

Research Article

Social Media and the Interconnectedness with Self-Concept of Undergraduate Psychology Students, University of Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

The extensive use of social media especially amongst young adults in college and universities raises concerns on its effects in regard to psychological well-being particularly, self-concept. However, little research has examined these issues within and in low-and-middle income countries. This study sought to examine the impact of using social media on the self-concept of psychology students at the University of Nairobi by focusing on exposure to risk, and the influence of online feedback. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected through liker-scale and open-ended questionnaires administered to 287 third-year psychology students, with a response rate of 95.7 percent, and analysed using both inferential and descriptive statistics. The findings established that frequent use of social media was linked to greater social comparison and reduced self-esteem, with the strongest effects observed among students who reported spending more than three hours daily on social media platforms. Significant risks included cyberbullying, anxiety, and Internet addiction, which negatively affected self-image. Feedback mechanisms (likes, comments, shares) significantly influenced self-worth, with negative feedback often leading to decreased self-esteem and positive feedback enhancing validation. The study concludes that social media considerably shapes self-concept, with both positive and negative effects mediated by usage patterns and feedback dependency. The study recommends integrating digital literacy and mental health programmes into learning to promote healthier social media engagement. Further research should explore longitudinal effects, gender differences, and cultural variations in social media-related self-concept formation.

Keywords

Social Media, Self-Concept, Psychological Well-Being, Young Adults, Kenya

1. Background to the Study

Self-concept refers to the set of perceptions, beliefs, and evaluations individuals hold about themselves, including their abilities, values, and social roles [61]. Even in the context of the more traditional societies, self-concept is a central construct in counselling, psychology and sociology studies be-

cause it shapes how people interpret experiences, relate to others, and regulate their behaviour [70]. A positive and coherent self-concept is strongly associated with psychological well-being and resilience, while a fragmented or negative self-concept is often linked to reduced self-esteem and mental health

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difficulties [59, 61]. Information and communication technological advances have made the Internet a powerful tool for interaction and connection [61] with intrapersonal and interpersonal implications [27]. Social media, in particular, has become one of the most influential developments, with platforms like TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Skype, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Facebook changing how people connect and interact in every day-to-day activity [8, 30]. The Internet through the social media has made it easier to share information including communication, networking, education, entertainment, relationship, business, marketing, and raising awareness on social, political, and global issues [26, 31, 39].

Conversely, social media also has certain disadvantages, such as spreading false information, which has adverse effects on mental health well-being, and often at times promotes unrealistic ideas of success and beauty [30, 61]. Misinformation is singled out as one of the major defining challenges of the Internet and social media [63, 64]. Yet, social media plays a critical role in how people manage several aspects of our lives, including our self-concept in the face of threats to their self-definition. According to Wild and Blanchar [72], individuals in the United States often use social media to boost their self-esteem, particularly when their self-image is under threat. They suggest that when people perceive their self-worth as being challenged, such as when they compare themselves unfavourably to others, they may engage in symbolic self-completion by sharing content that reflects their ideal self. This strategy helps to affirm their self-worth by projecting a desired identity to others online. Social media's ability to curate one's public persona provides a distinct advantage over face-to-face interactions, offering more control over how one is perceived. This research investigates the effects of social media on self-concept.

The Internet including the overall use of social media pervades all facets of our lives including our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships [11, 27, 33]. Even in low-and-middle income countries (LMICs), the Internet is used in almost all spheres including health, education, money and finance to advance effective and timely communication and other services. The influence of social comparison is highly dynamic and significant [33]. Users who encounter others they perceive as superior might feel their self-esteem is compromised and thus attempt to enhance their own image by posting content that showcases their strengths [72]. However, the outcomes of this behaviour are mixed: sometimes, individuals might avoid content related to their goals when feeling threatened, whereas at other times, they actively share content that supports their self-image. Wild and Blanchar [72] emphasize that social media platforms serve as a tool for managing self-concept and suggest that further research should explore additional social media activities, such as commenting and liking, to gain deeper insights on how such platforms influence self-identity.

Research shows that social media utility has a notable influence on the self-concept and mental health of young people

[1-6, 50, 60, 61]. For example, a study in Indonesia [61] observed a significant association between people's addiction to social media and negative self-concept ($p = 0.004$), indicating that elevated levels of addiction led to more negative self-perceptions. Their study reported that 47.1 percent of participants were moderately addicted to social media, while 61.8 percent had a negative self-concept. Similar patterns have been observed in South Africa, where Nkuna [50] highlights that how Black women's hair is depicted in the media shapes their identity, self-concept, and hair care practices. Social media can perpetuate historical stereotypes but also provides a platform for challenging and overcoming these norms. Positive depictions of Black hair on social media promote self-acceptance and empowerment, creating a supportive community where women can connect, discuss hair care, and share tips. In Ghana, social media addiction is linked to various negative outcomes, among them anxiety (62.1%), smartphone addiction (29.1%), depression (49%) and nomophobia (49.6%). These conditions tend to greatly and negatively impact self-concept, with higher levels of addiction leading to more negative self-perceptions and lower self-esteem.

Other studies have examined how excessive engagement with social media influences students' self-concept, as constant comparisons with idealized depictions of success, beauty, and lifestyle may contribute to negative self-perceptions. Overall, social media use affects not only students' mental health but also how they view themselves, including their self-esteem and academic identity [65]. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype and Instagram can nurture a sense of belonging and self-worth when learners engage online with supportive communities. However, these platforms may also contribute to feelings of inadequacy when students measure their lives against unrealistic online standards [65, 66]. Similarly, it must be taken in the fact that adolescents' and young people's self-concept is continually evolving as they strive to form their identity and gain social acceptance in Kenya just as elsewhere. Thus, although Facebook has generally been identified as one of the most frequently used platforms among adolescents, the overall self-concept may remain moderate although this is not an absolute assurance and cannot be guaranteed [61, 62, 68]. Furthermore, various studies have noted weak negative correlations between self-concept and the use of social media including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, indicating that some social media platforms could have minimal impact on self-concept unlike others that may be more influential [67, 69].

Social media primarily influences people by shaping their self-concept. Self-concept refers to how people perceive themselves, including their traits, roles, and abilities, and it plays a major role in shaping their sense of identity and self-worth [30, 61]. It comprises three main parts: self-image, self-esteem and ideal self [17]. Self-image refers to how people perceive themselves, particularly their personality, abilities and physical appearance and overall role in the society. A positive self-image can boost confidence, emotional well-being

and life satisfaction, whereas a negative self-image can lead to psychological issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem and depression. These effects are particularly manifested during adolescence, a developmental stage when people are more sensitive to how others perceive them [17, 30]. Self-esteem on the other hand denotes a person's emotional assessment of themselves, including two main components: self-respect and self-confidence and has an essential role in identity formation during adolescence, as individuals navigate their social interactions and relationships [4, 16].

Self-esteem is an essential component of mental health, as it contributes to confidence, resilience, and happiness. Since the use of social media has been on the rise among young people, it is important to understand how interaction with these platforms influences self-esteem. According to Al Ahbabi et al. [4], while social media has become an integral part of the daily routine of many teenagers and young adults, excessive use may have negative effects their psychological well-being. The ideal self refers to the person someone aspires to become, based on their personal goals, values, societal expectations. It represents an idealized version of oneself that they strive to reach. However, a significant gap between the real self and the ideal self can lead to frustration and unhappiness. It's imperative to understand how self-image and the ideal-self affect psychological and mental health well-being, especially in today's digital world, where social media frequently shows unrealistic standards of beauty and achievement [12]. Together, self-image, self-esteem, and the ideal-self shape how peoples' perceptions of themselves and influence their emotions, behaviour and overall mental health.

The aim of this study was to examine the impacts of using social media platforms on the self-concept of undergraduate students at the University of Nairobi. The objectives of study were:

- 1) To examine the impact of the frequency of social media use on the self-concept of undergraduate students.
- 2) To determine the potential risks associated with the use of social media on the self-concept of undergraduate students.
- 3) To investigate how social media feedback influences the self-concept of undergraduate students.

2. Research Methodology and Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey design [19, 20, 38]. The approach enabled the researchers to collect detailed information on participants' experiences, behaviours, and perceptions regarding social media use and self-concept. Data was both qualitative and quantitative insights, enabling the researcher to effectively analyse patterns, trends and relationships [13, 19, 48]. Additionally, the design facilitated the identification of correlations between variables [24, 47]. In particular, the study addresses both the frequency and nature of social media routines and how they impact self-concept components like self-image, self-esteem and the ideal-self.

The target population consisted of 300 third-year undergraduate psychology students at the University of Nairobi. This group was selected because university students actively utilize the social media, making them suitable for research on its influence on self-concept. Third-year students, in particular, were chosen because they are at a crucial stage of both academic and personal development, during which their self-concept continues to evolve through exposure to diverse social and academic environments. This way, the study sought to generate insights into how social media engagement shapes students' self-concept, while also identifying both challenges and opportunities for fostering positive self-concept development.

The researcher used a questionnaire, which contained Likert scale and open-ended questions as the primary instrument for data collection in this study [20, 34]. The questionnaire was designed to capture information on different aspects of social media use, including the frequency, preferred platforms, and the primary purposes for engagement, such as communication, entertainment, and self-expression. To measure self-concept, the study adapted items from established and validated measurement instruments. Specifically, self-esteem was assessed using items borrowed from Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, which is a globally recognized for its validity and trustworthiness in assessing global self-worth. Self-image was measured through items focusing on participants' perceptions of their physical appearance, personal qualities and achievements, while the ideal self was examined through items addressing participants' aspirations, personal goals, and desired attributes.

Data obtained from the questionnaires and self-concept scales was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to meet the research objectives [34, 36]. For the quantitative analysis, responses from the closed-ended questions were coded by assigning numerical values to each option (e.g., Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, etc.). The coded responses were organized in a spreadsheet, with each participant represented by a row and each question represented by a column. Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, standard deviations, percentages and means were computed to summarize the data and provide an overview of participants' social media usage patterns and self-concept dimensions [19, 38].

For the qualitative analysis, responses to the open-ended questions were thematically analyzed through the identification of recurring ideas, coding of key phrases, and grouping into categories to uncover patterns and themes [13, 48]. The themes were then interpreted within the study's context to provide deeper insights into participants' experiences of their social media usage. To enhance credibility and depth of the findings, qualitative and quantitative analyses were integrated through triangulation, which allowed the numerical data from Likert-scale items to be combined with qualitative themes, validating the results and offering a more holistic view of how social media utility influences self-concept [19, 20, 36].

Throughout the study, the researchers strictly adhered to ethical principles of anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent and voluntary consent [7, 14, 42, 47].

3. Theoretical Framework

This study makes use of Social Comparison Theory (SCT) to examine how people evaluate themselves based on comparisons of their skills, characteristics, and achievements with others [16, 21]. According to the theory, such comparisons have a central role in processes of study and address self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement. In a social media context, SCT helps to explain how users' self-concept might be influenced by frequent comparisons with carefully selected and often idealized portrayals of others [21]. Social comparisons may be upward (with those who are often better off), downward (with those who may be worse off) or lateral (with similar individuals), and will influence the self-concept of undergraduate students in different ways [21].

SCT further suggests that the frequency of social comparisons influences how self-concept is developed and thus, the more often individuals engage in comparisons, whether regarding their lives, achievements, or appearances on social media, the more their self-concept could potentially be influenced [16]. Consequently, frequent use of social media may expose individuals to upward, downward, or lateral comparisons, which may eventually lead to shifts in self-evaluation, self-esteem, self-image, and perceptions of the ideal self. Whether these comparisons are upward or downward could impact one's self-concept in different ways. This is because social media platforms like Facebook, You Tube, Snapchat, Instagram, You Tube and X provide varying levels of exposure to idealized portrayals of others [16]. As a result, SCT suggests that individuals may compare themselves to others in unique ways depending on both the content and context. For instance, highly visual platforms like Instagram may encourage appearance-based upward comparisons (such as comparing physical appearance or lifestyle), while more text-focused platforms like X may foster comparisons related to success or opinions. These variations in the direction of comparisons upward, downward, or lateral could have diverse effects on students' self-concept, depending on the social media platform.

Social media serves various functions, including social interaction, entertainment, and information sharing, and self-expression, which may influence the nature of comparisons individuals make [53]. Social Comparison Theory proposes that individuals compare themselves to others to fulfil different motives, such as self-enhancement, self-improvement, and

self-evaluation. For instance, using social media primarily for entertainment might encourage more passive comparisons (such as comparing one's leisure activities or lifestyle), while using it for social interaction could promote more active comparisons (such as comparing personal achievements or relationships). The primary function of social media use might influence the extent to which individuals engage in upward, downward, or lateral comparisons, which in turn could shape their self-concept. This could lead to a gap between their real self and ideal self, causing anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor adjustment.

While comparisons are a natural aspect of human behaviour, SCT highlights that they can potentially contribute to negative consequences like decreased self-esteem, especially through frequent upward comparison (comparing themselves to those they perceive as superior) [16]. To mitigate these possible negative effects, the study examined strategies to encourage downward comparisons (comparing oneself to others who are less fortunate) or lateral comparisons with peers who share similar characteristics. Additionally, interventions will focus on fostering self-reflection and critical thinking about the idealized images presented on social media. These strategies provided a structure to enable students develop a healthier self-concept by promoting comparisons that lead to self-enhancement, while reducing the harmful effects of constant upward comparisons.

In the context of social media, Rogers' theory helps explain how platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook create conditions of worth through feedback such as likes, comments, and shares. These forms of feedback act like conditional positive regard, where students may feel valued only when their posts meet certain idealized standards of appearance, success, or lifestyle [55]. For example, constantly seeing curated and idealized content can increase the difference between the actual self and the ideal self, making them feel inadequate and lowering their self-esteem. On the other hand, interacting with supportive online communities or content that matches their true values can offer unconditional positive regard. This promotes alignment between self-concept and ideal self, improving or decreasing their self-view. Rogers' Self-Theory also explains how social media shapes the ideal self. The carefully selected portrayals of other people's lives and successes on these platforms often become the goals that students set for themselves. When students see a large gap between who they really are and this social ideal self, they may experience psychological stress [55]. This theory helps us understand why students might change how they present themselves online to meet outside expectations, even if this means losing touch with their real self.

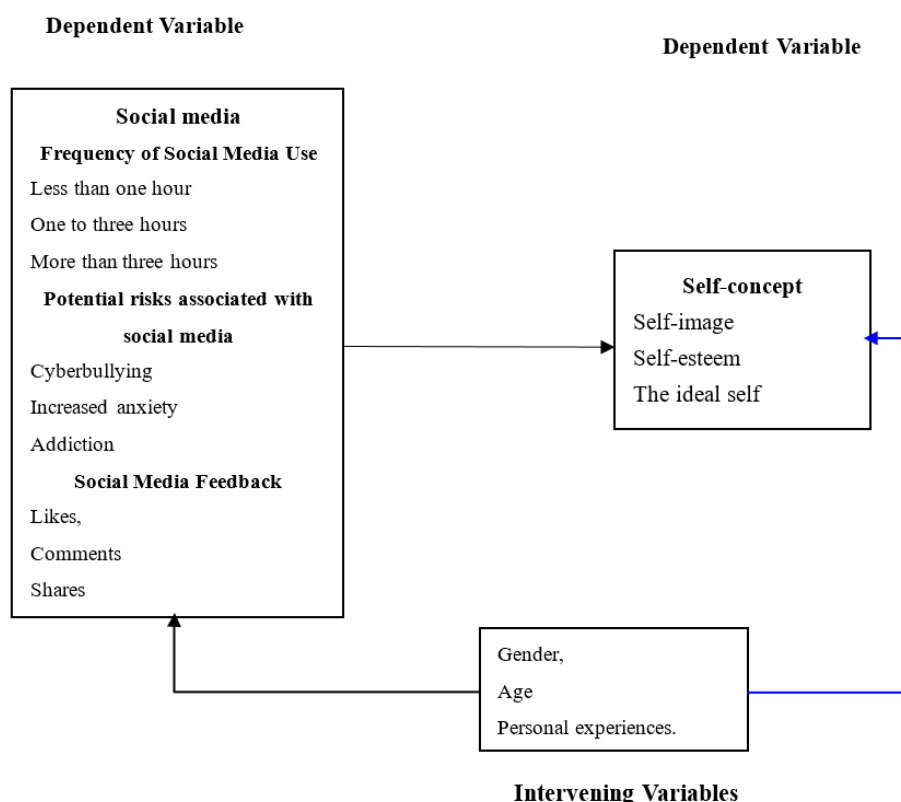


Figure 1. The Interconnectedness between Social Media and Self-Concept.

The conceptual framework provides a structured illustration of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, guiding the research process. It outlines how social media use, its frequency, potential risks, and feedback mechanisms influence self-concept. Drawing on Rogers' Self-Theory, this framework explains how social media creates conditions of worth, affects the match between self-concept and ideal self, and influences students' psychological well-being. Based on this theory, interventions could encourage self-acceptance, help students critically view idealized online content, and reduce dependence on external validation. This would support healthier and more consistent self-concepts among students. This framework ensures clarity in investigating the study's objectives while offering a foundation for analyzing findings. While the independent variables are manipulated, they create a significant impact on the dependent variable.

4. Results: Social Media, Spotting and Self-Concept

Two hundred and eighty-seven (287) third-year Psychology students at the University of Nairobi were involved in this study as illustrated in Table 1.

The gender distribution observed in this study aligns with common enrolment trends in Psychology programmes worldwide, which typically have a higher proportion of female students than male students. There was a high response rate of

95.7%, which was commendable for the purpose of the study. This exceptionally high response rate was achieved by administering the questionnaires in a controlled classroom environment, where students were asked to complete and submit them immediately. All questionnaires were collected on the same day they were distributed to minimize cases of non-response and incomplete submissions. According to Bailey [10], a response rate of at least 75% is considered acceptable for survey research, while Schutt [63] contends that response rates below 60% are inadequate and may compromise the quality of research findings. Therefore, the 95.7% response rate achieved in this study greatly surpassed these recommended standards, strengthening the validity and reliability of the data and ensures that the study's findings accurately represent the target population.

Table 1. Gender of Participants.

Gender	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Female	193	67.2
Male	94	32.8
Total	287	100.0

The participants' age was another important demographic variable considered in this research. Since all the participants

were third-year university students, their ages were categorized into four categories as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Age of Participants.

Age Category	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Below 20 years	2	0.7
20 - 25 years	281	97.9
26 - 30 years	2	0.7
Above 31 years	2	0.7
Total	287	100.0

The research findings indicate that the majority of the participants (281; 97.9%) were aged between 20 and 25 years,

which corresponds to the typical age range for third-year undergraduate students, affirming that the study sample represents the targeted population. Only a small number of the participants fell into the other age categories, with 2 individuals (0.7%) in each group: below 20 years, 26-30 years, and above 31 years. The sample's age distribution demonstrates a high level of homogeneity, which is a significant feature of this comparative study.

4.1. The Influence of the Frequency of Social Media on Self-concept

The first objective of the study was to examine the influence of the frequency of social media use on the self-concept of undergraduate students. To achieve this objective, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements using a five-point Likert scale. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of influence of the frequency of social media use on the self-concept.

STATEMENT	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	Mean	SDV
I spend less than one hour on social media each day.	42.5	22.3	13.6	11.5	10.1	2.24	1.37
I spend between one to three hours on social media each day.	18.8	18.8	30.3	19.5	12.5	2.88	1.28
I spend over 3 hours a day on social platforms.	7.7	21.6	18.8	30.7	21.3	3.36	1.25
The frequency of my social media use does not affect how I feel about my self-image.	9.8	19.5	24.0	27.2	19.5	3.27	1.25
I feel that my self-image is positively affected when I use social media more frequently.	11.1	16.4	21.6	30.0	20.9	3.33	1.28
I feel that my self-image is negatively affected when I use social media more frequently.	11.5	18.5	23.0	26.8	20.2	3.26	1.29
Frequent use of social media does not make me compare my appearance and life to others.	21.0	23.3	20.6	21.6	13.6	2.83	1.34
The more I use social media, the more I feel like I need to improve my appearance or lifestyle to match others.	11.5	17.8	20.9	28.2	21.6	3.31	1.30
I feel more confident about my self-image after spending time on social media.	15.3	19.9	23.0	24.7	17.1	3.08	1.33
My self-image improves when I engage with content that aligns with my values on social media.	10.8	16.0	22.3	28.9	22.0	3.36	1.29

Table 3 indicates that when participants were asked about spending less than one hour daily on social media, 42.5% strongly disagreed and 22.3% disagreed, while only 10.1% strongly agreed ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.37$). These findings suggest that very few participants used social platforms for less than an hour each day, meaning that limited use is rare among university populations. The pattern implies that social media has

become an integral part of students' daily routines and significantly shapes their social identity. Similar observations were made among university students in Germany and Kazakhstan [73] in which it was found that platforms like TikTok and Instagram dominate young people's digital habits, making regular online activity a key part of self-concept.

Regarding spending one to three hours daily on social media, the responses were more evenly spread: About 30.3%

were neutral, 19.5% agreed, and 12.5% strongly agreed ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.28$). This suggests that moderate social media use is relatively common among university students, although not as widespread as heavier use. While some participants felt that two to three hours of daily use was typical, others perceived it as either insufficient or excessive, showing that usage patterns vary widely. This pattern is similar to findings among university students in Kuwait [6] where most participants reported feeling addicted to social media, indicating that even moderate use is often viewed as habitual and tied to feelings of dependence.

A substantial proportion of participants largely agreed that they spent more than three hours daily on social media with 30.7% in agreement while 21.3% strongly agreed though 21.6% disagreed ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.25$). This shows that many participants spend long hours online, thus devoting a significant part of their day to social media. Such heavy use suggests greater vulnerability to comparison with others and pressures that shape how individuals view themselves. A comparable finding comes from adolescents in Indonesia [9] that reported that frequent social media use significantly increased experiences of fear of missing out (FOMO), highlighting how prolonged engagement can create dependence and influence self-concept.

In relation to the statement that frequency of social media use does not affect self-image, 27.2% of the participants agreed and 19.5% strongly agreed, while 24.0% remained neutral ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.25$). These mixed responses show that while some participants believe their self-image is unaffected, others acknowledge that it is influenced. Although a significant proportion of participants denied being affected, some acknowledged that frequent social media use still shapes their self-perception in subtle ways. Similar findings were reported among adolescents in the United States where it was observed that adolescents experienced changes in their self-perception through online interactions, even when they were not fully aware of the same [45].

When participants were asked whether frequent social media use positively influenced their self-image, 30.0% agreed and 20.9% strongly agreed, while 16.4% disagreed ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.28$). This suggests that many participants view social media as a source of inspiration and identity reinforcement. Exposure to encouraging or aspirational content seems to strengthen their self-esteem and confidence. Comparable results were found among university students in Turkey [35] that found strong attachments to social media could indeed improve self-perceptions, thus indicating that positive online experiences may positively contribute to a significant self-perception.

On the conviction that frequent social media use negatively affects self-image, 26.8% of participants merely agreed while 20.2% strongly agreed, though 23.0% were neutral ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.29$). These figures suggest that many participants recognize the adverse effects of prolonged social media use,

such as reduced self-worth. The findings show that social media can exert both positive and negative effects on self-image at the same time. Similar dual effects have been reported among adolescents in the United States of America [60] and that appearance-focused social media content strongly influence body image and self-evaluation, regardless of the amount of time spent online.

Regarding the question of whether frequent social media use does not lead to comparisons with others, 23.3% of the participants disagreed and 21.0% strongly disagreed, while only 13.6% strongly agreed ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.34$). These findings indicate that most participants acknowledged comparing themselves with others online, either consciously or unconsciously. Such comparisons may influence how individuals evaluate themselves, leading to dissatisfaction with one's self-concept. Comparable results were found among university students in Germany [49] that reported that frequent social media use was associated with social network use disorder, emphasizing the role of constant comparisons in shaping self-perceptions.

When asked whether frequent social media use increases their desire to improve their appearance or lifestyle, 28.2% of participants agreed and 21.6% strongly agreed, while only 11.5% strongly disagreed ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.30$). These findings indicate that social media use motivates many students to change their appearance or lifestyle in line with idealized standards. Although such aspirations may encourage positive self-improvement for some individuals, they may also create pressure on some to conform to idealized standards. Similar findings were reported by Kusum et al. [40], who found that excessive social media use among adolescents in Indonesia was associated with poorer well-being, indicating that extended social media exposure can influence daily behaviours, self-perceptions and personal aspirations.

Regarding whether participants feel more confident about their self-image after social media use, 24.7% agreed and 17.1% strongly agreed, while 19.9% disagreed and 15.3% strongly disagreed ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.33$). These results reveal a mixed pattern: some participants gain confidence through validation online, while others feel less confident. This suggests that social media influence on self-image depends on the nature of the content consumed and the personal resilience of each individual. A similar conclusion was reached by Sametoglu et al. [59], who reported that social media usage among university students in the Netherlands had a modest but noteworthy impact on well-being, reflecting the complex link between online engagement and self-concept.

Finally, when asked whether their self-image improved after engaging with content that aligned with their personal values, 28.9% of participants agreed and 22.0% strongly agreed, while only 10.8% strongly disagreed ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.29$). These findings suggest that value-based engagement strengthens positive self-perceptions. They indicate that seeking content consistent with personal beliefs supports identity development and self-acceptance. This pattern is consistent with

findings among university learners in Germany by Montag et al. [49], who found that while frequent social media use could contribute to social network use disorder, outcomes depended strongly on the type of platform and the content consumed. Meaningful, value-driven engagement was shown to support a healthier self-concept despite risks of overuse.

To better understand how undergraduate students perceived the impacts of social media use on their self-concept, the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. Four major themes emerged: (1) the contribution of time spent on social platforms in creating self-image, (2) the influence of social comparison on self-worth, (3) adjustments of self-image through engagement with online content, and (4) the emotional effects of online feedback and interactions. Each theme was supported by sub-themes that reflected different aspects of participants' experiences. Out of the 287 participants, the majority expressed views that aligned with these themes, with percentages used to indicate how common each perspective was.

4.1.1. Time Spent on Social Media in Shaping Self-Image

A total of 177 participants (61.7%) reported that the amount of time they spent on social media shaped how they perceived themselves. For many, extended use was draining. In particular, 115 participants (40.1%) explained that spending more than an hour online often left them feeling emotionally drained, distracted, or more critical of their appearance, suggesting that prolonged online exposure heightens negative self-reflection. In contrast, 62 participants (21.6%) felt that limited time on social media helped them maintain a healthier self-concept, suggesting that moderate social media may protect them against some of the harmful effects of overuse. Overall, the findings demonstrate that time spent on social platforms is a critical factor in shaping how students' self-image develops. Similar findings by Anjani and Widyatama [9] found that frequent social media use among adolescents in Indonesia increased fear of missing out, making them more vulnerable to negative psychological effects.

4.1.2. The Influence of Social Comparison on Self-Worth

The most widely reported theme was social comparison, mentioned by 202 participants (70.4%). Appearance was the strongest focus: 133 participants (46.3%) described how comparing their looks to idealized images online often left them feeling dissatisfied. Lifestyle comparisons also played a role, with 48 participants (16.7%) pointing out to aspects such as fashion, travel and financial success as benchmarks that made them reflect on their own situations. Another 21 participants (7.3%) spoke about comparisons of popularity or achievements, including academic or career accomplishments. Alt-

hough most participants described these comparisons as harmful, 28 participants (9.8%) perceived them as motivation for self-improvement. Collectively, these accounts suggest that social comparison plays a central role in shaping students' self-worth in the digital age, though its impact varies across individuals. Similar findings were reported among adolescents in the United States, where Sanzari et al. [60] observed that exposure to appearance-focused content reduced body appreciation, suggesting that the type of comparison matters more than the overall time spent online.

4.1.3. Adjustment of Self-Image Through Engagement with Online Content

For 144 participants (50.2%), social media not only reflected their self-image but also pushed them to change it. Some participants, 89 in total (31.0%), described changing their physical appearance through grooming, fitness, or fashion to resemble what they saw online, while 55 participants (19.2%), indicated that they reshaped their online identity by carefully curating achievements or presenting a more successful lifestyle. These accounts suggest that identity is not fixed but actively negotiated through online interactions, with students reworking how they present themselves both online and offline. Similar findings were reported among university students in Turkey, where Karayalçın and Yaraş [33] found that frequent social media users were more strongly influenced by online marketing, highlighting how social media engagement shapes consumer choices and broader aspects of self-presentation and identity.

4.1.4. Emotional Consequences of Feedback and Interactions on Social Media

The final theme explored the emotional impact of online feedback and interactions online, highlighted by 219 participants (76.3%). For some, positive responses such as likes and encouraging comments boosted self-esteem; 94 participants (32.8%) explained that such feedback gave them a stronger sense of acceptance. However, others reported more troubling experiences. A total of 73 participants (25.4%) reported that low levels of engagement left them feeling ignored or undervalued, while 52 participants (18.1%) described how negative comments or criticism undermined their confidence and made them question their self-worth. These reflections show that digital interactions are not just casual exchanges but powerful forces in shaping self-concept. Supporting evidence comes from young adult social media users in Germany, where Voggenreiter et al. [69] found that limited positive feedback was linked to lower self-esteem and stronger negative emotions, reinforcing the idea that online interactions carry real psychological consequences. The frequency and percentage of participants reflecting each perspective, together with illustrative findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Themes on the risks of social media use and the self-concept of undergraduate students.

Theme	Subtheme / Focus	Number of Participants	Percentage	Findings
The Role of Time Spent on Social Media in Shaping Self-Image	Extended use (>1 hour)	115	40.1	Prolonged exposure increased fatigue, distraction, negative self-reflection
	Shorter use	62	21.6	Limited use helped maintain healthier self-concept
Influence of Social Comparison on Self-Worth	Appearance	133	46.3	Comparing looks to idealized images led to dissatisfaction
	Lifestyle (fashion, travel, finances)	48	16.7	Reflected on personal situation, often negatively
	Popularity/ achievements	21	7.3	Comparison of success sometimes affected self-worth
Adjustment of Self-Image through Engagement with Online Content	Motivating comparisons	28	9.8	Some comparisons encouraged self-improvement
	Physical appearance	89	31.0	Adjustments in grooming, fitness, fashion to align with online content
	Online identity/ life-style	55	19.2	Curated achievements or successful life-style presentation
Emotional Consequences of Feedback and Interactions on social media	Positive feedback	94	32.8	Boosted self-esteem and sense of acceptance
	Low engagement	73	25.4	Feeling ignored or undervalued
	Negative feedback	52	18.1	Criticism undermined confidence, lowered self-worth

4.2. Potential Risks Associated with Social Media Use on the Self-concept of Undergraduate Students

The second objective of the study was to determine the potential risks associated with social media use on the self-concept of undergraduate students. To achieve this, the researcher asked the participants to indicate their level of agreement with the provided research statements using a five-point Likert scale. The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Potential Risks Associated with Social Media Use on the Self-Concept.

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	Mean	Std. Dev.
I have experienced cyber stalking while using social media.	15.7	27.1	17.4	21.3	18.5	2.94	1.31
Being a victim of cyberbullying on social media has not affected my self-esteem.	14.2	29.6	28.3	18.8	9.1	2.77	1.28
Social media causes me to feel more anxious about my self-image.	12.6	19.9	18.7	26.1	22.7	3.19	1.34
I find it difficult to disconnect from social media, which affects my self-esteem.	13.6	27.9	15.6	23.7	19.2	3.11	1.35
Using social media increases my anxiety about not meeting my ideal self.	12.2	16.7	18.5	28.6	24.0	3.39	1.29
I feel overwhelmed by social media, which negatively affects my self-image.	11.8	19.5	20.0	27.1	21.6	3.22	1.31

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	Mean	Std. Dev.
Witnessing others being bullied on social media does not make me question my self-worth.	15.3	27.9	23.3	22.0	11.5	2.86	1.32
I compare myself to others on social media, which lowers my self-esteem.	8.7	14.3	22.6	27.9	26.5	3.54	1.26
Social media addiction makes it harder for me to feel good about myself.	9.8	20.9	21.2	25.1	23.0	3.28	1.30
The fear of missing out (FOMO) on social media does not affect my connection to my ideal self.	13.9	26.5	28.6	21.6	9.4	2.98	1.27

Table 5 shows that when asked whether they had experienced cyberstalking while using social media, 15.7% participants strongly disagreed and 27.1% disagreed, while 21.3% agreed and 18.5% strongly agreed. The mean was 2.94 (SD = 1.31). These findings indicate that although many undergraduates denied experiencing cyberstalking, a considerable proportion still reported being affected by it. This suggests that cyberstalking remains a real threat to students' self-concept, potentially creating insecurity and fear in online spaces. Supporting evidence comes from undergraduate and postgraduate students in Europe, where Bussu et al. [15], through a narrative systematic review, showed that even less frequent forms of online harassment such as cyberstalking were connected to reduced emotional well-being.

Regarding the statement that being a victim of cyberbullying on social media has not affected self-esteem, 14.2% participants strongly disagreed and 29.6% disagreed, while 18.8% agreed and 9.1% strongly agreed. The mean score was 2.77 (SD = 1.28). These results reveal that most undergraduates believed that their self-esteem had indeed been damaged by cyberbullying, despite the neutral framing of the question. This highlights cyberbullying as one of the most harmful risks of social media for students' self-concept. These findings are consistent with those reported by Gönültaş [28], who observed that experiences of cyberbullying among university students in Turkey were strongly associated with lower self-worth.

Concerning whether social media causes anxiety about self-image, 26.1% participants agreed and 22.7% strongly agreed, while 18.7% were neutral. In contrast, 19.9% disagreed and 12.6% strongly disagreed, producing a mean of 3.19 (SD = 1.34). These findings indicate that self-image anxiety is a common concern for undergraduate students, suggesting that repeated exposure to idealized portrayals online increases self-consciousness and stress. There is also supporting evidence from young women in China, where Liu et al. [43] found that passive social media use and frequent comparisons heightened anxiety and disrupted clarity of self-concept.

When asked about difficulties disconnecting from social media, which in turn affects self-esteem, 23.7% agreed and 19.2% strongly agreed, while 15.6% were neutral. On the other hand, 27.9% disagreed and 13.6% strongly disagreed. The mean was 3.11 (SD = 1.35). These findings suggest that

a considerable proportion of undergraduate students struggle to regulate their use of social media, indicating traits of addictive behaviour. Difficulty disconnecting from social media makes students more vulnerable to basing their self-worth on online approval. Similar results were reported among health sciences undergraduates in Turkey by Çimke and Cerit [18], who found that higher levels of social media addiction were linked to lower self-esteem.

Regarding whether social media increases anxiety about not meeting one's ideal self, 28.6% agreed and 24.0% strongly agreed, while 18.5% were neutral. In contrast, 16.7% disagreed and 12.2% strongly disagreed. The mean was 3.39 (SD = 1.29). These findings indicate that many students experience tension between their actual and ideal selves, largely shaped by social media portrayals. Such online comparisons seem to reinforce dissatisfaction with personal identity and self-worth. Comparable evidence comes from university students in the United Arab Emirates, where Al Ahbabi et al. [4] observed that frequent exposure to curated content contributed to unrealistic expectations and lower self-esteem.

Concerning whether students feel overwhelmed by social media, which negatively affects their self-image, 27.1% agreed and 21.6% strongly agreed, while 20.0% were neutral. In contrast, 19.5% disagreed and 11.8% strongly disagreed. The mean score was 3.22 (SD = 1.31). These results suggest that excessive social media exposure leads to emotional overload among many undergraduates, undermining their confidence in self-image. This shows that constant exposure to information and comparisons fosters fatigue and reduced self-worth. Thus, excessive social media use may be associated with heightened anxiety and diminished self-esteem.

With regard to the statement that witnessing others being bullied on social media without questioning their self-worth, 15.3% strongly disagreed and 27.9% disagreed. On the other hand, 22.0% agreed and 11.5% strongly agreed, while 23.3% remained neutral. The mean was 2.86 (SD = 1.32). These results suggest that exposure to online bullying may push many undergraduate students to question their self-worth. This indicates that even indirect exposure to online hostility can negatively affect undergraduates' self-concept. This finding is consistent with findings by Landa-Blanco et al. [41], who reported that both direct and indirect exposure to social media-

related harms contributed to lower self-esteem among university students in Honduras.

When asked whether comparing themselves to others on social media lowered their self-esteem, 27.9% participants agreed and 26.5% strongly agreed. In contrast, 22.6% were neutral, while 14.3% disagreed and 8.7% strongly disagreed. The mean score was 3.54 ($SD = 1.26$). These findings highlight social comparison as one of the most prominent risks associated with social media use for undergraduates, often undermining their self-confidence and self-concept. These findings show that frequent comparisons heighten negative self-judgments and weaken self-concept. Liu et al. [43] similarly reported this pattern among young women in China, where passive social media use involving social comparison significantly increased anxiety and disrupted self-concept clarity.

Concerning whether social media addiction makes it harder to feel good about oneself, 25.1% participants agreed and 23.0% strongly agreed, while 21.2% were neutral. In contrast, 20.9% disagreed and 9.8% strongly disagreed. The mean was 3.28 ($SD = 1.30$). These findings suggest that many undergraduates link social media addiction to reduced self-worth. This shows that dependence on digital platforms prevents students from sustaining a positive self-concept outside online spaces. Supporting evidence comes from first-year university students in China [44] that noted that problematic social media use was closely associated with diminished self-esteem.

When asked whether the fear of missing out (FOMO) on social media affected their connection to their ideal self, 13.9% strongly disagreed and 26.5% disagreed, while 21.6% agreed and 9.4% strongly agreed, and 28.6% remained neutral. The mean was 2.98 ($SD = 1.27$). These findings suggest that while many students rejected the claim, a significant proportion acknowledged that FOMO influences their sense of self. This shows that FOMO encourages undergraduates to measure their lives against others, weakening alignment with their own goals. Once again, there is supporting evidence from adolescents in China, where Kong et al. [37] found that social anxiety and low self-concept clarity contributed to problematic mobile phone use, reflecting the influence of FOMO in identity development.

The researcher thematically analysed the responses to the open-ended research questions to unravel the risks associated with social media usage on the self-concept of undergraduate students. The analysis revealed that social media influences students' self-perception through several mechanisms. Four major themes emerged: (1) how the time spent on social media creates self-image, (2) the impact of social comparison on self-worth, (3) the adjustment of self-image through engagement with online content, and (4) the emotional impact of negative experiences and feedback online. Out of the 287 participants, the majority expressed views that could be categorised within these themes, and the distribution of responses illustrates how social media plays a complex role in building the self-concept of undergraduates.

4.2.1. The Role of Time Spent on Social Media in Shaping Self-Image

A total of 177 participants (61.7%) explained that the time they spent on social media influenced how they perceived themselves. Many participants (115, 40.1%) described that prolonged use, particularly more than one hour daily online, made them feel tired, distracted, or anxious about their appearance. In contrast, a smaller but significant group (62, 21.6%) highlighted that limited and purposeful use of social media helped them maintain a healthier self-perception. These responses indicate that the duration of social media use is closely tied to the way students construct and evaluate their self-image. Long periods of exposure appear to intensify negative self-reflection, while controlled engagement can act as a protective factor that supports positive self-concept. Similar findings were reported among university students in the United Arab Emirates, where Al Ahbabi et al. [4] found that excessive social media usage led to lower self-esteem and higher anxiety. This suggests that monitoring the time spent online could serve as a practical strategy for undergraduates to preserve psychological well-being.

4.2.2. The Influence of Social Comparison on Self-Worth

The second theme highlights how social comparison strongly shapes the self-worth of undergraduate students. A majority of participants (202, 70.4%) acknowledged that they frequently compared themselves with their peers on social media, which significantly affected their self-concept. 133 participants (46.3%) focused on physical appearance, with participants noting that curated images of others made them feel self-conscious and less confident. Another group (69, 24.0%) compared their lifestyle and achievements with those of their peers, explaining that viewing peers' travel, popularity, or academic success often created pressure and dissatisfaction with their own progress. Interestingly, a smaller group of 28 participants (9.8%) viewed social comparisons as motivation for self-improvement, suggesting that not all effects were harmful. These responses confirm that although social comparison is a powerful mechanism through which self-esteem is shaped, it occasionally undermines self-esteem and identity. Similar patterns among university students in Turkey and adolescents in China indicates frequent online comparison was associated with lower self-esteem and reduced clarity of self-concept [43, 60].

4.2.3. Adjustment of Self-Image Through Engagement with Online Content

The third theme demonstrates that social media is not only a platform for self-reflection but also a space of active self-modification. A total of 144 participants (50.2%) indicated that they adjusted their self-image as a result of their online engagement. Of these, 89 (31.0%) reported modifying their

physical self-presentation, such as grooming, fashion, or fitness routines, in order to align with online standards, while 55 (19.2%) focused on curating their online identity by presenting achievements, lifestyle choices, or personality traits in a more positive or enhanced way. These responses illustrate that self-concept is dynamic and socially negotiated, with students actively managing both how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived or wish to be perceived by others. Comparable research with university students in Turkey by Karayalçın and Yaraş [35] and adolescents in China by Kong et al. [37] reinforces this observation, showing that appearance-related anxiety and self-concept clarity strongly influence the ways in which young people adjust their identity in online spaces implying that social platforms create identity and provide constant opportunities and pressures to reshape it.

4.2.4. Emotional Impact of Negative Experiences and Feedback Online

The final theme reflects the emotional consequences of negative interactions and feedback on social media. A total number of 198 participants (69.0%) described how experiences

such as cyberbullying, stalking, fear of missing out or limited online engagement affected their self-concept. Specifically, 84 participants (29.3%) reported that incidents of cyberbullying or stalking made them feel insecure, fearful, and less confident, while 93 (32.4%) indicated that anxiety and the fear of missing out (FOMO) negatively affected their self-esteem and ideal self. In addition, 21 participants (7.3%) explained that receiving negative comments or low engagement on their posts weakened their self-image, while positive feedback provided only short-lived boosts. These accounts demonstrate that negative online experiences and feedback notably shape emotional well-being and self-concept. Findings from university students in Turkey by Gönültaş [28] and college students in Germany by Voggenreiter et al. [69] support this conclusion, showing that exposure to cyberbullying and lack of positive feedback were associated with lower self-esteem and heightened negative emotions. This indicates that beyond shaping identity, social media also exposes undergraduates to emotional risks that directly undermine their psychological resilience. The frequency and percentage of participants reflecting each perspective, along with findings, are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Themes on social media feedback and the self-concept of undergraduate students.

Theme	Subtheme / Focus	Number of Participants	Percentage	Findings
The Role of Time Spent on social media in Shaping Self-Image	Prolonged use (>1 hour)	115	40.1	Prolonged use led to fatigue, distraction, anxiety about appearance
	Limited / purposeful use	62	21.6	Limited use helped maintain healthier self-perception
Influence of Social Comparison on Self-Worth	Physical appearance	133	46.3	Curated images of others caused self-consciousness
	Lifestyle and achievement	69	24.0	Viewing peers' achievements created pressure and dissatisfaction
	Motivating comparison	28	9.8	Occasionally motivated self-improvement
Adjustment of Self-Image through Engagement with Online Content	Physical self-presentation	89	31.0	Modified grooming, fashion, or fitness routines
	Curated online identity	55	19.2	Enhanced presentation of achievements or lifestyle
	Cyberbullying / stalking	84	29.3	Created insecurity, fear, lowered confidence
Emotional Impact of Negative Experiences and Feedback Online	Anxiety / FOMO	93	32.4	Negatively affected self-esteem and ideal self
	Negative feedback/low engagement	21	7.3	Weakened self-image, positive feedback only short-term

4.3. Social Media Feedback Influence on the Self-concept of Undergraduate Students

The third objective focused on how social media feedback

influences the self-concept of undergraduate students. The participants' feedback on how comments, likes, and other forms of feedback on social media affected their self-esteem, self-image, and ideal self is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics on social media feedback influence on the self-concept of undergraduate student.

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	Mean	SDV
I feel less confident when I do not receive positive feedback on my posts.	11.7	17.3	19.1	29.3	22.6	3.39	1.24
I often check the number of likes and comments on my posts to gauge my self-worth.	10.3	16.7	19.7	31.1	22.2	3.46	1.21
Negative feedback on social media affects how I view myself.	11.1	17.9	18.9	29.7	22.4	3.44	1.22
I feel validated when others like or comment positively on my posts.	8.9	15.3	17.9	32.7	25.2	3.61	1.18
My self-esteem does not increase when I get a lot of engagement on my posts.	14.3	21.7	19.9	25.9	18.2	3.06	1.28
I get discouraged when my social media posts do not get enough feedback.	11.3	18.1	19.3	28.9	22.4	3.42	1.21
I feel a sense of belonging when I receive supportive feedback on social media.	8.7	14.3	17.7	33.3	26.0	3.71	1.15
Social media feedback affects how I see myself.	10.5	16.7	18.9	30.3	23.6	3.48	1.19
I do not feel proud of myself when I receive positive feedback on social media.	13.3	19.7	19.9	25.3	21.8	3.22	1.25
Negative feedback on social media lowers my self-esteem.	10.1	16.9	18.7	29.9	24.4	3.49	1.19
Social media helps me track progress toward my ideal self.	8.9	14.9	18.7	33.1	24.4	3.63	1.16
I often use the feedback I get on social media to adjust my self-image.	10.1	16.1	18.7	31.3	23.8	3.55	1.18

Table 7 shows that when asked about feeling less confident when they do not receive positive feedback on their posts, 11.7% of participants strongly disagreed, 17.3% disagreed, 19.1% were neutral, 29.3% agreed, and 22.6% strongly agreed, producing a mean of 3.39 (SD = 1.24). These results indicate that a considerable number of undergraduates experience decreased confidence when positive reinforcement is absent on social media. This suggests that students' self-worth is partly dependent on affirmation from online peers. Similar outcomes were reported among young adult social media users in Germany by Voggenreiter et al. [69], who found that insufficient positive feedback reduced self-esteem and increased negative emotions. Likewise, Sabik et al. [57] in the United States, studying undergraduate women, showed that reliance on social media validation was linked to greater stress levels and lower resilience.

Concerning the frequency with which students check the number of likes and comments on their posts to gauge self-worth, 10.3% strongly disagreed, 16.7% disagreed, 19.7% were neutral, 31.1% agreed, and 22.2% strongly agreed (mean

= 3.46, SD = 1.21). These findings demonstrate that many undergraduates actively monitor social media metrics as indicators of self-esteem. This shows that frequent checking reinforces contingent self-worth and dependence on external validation. Similar patterns were observed among undergraduates and adults in the United States, where Martinez et al. [46] found that higher levels of contingent self-esteem were linked to increased social media engagement and greater risk of problematic platform use.

Regarding the impact of negative feedback on self-perception, 11.1% strongly disagreed, 17.9% disagreed, 18.9% were neutral, 29.7% agreed, and 22.4% strongly agreed (mean = 3.44, SD = 1.22). These results indicate that negative reactions on social media substantially shape undergraduates' self-concept, suggesting that online criticism may lead to lowered confidence and self-worth. Comparable findings were reported among social media users in Canada by Ismail et al. [32], who observed that repeated exposure to hate comments reduced self-confidence, especially among younger users and women.

With regard to feeling validated when others like or comment positively on their posts, 8.9% strongly disagreed, 15.3% disagreed, 17.9% were neutral, 32.7% agreed, and 25.2% strongly agreed (mean = 3.61, SD = 1.18). These findings suggest that positive online feedback enhances affirmation and social connectedness among undergraduates. This indicates that supportive online engagement helps strengthen self-esteem and reinforces a sense of belonging. Similar evidence was reported among young adult social media users in Germany, where Voggenreiter et al. [69] found that receiving more positive feedback increased self-esteem and reduced loneliness.

Concerning whether self-esteem does not increase with high engagement, 14.3% strongly disagreed, 21.7% disagreed, 19.9% were neutral, 25.9% agreed, and 18.2% strongly agreed (mean = 3.06, SD = 1.28). These findings reflect that students' sensitivity to social media engagement varies, with some less affected by high numbers of likes or comments. This implies that while positive feedback generally enhances self-concept, its effect is moderated by individual differences. Da Silva Pinho et al. [22] similarly demonstrated this variation among Instagram users in Brazil and Portugal, where adolescents were more sensitive to online feedback than adults.

When asked if they feel discouraged when their posts received insufficient feedback, 11.3% strongly disagreed, 18.1% disagreed, 19.3% were neutral, 28.9% agreed, and 22.4% strongly agreed (mean = 3.42, SD = 1.21). These findings reveal that low levels engagement negatively influence undergraduates' motivation and self-worth, suggesting that insufficient feedback can generate discouragement and reduced confidence. A review by Rafiq and Linden [54], focusing on post-secondary students, confirmed that likes and comments could either strengthen or undermine self-concept depending on individual interpretation, response and context.

With regard to feeling a sense of belonging when receiving supportive feedback, 8.7% strongly disagreed, 14.3% disagreed, 17.7% were neutral, 33.3% agreed, and 26.0% strongly agreed (mean = 3.71, SD = 1.15). These findings indicate that positive social media interactions foster belonging and support self-esteem by enhancing social connectedness within online communities. Comparable results were noted among adolescents in Indonesia by Handayani et al. [29], who found that positive online interactions enhanced both self-concept and emotional well-being.

Concerning the overall effect of social media feedback on self-perception, 10.5% strongly disagreed, 16.7% disagreed, 18.9% were neutral, 30.3% agreed, and 23.6% strongly agreed (mean = 3.48, SD = 1.19). These results suggest that feedback acts as a mirror, shaping undergraduates' self-concept by reflecting both affirmation and criticism. This highlights how online feedback continually influences self-perception. Supporting evidence comes from college students in the United States, where Rosenthal and Tobin [56] reported that social media engagement could either boost or undermine self-esteem depending on the nature of feedback received.

Regarding the use of social media feedback to track progress toward the ideal self and adjust self-image, 8.9% strongly disagreed, 14.9% disagreed, 18.7% were neutral, 33.1% agreed, and 24.4% strongly agreed for tracking progress (mean = 3.63, SD = 1.16). For adjusting self-image, 10.1% strongly disagreed, 16.1% disagreed, 18.7% were neutral, 31.3% agreed, and 23.8% strongly agreed (mean = 3.55, SD = 1.18). These findings suggest that many undergraduates actively use feedback to monitor and modify their self-concept, indicating that digital responses function as a tool for identity negotiation, guiding self-presentation and personal development. Similar patterns were observed among undergraduate women in the United States by Sabik et al. [57] and among young adults in Italy by Duradoni et al. [25], who found that individuals relied on online feedback to shape and construct their identities.

To better understand how social media feedback influences undergraduate students' self-concept, responses to the open-ended questions were thematically analyzed. Three major themes emerged: (1) emotional reactions to social media feedback, (2) social comparison and self-worth, and (3) adjustment of self-concept through online feedback. Each theme is presented together with its sub-themes, percentages, and the number of participants represented.

4.3.1. Emotional Reactions to Social Media Feedback

The first theme highlights the emotional impact of social media feedback on undergraduate students' self-concept. A total of 182 participants (63.4%) reported that the feedback they received on their posts directly influenced their emotions and self-perception. Of these, 101 participants (35.2%) described negative emotional reactions, such as disappointment, discouragement, and reduced confidence when their posts received little engagement or were met with critical comments. In contrast, 81 participants (28.2%) explained that positive feedback in the form of likes, affirming comments, and other supportive interactions made them feel valued, confident, and socially connected.

These findings demonstrate that online feedback acts as a powerful psychological stimulus, shaping students' self-evaluation on a daily basis. Positive feedback provided short-term boosts in self-esteem, while negative or limited responses generated self-doubt and emotional distress. This pattern suggests that many undergraduate students' emotional well-being is highly dependent on digital interactions, making social media an important and at times risky source of validation. Evidence from undergraduate women in the United States by Sabik et al. [57] supports this conclusion, showing that heavy reliance on feedback was linked to increased stress and reduced resilience. Similarly, research with young adult social media users in Germany by Voggenreiter et al. [69] demonstrated that insufficient positive online engagement was associated with negative emotions and lower self-esteem. Together, these

findings underscore that the emotional consequences of feedback are central to the way undergraduates negotiate their self-concept in online spaces.

4.3.2. Social Comparison and Self-Worth

The second theme reveals how comparison shapes undergraduates' sense of self-worth. A total of 156 participants (54.4%) indicated that they regularly compared their posts and levels of engagement with those of their peers, with this practice strongly influencing their self-perception. Among them, 94 participants (32.8%) reported feelings of inadequacy and lowered confidence when their peers received higher levels of positive feedback, particularly in relation to appearance, lifestyle, and achievements. Conversely, 62 participants (21.6%) noted that comparison occasionally motivated them to improve their own posts or presentation, suggesting that despite its harmful effects, comparison could also serve as a stimulus for self-improvement. This theme shows the double-edged nature of social comparison: while it can be a source of pressure that undermines confidence, it can also operate as a driver of motivation. The implication is that undergraduate students' self-worth is not evaluated in isolation but is continuously benchmarked against the perceived success of peers. This aligns with the social comparison theory, which suggests that people derive self-evaluations by contrasting themselves with others.

Research among post-secondary students in the United States by Rafiq and Linden [54] revealed similar mixed effects, with some students experiencing harmful self-doubt while others felt inspired to enhance their online identity. Likewise, a study with undergraduate American learners by Pasko and Arigo [52] found that exposure to fitspiration posts among undergraduate students triggered emotional responses that were directly mediated by comparison orientation. These findings collectively demonstrate that social comparison is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which social platforms

shape undergraduate students' self-concept.

4.3.3. Adjustment of Self-Concept Through Online Feedback

The third theme concerns the ways in which students actively adjust their self-concept in response to social media feedback. A total of 139 participants (48.4%) explained that online feedback influenced not only how they felt but also how they presented themselves. Within this theme, two distinct patterns emerged. The first involved physical self-presentation, with 78 participants (27.2%) reporting changes to their physical appearance through grooming, clothing, or fitness routines in order to align more closely with online ideals. The second involved digital self-curation, where 61 participants (21.2%) described selectively presenting their achievements, lifestyle choices, or personality traits to project a more socially desirable image. These accounts suggest that social media feedback does not merely reflect students' identity but actively shapes it. Students interpret online feedback as both approval and critique, using it as a guide to refine their self-perceptions and how they are perceived by others.

This highlights the dynamic nature of self-concept in the digital era, where identity is continuously negotiated between internal perceptions and external responses. Similar findings were found among adolescents in Indonesia, where Handayani et al. [29] reported that pressures from online feedback frequently encouraged adolescents to construct idealized identities. Similarly, among university students in Italy, Duradoni et al. [25] found that the pursuit of online approval strongly influenced patterns of self-presentation and engagement. Together, these findings confirm that social media feedback functions both as a mirror that reflects identity and as a tool through which it is shaped, often reinforcing pressures to present a carefully curated self. The frequencies, percentages and representative participant responses reflecting each perspective, along with findings, are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Social identity as a tool for Self-Concept+.

Theme	Subtheme / Focus	Number of Participants	Percentage	Findings
Emotional Reactions to Social Media Feedback	Negative feedback	101	35.2	Disappointment, discouragement, reduced confidence
	Positive feedback	81	28.2	Boosted confidence, feeling valued and connected
Social Comparison and Self-Worth	Inadequacy from peers' higher engagement	94	32.8	Lowered confidence, pressure to measure up
	Motivating comparison	62	21.6	Occasionally encouraged improvement
Adjustment of Self-Concept	Physical self-presentation	78	27.2	Changes to grooming, clothing, or fitness routines

Theme	Subtheme / Focus	Number of Participants	Percentage	Findings
through Online Feedback	Digital self-curation	61	21.2	Selective presentation of achievements and lifestyle

The findings demonstrate that social media engagement exerts a considerable influence on undergraduate students' self-esteem, self-image, and the ideal self, with potential risks such as cyberbullying, social comparison, difficulty disconnecting, and feedback-related pressures emerging as salient factors. Quantitative data from the Likert-scale survey reveal that a substantial proportion of students experiences negative psychological and emotional effects. Similarly, qualitative insights from the open-ended responses underscore the nuanced ways in which prolonged social media use, social comparison, and feedback mechanisms interact to influence self-perception. These patterns are consistent with research conducted internationally, including studies in the China, Kenya, Indonesia, Italy, South Africa, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and the United States, highlighting the broader relevance and universality of the social media phenomena. Overall, the evidence suggests that while social media facilitates connectivity and self-expression, it also presents significant challenges that can affect students' psychological well-being and self-concept.

5. The Complexity of the Internet Interconnectedness

The Internet provides immense resources for individuals to examine their identities and interact with others, thus influencing development of their self-concept. This in turn affects our communication and networks, including family, work and other relationships. Consequently, social media use influences the self-concept of undergraduate students, particularly in relation to self-esteem, self-image, and the ideal self as highlighted in this study.

5.1. Impact of the Frequency of Social Media Use on the Self-Concept

The study established that the frequency of social media use has a substantial effect on undergraduate students' self-concept. Majority of students reported that prolonged daily online engagement contributed to fatigue, distraction, and heightened anxiety regarding their appearance, while limited and controlled use allowed for a more balanced perception of self. Specifically, students who spent extended periods on social platforms were more likely to engage in negative social comparison, experienced reduced self-esteem, and developed dissatisfaction with their self-image. Conversely, students who practised mindful or moderate use often reported that social

media enhanced awareness of their personal achievements and sense of identity, suggesting a link between the duration spent online and psychological well-being. These results indicate that the duration and intensity of social media engagement are critical factors in shaping students' psychological well-being and self-perception, hence the need for self-regulation to mitigate potential negative outcomes, consistent with studies on parenting skills among children in Kenya [71].

5.2. Potential Risks Associated with Social Media Use on the Self-Concept

Several risks emerged from the study, demonstrating the complex challenges social platforms pose to students' self-concept. Cyberbullying, the fear of missing out (FOMO) and negative social comparison were the most frequently reported, with students indicating that these experiences eroded their self-esteem, caused anxiety, and created feelings of inadequacy. Notably, a significant proportion of participants acknowledged that observing peers' curated posts led to unfavourable comparisons that undermined their confidence and disrupted their sense of identity. These findings confirm that although social media promotes social connection and engagement, it can simultaneously act as a source of psychological distress and self-concept disruption. Addressing such risks can help in development of relevant educational and psychological interventions that promote responsible social media use, resilience, and self-awareness especially among undergraduate students.

5.3. Influence of Social Media Feedback on Self-Concept

The study further revealed that social media comments, shares and likes play a significant role in shaping students' self-concept. Positive feedback was consistently associated with heightened self-confidence, validation, and a sense of social belonging, reinforcing students' self-esteem and feelings of competence. In contrast, negative or limited feedback often led to self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, and uncertainty regarding personal worth, illustrating the psychological impact of online social validation. Participants indicated that both the quantity and type of feedback influenced their real and ideal self-perceptions, highlighting the role of social media interactions in identity formation. The outcomes of the study align with prior research findings emphasizing that feedback mechanisms on social platforms can amplify social comparison and

affect psychological well-being, underscoring the need for strategies that reduce overreliance on online validation.

6. Conclusion

Social media continues to exert a lot of influence on individuals, particularly college and university students, affecting both their social interactions and academics [2, 22, 23, 41, 51, 58]. This study demonstrates that social media exerts a multifaceted influence on undergraduate students' self-concept, encompassing both positive and negative outcomes. High-frequency social media use and engagement with feedback mechanisms can enhance awareness of self and social belonging but also exacerbate self-consciousness, anxiety, and susceptibility to negative social comparison.

A major weakness of this study was that it was a horizontal study as it captured participants' experiences at a single point in time. This means that it cannot determine self-concept changes over time. Future studies should therefore adopt a longitudinal study in order to track changes in the frequency of social media use over time. This could include an in-depth investigation into how different types of social media shape self-esteem, self-image and the formation of the ideal-self incorporating culture and the perception of online risks and their long-term psychological impact on self-concept. Furthermore, risks such as cyberbullying and fear of missing out (FOMO) intensify these effects, indicating that students' self-esteem, self-image, and ideal self are closely intertwined with their online behaviours and experiences. The findings underscore the benefits of promoting responsible social media practices, self-regulation, and digital literacy to safeguard psychological well-being while allowing students to benefit from the positive aspects of social connectivity. Wango [70] emphasizes on the need for counselling psychology research in the Kenyan social context in order to examine emerging trends such as use of social media and their implications on the psychological well-being of young people.

Based on the findings of this study, several intervention programmes are recommended to promote responsible social media use among undergraduate students, with emphasis on the risks of overuse and strategies for self-regulation. This should include (1) integration of guidance on managing online interactions in mental health support services; (2) provision of strategies to mitigate negative effects of social comparison; and, (3) promotion of digital literacy and awareness about cyberbullying to protect self-concept.

Abbreviations

FOMO	Fear of Missing Out
LMCs	Low- and Middle-income Countries
SCT	Social Communication Theory

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Author Contributions

Leila Mkameli Gwiyo: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft

Geoffrey Mbugua Wango: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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