

23 - 25 October 2026

Geneva , Switzerland

Social Media, Social Comparison, and Self-Esteem: Psychological Vulnerabilities in the Digital Environment

Prof. Dr. Rus Mihaela*Ovidius University Constanța, Romania*

Abstract

The increasing integration of social media into everyday life has transformed the ways individuals construct their identities, evaluate themselves, and relate to others. This paper examines the relationship between social media use, social comparison, and self-esteem, with particular attention to the psychological vulnerabilities associated with exposure to highly curated digital content. Drawing on social comparison theory, the study explores how repeated exposure to idealized representations of appearance, success, relationships, and lifestyle may encourage upward social comparisons and contribute to negative self-evaluation. Particular attention is given to the roles of passive social media use, perceived discrepancy between the real and ideal self, fear of missing out, and dependence on external validation. The paper also considers individual differences that may increase susceptibility to these effects, including low baseline self-esteem, perfectionistic tendencies, and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation. At the same time, social media is approached as a complex psychological environment whose effects depend on patterns of use, individual characteristics, and the nature of online interactions. The study highlights the importance of digital literacy, adaptive self-evaluation, and healthier patterns of online engagement as potential protective factors. Understanding these mechanisms may contribute to the development of psychological interventions aimed at reducing vulnerability and promoting well-being in increasingly digital social contexts.

Keywords: Social Media; Social Comparison; Self-Esteem; Psychological Vulnerability; Self-Evaluation; Fear of Missing Out; Digital Well-Being