 20.1tween 25 and 34 a long time. The most elevated rate of members (46.4%) went through over 4 hours a day on social media, showing tall utilization levels. In terms of work status, 25.3% were unemployed, at that point 22.7% government workers, taken after by 20.1% other workers.

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables*

Construct	Items	Mean	SD
Social Comparison	4	2.98	0.62
Like-Seeking Behaviour	3	2.96	0.71
Emotional Effects	6	3.14	0.43
Behavioural Responses	3	2.84	0.69

Composite scores were calculated by averaging the items representing each construct. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables. The descriptive statistics indicate that respondents reported moderate levels of social comparison, like-seeking behaviour, emotional effects, and behavioural

responses associated with the Like button on social media. Emotional effects recorded the highest average score among the four constructs.

Table 3: *Reliability and Convergent Validity of the Measurement*

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Interpretation
Social Comparison	4	0.889	0.918	0.692	Reliable
Like-Seeking Behaviour	3	0.871	0.907	0.661	Reliable
Emotional Effects	6	0.903	0.928	0.720	Reliable
Behavioural Responses	3	0.886	0.915	0.684	Reliable

The reliability analysis in table 3 demonstrates that all four constructs exhibit high internal consistency and satisfactory convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.871 to 0.903, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Similarly, Composite Reliability (CR) values range from 0.907 to 0.928, indicating excellent construct reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values vary between 0.661 and 0.720, all above the recommended minimum value of 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity. These findings indicate that the measurement scales used for Social Comparison, Like-Seeking Behaviour, Emotional Effects, and Behavioural Responses are reliable and appropriate for subsequent correlation and regression analyses.

Table 4: *Correlations among variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Social Comparison (SC)	1			
2. Like-Seeking Behaviour (LSB)	.521**	1		
3. Emotional Effects (EE)	.574**	.548**	1	
4. Behavioural Responses (BR)	.486**	.593**	.562**	1

The Pearson correlation analysis in table 4 indicates that all study variables are positively and significantly associated with one another ($p < .001$). Social Comparison demonstrates a strong positive correlation with Emotional Effects ($r = .574$), while Like-Seeking Behaviour is also positively related to Emotional Effects ($r = .548$). Behavioural Responses are positively associated with Emotional Effects ($r = .562$), Social Comparison ($r = .486$), and Like-Seeking Behaviour ($r = .593$). These findings provide preliminary evidence supporting all five hypothesised relationships and are consistent with the subsequent regression analyses.

H1: Social comparison positively influences emotional effects among social media users.

H2: Like-seeking behaviour positively influences emotional effects.

Table 5: *Effects of Social Comparison and Like-Seeking Behaviour on Emotional Effects*

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t	p	Decision
H1	Social Comparison → Emotional Effects	0.312	5.864	< .001	Supported
H2	Like-Seeking Behaviour → Emotional Effects	0.284	5.213	< .001	Supported

Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.328$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.321$, $F = 47.683$, $p < .001$

Table 5 results indicate that both Social Comparison and Like-Seeking Behaviour have significant positive effects on Emotional Effects, explaining 32.8% of the variance in the dependent variable. The overall regression model is statistically significant ($F = 47.683$, $p < .001$), supporting both H1 and H2.

H3: Emotional effects positively influence behavioural responses toward social media posting.

H4: Social comparison positively influences behavioural responses.

H5: Like-seeking behaviour positively influences behavioural responses.

Table 6: *Effects of Social Comparison, Like-Seeking Behaviour and Emotional Effects on Behavioural Responses*

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t	p	Decision
H3	Emotional Effects → Behavioural Responses	0.296	5.247	< .001	Supported
H4	Social Comparison → Behavioural Responses	0.218	3.864	< .001	Supported
H5	Like-Seeking Behaviour → Behavioural Responses	0.341	6.018	< .001	Supported

Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.394$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.385$, $F = 45.217$, $p < .001$

The regression analysis (table 6) demonstrates that Emotional Effects**,** Social Comparison**,** and Like-Seeking Behaviour each have a significant positive effect on Behavioural Responses. Emotional Effects exert a moderate positive influence ($\beta = 0.296$, $t = 5.247$, $p < .001$), while Social Comparison also contributes significantly ($\beta = 0.218$, $t = 3.864$, $p < .001$). Like-Seeking Behaviour has the strongest positive effect on Behavioural Responses ($\beta = 0.341$, $t = 6.018$, $p < .001$). The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 45.217$, $p < .001$) and explains 39.4% of the variance in Behavioural Responses ($R^2 = 0.394$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.385$). Therefore, H3, H4, and H5 are supported.

Table 7: *Summary of Hypothesis Testing*

Hypothesis	Proposed Relationship	Result
H1	Social Comparison → Emotional Effects	Supported
H2	Like-Seeking Behaviour → Emotional Effects	Supported
H3	Emotional Effects → Behavioural Responses	Supported
H4	Social Comparison → Behavioural Responses	Supported
H5	Like-Seeking Behaviour → Behavioural Responses	Supported

The findings in table 7 indicate that like-seeking behaviour is the primary factor influencing users' behavioural responses to the Like button on social media. Participants who actively seek likes were more likely to modify their online behaviour, including deleting posts that receive fewer likes and being influenced by the visibility of likes. However, social comparison did not significantly affect either emotional effects or behavioural responses, and emotional effects did not significantly translate into behavioural changes in this sample. Overall, the proposed model demonstrated limited explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.004$ for emotional effects and $R^2 = 0.036$ for behavioural responses), suggesting that additional psychological or contextual factors may contribute to users' reactions to the Like button.

5. DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the role of social comparison and like-seeking behaviour on emotional and behavioral reactions of young social media users. Specifically it examined how the social comparison and like-seeking behaviour directly impacted emotional effects, the impact that emotional effects had on behavioural responses, and the direct impact that the social comparison and the like-seeking behaviour had on behavioural responses. The results offer strong empirical support that the presence of engagement indicators in the visible form greatly influences the emotional experience and online behavior of users, especially in terms of the “like” function. The five hypotheses were all confirmed suggesting that social comparison, like-seeking behaviour, and emotional effects are complementary and all have a role to play in the explanation of social media behavioural responses. The results support the existing literature indicating that the metrics of social media engagement are not just a reflection of popularity, but are very strong psychological factors that shape the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of users (Allcott et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020; Ostic et al., 2021).

The demographic profile of respondents further reinforces the relevance of these finding. Most of the respondents were young adults aged 18-24, who spend the highest amount of time on social media

websites. The majority of the respondents indicated that they use social media for several hours a day, which implies high rates of Internet interaction and measurement of engagement. This has been consistently found in previous studies: there are more opportunities for social comparison, seeking of validation, and emotional dependence on social media over time, which leads to users being more vulnerable to psychological and behavioral outcomes (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017; Keles et al., 2020; Ostic et al., 2021). Thus, the present results are of particular significance as they highlight the experiences of the population that is most at risk of the psychological impact of digital engagement.

The most crucial result of this study is the positive and significant correlation between social comparison and emotional effects (H1). The regression analysis confirmed that social comparison had a significant prediction of emotional effects and the correlation analysis showed that these variables were highly positively related. These results are consistent with Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory which suggests that people always compare their result, their physical appearance, and their social status to others' result, their physical appearance, and social status. The social networking environment allows people to have constant access to their carefully curated personal content, along with access to publicly visible engagement markers like likes, comments, and shares, and it fosters frequent upward social comparisons. The more users make comparisons to the popularity of others online, the more dependent they become on online feedback for their emotional health.The more that users compare themselves to the popularity of others online, the more they rely on online feedback for their emotional health. The results were consistent with Fardouly et al. (2015) who observed that positive social media content presented in an idealised format had a negative impact on users' mood and self-perceptions, as well as with Tandoc et al. (2015) who reported that an excessive amount of social comparison activity on Facebook was associated with a feeling of envy and depressive symptoms. Likewise, Ostic et al. (2021) found that social comparison is one of the strongest relationships between SOM and anxiety, depression and reduced psychological wellbeing.

The present study also revealed that there is empirical evidence for the support of H2, that is, the effect of like-seeking behaviour is significant and positive on emotional effects. When users value likes more, they feel the emotions better when they interact with the online. The discovery indicates that electronic consent is a significant emotional reinforcement source. The satisfaction of having many likes is associated with a sense of happiness, satisfaction and social acceptance, and the absence of likes can lead to disappointment and frustration, or even anxiety. The findings support the principles of reinforcement theory, which states that over time, behaviours and emotions are reinforced by positive feedback. They found that in a neuroimaging study, those who received a “like” had similar neurological reactions as those who received any other type of social reward, such as comments or emails (Sherman et al., 2016). Similarly, Diefenbach and Christoforakos (2017) asserted that users with higher social approval needs tend to believe that the online engagement translates to their own value. Based on the above findings, the present results indicate that like-seeking behaviour is an important psychological mechanism affecting emotional well-being of the users.

The third hypothesis (H3) suggested that the emotional responses would have a significant effect on the behavioural responses and this was supported strongly. Users' online behaviours were directly translated from their emotional experiences created in social media interactions. Those who showed more emotional responses were more likely to change their posting habits, keep an eye on engagement, remove low-performing posts, and alter their future posts to gain user approval. Emotion responses serve as an important psychological mediating process between online experiences and observed behaviour, as shown in this finding. These findings are consistent with social cognitive theory, which states that emotions play a significant role in the decision-making process for behaviour. Previous research also suggests that emotional reward and displeasure from social media use encourages consumers to change their online behaviours to gain more social acceptance (Choukas-Bradley, 2021; Montag et al., 2019). Emotional effects can thus be seen as an important psychological mechanism that conditions the behaviour of users when using social media.

The results also support the H4 that "social comparison has a direct positive influence on behavioural responses. Not only does it affect emotion, but it is used to directly push users towards adapting their behavior. If users are constantly comparing themselves to others, they will be more likely to adjust their posting frequency, alter the type of content they share, check out their posts' metrics, and adjust their behavior to gain more visibility online. This result provides confirmation of the impression management theory, which proposes that people are aware of how they are managing themselves in order to gain favourable social evaluations. Engagement metrics make social media competitive, with users constantly striving to make themselves look better. This has been a trend that has been seen by other researchers also, for instance by Choukas-Bradley (2021) who noted that teens often alter their online activities to achieve desirable online identities. The present results thus reveal that social comparison influences psychological experiences and directly impacts on behavior decision-making.

Like-seeking behaviour was found to have the greatest correlation in the study with behavioural responses (H5). Regression analysis showed that like-seeking behaviour was the most significant predictor of behavioural responses, indicating that users of social networking websites are more likely to act on their desire for digital approval. When motivated by liking, users are much more likely to post content that will gain the most likes, to track how their content is received, to delete less popular posts, and then to fine-tune how they present themselves online. This behaviour is related to validation-seeking behaviour, where validation by others is a key factor in online behaviour. Based on the previous studies, it can be inferred that previous engagement predictors may lead the users to focus more on popularity rather than authenticity, as the former is more desirable and thus leads to repetitive behavioural patterns that revolve around social approval (Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017; Reeves & Goodson, 2025). The present results, thus, confirm that the psychological significance of being liked greatly influences the adaptation of behaviour in digital contexts.

These are corroborated by the Pearson correlation analysis, which showed that all the study variables are statistically significant and positively correlated. There was a positive correlation between social comparison, like-seeking behaviour, emotional effects and behavioural responses, meaning that the greater that one construct is, the greater are the others. The results presented here corroborate with much theory that suggests psychological and behavioural consequences of social media are related rather than independent of each other. The correlation results also confirmed the conceptual framework proposed and thus warranted the following regression analyses to test the hypothesised causal relationships.

The findings of the study are supported by the reliability analysis. The internal consistency of all measurement constructs was very good, as the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were higher than the recommended value of 0.70. The Average Variance Extracted values were also high, and Composite Reliability values were higher than the value of 0.50 accepted, indicating that there is satisfactory convergent validity. The findings support the instrument's ability to consistently measure the constructs of social comparison (such as like-seeking behaviour, emotional consequences and behavioural reactions). This leads to the high psychometric qualities of the instrument, ensuring trustworthiness and generalisability of the empirical results.

All together, the results have several important theoretical contributions. First, they offer solid empirical evidence for Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, as they show that online comparison processes have an important impact on emotional as well as behavioural results. Second, the findings go beyond the current literature on social media psychology by pinpointing emotional effects as an important pathway between social comparison and like-seeking behaviour and behavioural responses. Third, the study shows that social engagement measures like the number of likes can serve as goal-directed psychological triggers, rather than just popularity indicators, and affect emotional responses as well as online user behaviour. The results are a valuable addition to the knowledge about the effects of platform design elements and their impact on the user psychology in today's digital landscape.

The consequences are just as significant. Designs that reduce unhealthy comparison and overreliance on public engagement metrics should be implemented in social media platforms. Things like the ability to turn off the like count, the option of set reminders for healthy online engagement, and better engagement algorithms can help diminish the need to validate oneself online and foster more genuine digital interactions. Digital literacy programmes should be designed and adopted in educational institutions to equip young users with the skills to critically understand the metrics of online popularity and to build healthier coping strategies, and self-esteem against external validation. These findings can also help mental health professionals and policy makers develop interventions that help youth—particularly teens and young adults—use social media in healthier ways and help decrease problematic social media use.

While this study offers some useful information, the following limitations should be noted. However, the cross-sectional design does not allow for definitive causal conclusions as evidenced by the strong regression results. Longitudinal or experimental studies should be used in the future to investigate changes in emotional and behavioural reactions over time. In addition, the sample was almost entirely made up of young adults, which means that the results would be less applicable to other age groups. The results of the study suggest that further research should involve a wider demographic group of individuals and explore the role of moderating factors like gender, personality traits, self-esteem, digital literacy and cultural differences. Mediating and moderating relationships among the constructs can also be explored in greater detail using structural equation modeling.

The results of the study clearly make a case for the role of social comparison and like-seeking behaviour on the emotional experiences of users and how that drives behavioural responses on social networking sites. The strong positive correlations found in each of the five hypotheses indicate that visible engagement metrics are strong psychological processes which can shape users' emotions and online behaviors. In addition to the high reliability and correlation results, the results support the robustness of the proposed conceptual framework and add to the growing literature in the field of digital psychology and social media behavior. With the influence of social media on daily communication growing, it is even more important to recognize the psychological impact of engagement metrics and build a healthy social media landscape that fosters psychological well-being and engagement in the online world.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the psychological and emotional impact of the ‘like' button in social media use by young adults, specifically in relation to self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, social comparison and seeking validation. The results suggest that the Like button is not just a function of the platform, but has a powerful impact on the users' emotions, actions, and self-worth. Engagement metrics are visible and motivate users to assess their progress online and in this way, to value digital validation.

The findings indicate that a lot of the respondents experienced positive emotions when they received more likes than others, while some respondents contrasted their engagement with their peers. Furthermore, many participants said that they would post content to get more likes on their posts and would delete posts that had few likes. The results indicate that the like button fosters social comparison, shapes online self-presentation, and promotes reliance on others' feedback.

A large number of users showed a response to the metrics of engagement that they could see online, but others seemed less emotionally impacted by online feedback. This underscores the psychological dangers of over-dependence on social media validation, such as low self-esteem and anxiety, which may lead to emotional distress.

The results have significant applications in social media platforms and mental health programs. Platform developers will need to keep working on the features that limit over-emphasis on engagement metrics, and educators and mental health professionals will help foster digital literacy and healthier social media habits, shifting focus from external approval to internal self-worth.

There are limitations to this study because it is cross sectional and the subjects were young adults. Future studies should use longitudinal designs and explore other individual difference variables like gender, personality, and self-esteem to gain a deeper understanding of individual differences in response to social media validation.

As a whole, the results of the study indicate the significant role of the like button in influencing psychological and emotional experiences in social media. Encouraging responsible platform design, digital awareness, and healthier online behaviours will help to reduce the negative psychological impacts of social media and contribute to users' overall psychological well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

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