

Upward social comparison on social network sites and depressive symptoms: A moderated mediation model of self-esteem and optimism



Qing-Qi Liu, Zong-Kui Zhou ^{*}, Xiu-Juan Yang, Geng-Feng Niu, Yuan Tian, Cui-Ying Fan

Key Laboratory of Adolescent Cyberpsychology and Behavior (CCNU), Ministry of Education, Wuhan 430079, China
School of Psychology, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China

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ABSTRACT

Studies have revealed that upward social comparison on social network sites (SNSs) was a risk factor for depressive symptoms, however, little is known about the underlying processes that may mediate or moderate this relationship. This study extended prior research by examining the mediating role of self-esteem and the moderating role of optimism in this relationship. A sample of 1205 Chinese undergraduate students completed measures of upward social comparison on SNSs, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and optimism. Results showed that self-esteem partially mediated the relation between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms. In addition, the direct effect of upward social comparison on SNSs on depressive symptoms and the mediating effect of self-esteem were both moderated by optimism. The two effects were more potent for individuals with low optimism than for those with high optimism. The present study contributes to a better understanding of how and when upward social comparison on SNSs increases the risk of depressive symptoms. Limitations and implications of this study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social comparison is a common social phenomenon (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Miller, 1977; Xing & Yu, 2005). Information of others is the key factor that leads individuals to engage in social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2006). In addition to offline interpersonal interaction, many Internet applications also provide individuals with convenient access to comparative information. One such application is social network sites (SNSs). Since viewing others' profiles is the most prevalent activity on SNSs (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), and the majority of time spent on SNSs was devoted to browsing and searching for others' information (Wise, Alhabash, & Park, 2010), social network sites have been considered as an ideal platform for social comparison to take place (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015). Moreover, information on SNSs is overly positive because people tend to present themselves in overly flattering ways and communicate positive life developments more frequently than negative ones on SNSs (Kross et al., 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015). Social comparison on SNSs thus involves mostly upward social comparison, namely, comparing with those who are better off (Feinstein et al., 2013; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014; Vogel et al., 2015), or even envy of others (Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015).

Studies indicated that social comparison on SNSs would bring about negative impacts on individuals' mental health (Jang, Park, & Song, 2016; Lee, 2014). Depression is one of the undesirable consequences of upward social comparison on SNSs (Appel, Crusius, & Gerlach, 2015). Research showed that upward social comparison on SNSs was positively associated with depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), and envy on SNSs positively predicted symptoms of depression (Tandoc et al., 2015). In addition, upward social comparison on SNSs would lead to increases in depressive symptoms 3 weeks later (Feinstein et al., 2013). Namely, upward social comparison on SNSs has not only an immediate effect but also a delayed effect on depressive symptoms. In spite of the robust association between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms, however, whether there exist some individual traits that would mediate or moderate this association remains largely unexplored. Determining the mediating and moderating mechanism underlying this association could advance our understanding of how and when upward social comparison on SNSs leads to symptoms of depression, and how to protect individuals from the deleterious effects of upward social comparison on SNSs.

1.1. The mediating role of self-esteem

Self-esteem is regarded as a global evaluation of oneself (Blachnio, Przepiorka, & Rudnicka, 2016). Since social comparison is primarily used to learn about the self, it will undoubtedly exert significant impacts

^{*} Corresponding author: Key Laboratory of Adolescent Cyberpsychology and Behavior (CCNU), Ministry of Education, Wuhan 430079, China.
E-mail address: zhouzk@mail.ccnu.edu.cn (Z.-K. Zhou).

on self-evaluation (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011; Festinger, 1954). According to social comparison theory (de Vries & Kühne, 2015; Festinger, 1954), upward social comparison would lead individuals to be more aware of the fact that they are worse off than others. The contrast effect would then cause a less favorable self-evaluation (Collins, 1995). Studies on upward social comparison on SNSs support the viewpoint of social comparison theory. For instance, a study showed that upward social comparison on SNSs negatively predicted self-perceived competence and physical appearance (de Vries & Kühne, 2015). Another study found that upward social comparison on social media significantly lowered self-esteem (Lee, 2014).

Self-esteem is closely associated with depressive symptoms (Bajaj, Robins, & Pande, 2016). According to Beck's cognitive theory of depression, negative belief about oneself (e.g., low self-esteem) is the key etiology of depression (Beck, 1967). Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies found that low self-esteem was one of the most important risk factors for depression (Michalak, Teismann, Heidenreich, Strohle, & Vocks, 2011; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Considering that upward social comparison on SNSs would lower self-esteem, and low self-esteem would in turn result in symptoms of depression, we assume that upward social comparison on SNSs may influence depression symptoms through the mediating role of self-esteem.

1.2. The moderating role of optimism

Although upward social comparison would bring about negative impacts on self-esteem and depression, the impacts may not be the same for all individuals. The negative effects of upward social comparison may be weak in some individuals because of their positive attitudes towards the comparative information. Some factors, especially individual trait factors, could moderate the association between social comparison and its outcomes (Xing & Yu, 2005). Therefore, it is important to explore individual traits that may alleviate the adverse impacts of upward social comparison on SNSs.

Optimism is one of the most important central concepts in the Positive Psychology. A great number of scholars are attracted to conduct research on optimism. Some researchers consider optimism as an attributional style displayed in explaining successful or failure experience (Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & Von, 1979). Others argue that optimism is a dispositional trait (e.g., Barnett & Martinez, 2015; Carver & Scheier, 2005; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1987; Tucker et al., 2013). Optimists tend to think of their future in a positive manner and believe that life will be generally favorable (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Scheier et al., 1987). Although there exist different viewpoints about the construct of optimism, most of the researchers agree that optimism could be considered as a relatively stable dispositional trait. A meta-analysis study revealed that dispositional optimism was positively correlated with self-esteem, positive affect, and life satisfaction, and negatively correlated with stress, anxiety, and depression (Qi, Zhang, Shao, Wang, & Gong, 2012). In addition, as an important factor for individual development, optimism was found to moderate the relationship between stress factors and mental health. For example, studies showed that optimism weakened the relationship between rumination and suicidal ideation (Tucker et al., 2013), as well as the association between chronic stress and burnout (Rioli & Savicki, 2003).

Optimism may influence the way individuals' process information of upward social comparison. Since optimists generally have positive expectation of future (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Scheier et al., 1987), they may think that they can get the same ideal life as that of others in the future when faced with the information that others are better off. An experimental study found that happiness moderated the relationship between upward social comparison and its consequences (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). Upward social comparison decreased the positive mood and lowered the self-evaluation of competence among unhappy people, whereas such tendency did not happen to happy people. Since happiness and optimism are closely related, optimism may also serve as a

moderator in the relationship between social comparison and its outcomes (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). Therefore, it may be assumed that optimism, as a positive personality trait, may weaken the relationship between upward social comparison on SNSs and its unfavorable outcomes. Namely, the association between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms and the association between upward social comparison on SNSs and self-esteem may be both moderated by optimism. According to previous studies (e.g., Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2013; Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005), if self-esteem mediates the relation between upward social comparison on SNSs and depression, and optimism moderates the relation between upward social comparison on SNSs and self-esteem simultaneously, then the mediating role of self-esteem would be moderated by optimism. Further, if the mediation process depends on the value of a moderator variable, there will be a moderated mediation effect.

1.3. The present study

Taken together, the present study aimed at examining whether the relationship between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms was mediated by self-esteem, and whether the effect of upward social comparison on SNSs on depressive symptoms and the mediating effect of self-esteem were moderated by optimism. The specific hypotheses to be examined were as follows, and the integrated model proposed was outlined in Fig. 1.

- H1.** Self-esteem would mediate the relationship between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms.
- H2.** Optimism would moderate the relationship between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms.
- H3.** Optimism would moderate the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between upward social comparison on SNSs and depressive symptoms.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited from three universities in China. The authenticity, independence and integral nature of all answers as well as the confidentiality of the information collected were emphasized to all participants by well-trained psychology graduate students. A total of 1205 undergraduate students between 17 and 24 years ($M_{age} = 19.86$, $SD_{age} = 1.265$, 51.45% females) completed the present study after informed consent was obtained from the schools and the participants.

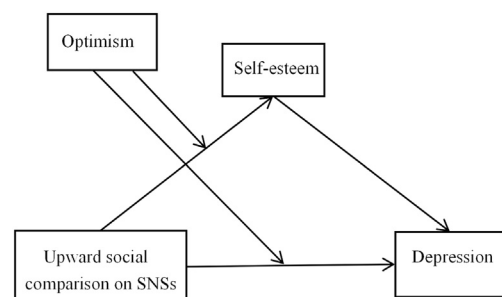


Fig. 1. Overview of the hypothesized moderated mediation model.

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