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Impact of Social Networking Sites on the Self-Esteem of Degree College Students: A Theoretical Review

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Abstract

Social networking sites (SNS) have become a near-constant feature of daily life for degree college students, and a growing body of research links regular SNS use to measurable shifts in self-esteem, the overall evaluative judgement a person holds about their own worth. This paper presents a theoretical review of the psychological mechanisms through which SNS use raises or lowers self-esteem among college students. Drawing on Sociometer Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory, and Self-Discrepancy Theory, the review synthesises existing conceptual and empirical literature to explain why quantified social feedback, curated peer content, and idealised self-presentation on SNS can each shift a student's sense of self-worth in different directions. Unlike offline social feedback, SNS supply frequent, quantifiable, and publicly visible indicators of social approval, such as likes, comments, and follower counts, that can be internalised as direct evidence of one's relational and social value. The paper proposes an integrated conceptual model linking patterns of SNS use to self-esteem outcomes, moderated by factors such as contingent self-worth, social comparison orientation, gender, and cultural background. The review concludes by identifying gaps in theorising relevant to collectivist, non-Western populations and outlines directions for future empirical research among Indian degree college students.

Keywords:
Self-esteem, social networking sites, social comparison, self-worth, college students

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Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat have become an everyday setting in which degree college students seek out, display, and respond to social feedback. Self-esteem, broadly defined as an individual's overall positive or negative evaluation of their own worth, has long been recognised as sensitive to social feedback and relational standing (Rosenberg, 1965). What distinguishes SNS from earlier social contexts is the sheer volume and visibility of feedback available: a single post can generate a quantified, publicly displayed record of peer approval within minutes, in a way that ordinary face-to-face interaction does not (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

For degree college students, whose sense of self is still consolidating and who are highly attuned to peer evaluation, this feedback-rich environment raises an important question: does frequent SNS use build self-esteem by providing reassurance and connection, or does it erode self-esteem by exposing users to constant upward comparison and to their own quantified social shortcomings (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014)? The empirical literature on this question is decidedly mixed, and much of the disagreement can be traced to differences in the underlying theoretical assumptions different studies bring to the question.

This paper undertakes a theoretical review rather than an empirical study. Its purpose is to synthesise the major psychological frameworks that explain how SNS use influences self-esteem, to examine platform-specific mechanisms that may intensify or offset these classical processes, and to propose an integrated conceptual model to guide future empirical research among degree college students. The review addresses three questions: (a) which classical theoretical frameworks best explain the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem; (b) which mechanisms specific to SNS amplify or moderate these classical processes; and (c) which individual and contextual factors shape this relationship among the college-student population.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the review methodology; Section 3 sets out the rationale for focusing on degree college students; Section 4 presents four theoretical frameworks in turn; Section 5 discusses SNS-specific amplifying mechanisms; Section 6 introduces an integrated conceptual model; Section 7 offers a comparative summary of the frameworks; Section 8 discusses moderating factors, with attention to the Indian degree college context; and Sections 9 through 12 present the discussion, limitations, future research directions, and conclusion, respectively.

2. Review Methodology

This is a narrative theoretical review rather than a systematic or empirical one. Peer-reviewed journal articles and foundational theoretical sources addressing self-esteem, social comparison, self-worth, and SNS use were located through established databases and prior reviews of the SNS-and-wellbeing literature. Sources were prioritised on the basis of their theoretical centrality within the self-esteem literature and their relevance to emerging-adult or college-age populations. Foundational papers (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965; Festinger, 1954; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Higgins, 1987) were used to establish the theoretical foundation, supplemented by more recent studies that test or extend these frameworks specifically within SNS contexts. No formal inclusion or exclusion protocol was applied; consistent with narrative reviews in the social sciences, the goal is to integrate the dominant explanatory frameworks into a single coherent account.

3. Rationale and Significance

Degree college students are a particularly relevant population for research on SNS use and self-esteem. Emerging adulthood is marked by active identity formation and heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, a period during which self-esteem is comparatively unstable and responsive to social feedback (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). At the same time, this age group shows among the highest rates of daily SNS engagement of any demographic, meaning that a large share of the social feedback shaping their self-esteem is now mediated through SNS rather than face-to-face contact

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(Twenge & Martin, 2020).

A theoretical synthesis is warranted for two further reasons. First, the self-esteem literature offers several long-standing but historically separate frameworks, sociometer-based, comparison-based, contingency-based, and discrepancy-based accounts, that have rarely been integrated into a single model applied specifically to SNS use. Second, much of the foundational theorising on self-esteem predates the existence of quantified, publicly visible social feedback mechanisms such as likes and follower counts, and therefore requires deliberate extension to the SNS context. This paper addresses both gaps by integrating four theoretical traditions into a single framework, summarised later as Table 1.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Sociometer Theory

Leary and Baumeister (2000) proposed that self-esteem functions as an internal gauge, or 'sociometer', that monitors the degree to which a person is accepted or rejected by others, with the subjective feeling of self-esteem rising and falling in response to perceived relational value rather than serving as an end in itself. On this account, self-esteem is fundamentally a readout of social inclusion rather than a stable trait insulated from social feedback.

Applied to SNS, Sociometer Theory predicts that quantified indicators of peer approval, such as the number of likes or comments a post receives, function as direct inputs to this internal gauge, so that a well-received post can produce a short-term rise in self-esteem while a post that receives little engagement can produce a corresponding dip (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). Because SNS make this feedback unusually frequent, explicit, and numerically comparable across posts, the theory suggests that habitual SNS users may develop a self-esteem that fluctuates more closely, and more visibly, with momentary social feedback than would be typical of offline social life.

4.2 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals evaluate their own standing by comparing themselves with others, particularly in the absence of objective standards, and that comparisons with those perceived as superior, termed upward comparisons, tend to produce negative self-evaluation. While Social Comparison Theory has most often been applied to appearance and ability, its core logic extends directly to global self-esteem when the comparison concerns broader life outcomes, popularity, or social success.

SNS feeds are theorised to intensify upward comparison relative to everyday life because they are structurally skewed toward the selective display of favourable content: users predominantly post achievements, flattering images, and positive experiences, producing a comparison target that is systematically more polished than the average offline peer (Chou & Edge, 2012). Repeated upward comparison against this selectively positive stream of peer content is associated with lower self-esteem, particularly among students who engage in frequent, appearance- or achievement-based comparison on SNS (Vogel et al., 2014).

4.3 Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) argued that self-esteem is not uniformly sensitive to all forms of feedback but is instead organised around specific domains, or contingencies, in which a person has staked their sense of worth, such as academic competence, physical appearance, or others' approval. Success or failure within a domain in which self-worth is strongly contingent produces a correspondingly large shift in self-esteem, while feedback in a domain that is not a personal contingency has comparatively little effect.

This framework helps explain why SNS feedback affects some students' self-esteem far more strongly than others': for students whose self-worth is heavily contingent on others' approval, quantified SNS feedback such as likes and comments is theorised to function as high-stakes evidence bearing directly on their sense of worth, producing pronounced self-esteem fluctuations, whereas students whose self-worth rests on other contingencies, such as academic mastery, may be comparatively insulated from the same feedback (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory therefore supplies an individual-difference

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account of why the sociometer and social comparison mechanisms described above operate more strongly in some students than in others.

4.4 Self-Discrepancy Theory

Higgins (1987) proposed that psychological distress and lowered self-regard arise from perceived discrepancies between one's actual self and one's ideal self, the person one aspires to be, with larger discrepancies producing more negative self-evaluation. The theory further distinguishes the ideal self from the ought self, the person one believes they should be according to duties and obligations, though the actual-ideal discrepancy is most directly relevant to self-esteem.

SNS use is theorised to widen the perceived actual-ideal discrepancy in two ways: first, by continually exposing users to idealised peer content that raises the salience and apparent attainability of an unrealistically polished 'ideal' life; and second, by pressuring users to curate their own profiles toward this same ideal, creating a persistent, self-authored reminder of the gap between the curated online self and the private, actual self (Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015). Where this discrepancy becomes chronically salient, Self-Discrepancy Theory predicts a corresponding erosion of self-esteem, particularly among students who spend more time constructing an idealised profile than they do in unmediated offline interaction.

5. SNS-Specific Amplifying Mechanisms

While the four frameworks above were developed independently of, or prior to, the design features of contemporary SNS, several platform-specific mechanisms identified in recent literature help explain why SNS use has a distinctive, and at times outsized, effect on self-esteem relative to earlier social contexts.

Quantified feedback metrics: likes, comments, and follower counts convert social approval into an explicit, comparable number, giving the sociometer mechanism a uniquely precise and persistent form of input that offline interaction rarely provides (Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

Positivity-skewed self-presentation norms: the platform-wide norm of posting only favourable content produces an artificially positive comparison pool, intensifying the upward-comparison mechanism identified by Social Comparison Theory (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Persistent, editable self-presentation: the ability to edit, filter, and selectively curate one's own profile before publication invites users to construct an idealised online self, widening the actual-ideal discrepancy described by Self-Discrepancy Theory.

Algorithmically prioritised social content: content feeds are often curated to surface highly engaging, comparison-relevant posts, increasing the frequency with which appearance- or approval-contingent students encounter self-esteem-relevant material (Vogel et al., 2014).

Together, these mechanisms function as structural amplifiers rather than incidental features of the medium: quantified metrics determine how precisely social feedback is registered; positivity-skewed norms determine how favourable the comparison pool appears; editable self-presentation determines how wide the actual-ideal gap can become; and algorithmic curation determines how often self-esteem-relevant content is encountered in the first place. This suggests that SNS platforms do not merely provide a new venue for pre-existing self-esteem processes but actively restructure the conditions under which self-worth is evaluated and experienced.

6. Integrated Conceptual Model

Drawing on the four theoretical frameworks and the SNS-specific mechanisms discussed above, this paper proposes an integrated conceptual model. SNS engagement, including posting frequency, feedback-seeking, and passive browsing of peers' content, is depicted as the initiating behaviour, which activates self-esteem-relevant processes explained by the four classical theories: sociometer-based feedback monitoring, upward social comparison, contingent self-worth evaluation, and actual-ideal self-discrepancy. These processes are amplified by the SNS-specific mechanisms of quantified feedback, positivity-skewed norms, editable self-presentation,

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and algorithmic curation, and are moderated by individual factors such as contingent self-worth, comparison orientation, gender, and cultural background. The pathway culminates in short-term and, with repeated exposure, longer-term shifts in self-esteem, ranging from a modest, feedback-contingent boost following well-received posts to a more sustained erosion of self-esteem among students whose self-worth is heavily staked on SNS-mediated approval.

Schematically, the model can be summarised as a chain running from SNS engagement behaviour, through the four classical self-esteem mechanisms, through the platform-specific amplifiers, to the final self-esteem outcome, with the individual and contextual moderators discussed in Section 8 acting on the strength of each link in this chain rather than on the outcome alone.

7. Comparative Summary of Theoretical Frameworks

Table 1 summarises the four theoretical frameworks discussed in this paper, their key proponents, core premises, and their specific application to the SNS–self-esteem relationship among college students.

Theory	Key Proponent(s)	Core Premise	Application to SNS & Self-Esteem
Sociometer Theory	Leary & Baumeister (2000)	Self-esteem functions as an internal gauge of perceived social acceptance or rejection, rising and falling in response to relational feedback.	Quantified SNS feedback, such as likes and comments, functions as direct input to this gauge, producing short-term rises or dips in self-esteem tied to post engagement.
Social Comparison Theory	Festinger (1954)	Individuals evaluate their own standing by comparing themselves with others; upward comparisons with perceived superiors tend to lower self-evaluation.	The positivity-skewed content of SNS feeds intensifies upward comparison, lowering self-esteem among students who frequently compare themselves to curated peer content.
Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory	Crocker & Wolfe (2001)	Self-esteem is organised around specific domains of contingent worth; feedback within a salient contingency produces larger shifts in self-esteem than feedback outside it.	Students whose self-worth is strongly contingent on others' approval show larger self-esteem swings in response to SNS feedback than students with other contingencies.
Self-Discrepancy Theory	Higgins (1987)	Perceived discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self produce negative self-evaluation; larger discrepancies produce greater distress.	Exposure to idealised peer content and pressure toward curated self-presentation widen the actual-ideal gap, eroding self-esteem with repeated exposure.

8. Moderating and Individual Difference Factors

The pathways described above do not operate uniformly across all students. Contingent self-worth, discussed above as a theoretical mechanism, also functions as a moderator of the other three pathways: students whose self-worth is strongly staked on others' approval show a stronger sociometer response and a wider self-discrepancy effect than students whose self-worth rests elsewhere (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Social comparison orientation, the dispositional tendency to compare oneself with others, similarly moderates the strength of the comparison pathway, with high-comparison individuals showing a stronger self-esteem drop following exposure to idealised peer content (Vogel et al., 2014).

Gender differences are also documented, with some evidence

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that female students report stronger appearance-based comparison effects on self-esteem, while male students show comparatively stronger effects tied to achievement- or status-based comparison, though these patterns are theorised to be culturally moderated rather than universal (Chou & Edge, 2012).

8.1 Relevance to the Indian Degree College Context

Although most foundational studies reviewed in this paper were conducted with Western, individualist samples, several features of Indian degree colleges are likely to interact with these pathways. First, collectivist family and community orientations common in many Indian households may shift the domain of contingent self-worth toward family reputation and academic or career achievement rather than the individual popularity emphasised in much Western SNS research, potentially altering which forms of SNS feedback carry the greatest self-esteem consequences. Second, the joint visibility of family, peers, and extended community within a single SNS network in many Indian settings may intensify social comparison across multiple reference groups simultaneously, a condition not fully anticipated by Festinger's (1954) originally dyadic model of comparison. Third, cultural norms around modesty and restrained self-promotion may moderate the self-discrepancy pathway, since the pressure to construct an idealised online self may be expressed differently, and possibly less overtly, than in more individualist cultural contexts. These contextual considerations underscore the need for the culturally adapted empirical testing proposed in Section 11.

9. Discussion

This review suggests that no single classical framework fully explains the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem among degree college students. Sociometer Theory explains the moment-to-moment sensitivity of self-esteem to quantified SNS feedback; Social Comparison Theory explains why the specifically positivity-skewed content of SNS feeds tends to lower self-esteem through upward comparison; Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory explains why these effects are far stronger for some students than others; and Self-Discrepancy Theory explains a more slow-building erosion of self-esteem arising from the gap between one's curated online self and one's private, actual self. Together, these frameworks offer a more complete account than any one theory considered alone.

A recurring theme across the literature is that SNS do not simply provide a new venue for pre-existing self-esteem processes but actively restructure the conditions under which self-worth is evaluated, through quantified feedback, positivity-skewed comparison pools, editable self-presentation, and algorithmically prioritised content. This has implications for how educators and student counselling services might approach self-esteem concerns among college students: interventions may need to address not only students' underlying contingencies of self-worth but also their specific patterns of SNS engagement, since two students with similar offline self-esteem may respond very differently to the same platform depending on how heavily their self-worth is staked on SNS-mediated approval.

10. Limitations of Existing Theoretical Work

Three limitations in the existing literature are worth noting. First, as with much of the broader SNS literature, foundational and empirical studies on self-esteem and SNS use were disproportionately conducted with Western, individualist samples, raising questions about the applicability of these frameworks to Indian degree college populations with different family structures and contingencies of self-worth. Second, much of the empirical work relies on cross-sectional self-report measures of both self-esteem and SNS use, making it difficult to establish whether lower self-esteem precedes, follows, or is reciprocally related to particular patterns of SNS use. Third, much of the theorising predates newer SNS features, such as ephemeral Stories, algorithmically curated 'explore' feeds, and appearance-editing filters, whose specific effects on the discrepancy and comparison pathways remain under-theorised.

11. Directions for Future Research

Building on the integrated model proposed here, future

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empirical research among Indian degree college students should test the relative strength of the sociometer, comparison, contingency, and discrepancy pathways using validated self-esteem measures such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale alongside behavioural-trace measures of SNS engagement, rather than self-reported frequency alone. Research should also examine collectivist-context moderators, including family-oriented contingencies of self-worth and multi-audience social comparison, which existing Western-derived models do not directly address. Experimental and longitudinal designs would further allow researchers to isolate the short-term, feedback-driven fluctuations in self-esteem predicted by Sociometer Theory from the slower, discrepancy-driven erosion predicted by Self-Discrepancy Theory, a distinction that purely cross-sectional designs cannot adequately capture.

12. Conclusion

Social networking sites have become a central setting in which degree college students receive, seek, and evaluate social feedback bearing directly on their sense of self-worth. This paper has synthesised four theoretical frameworks, Sociometer Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory, and Self-Discrepancy Theory, into an integrated conceptual model explaining how patterns of SNS use translate into shifts in self-esteem through both classical psychological processes and SNS-specific amplifying mechanisms. While existing theory provides a useful foundation, cross-cultural and platform-updated theoretical development remains necessary. The proposed model offers a starting framework for future empirical research examining this relationship among Indian degree college students specifically.

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