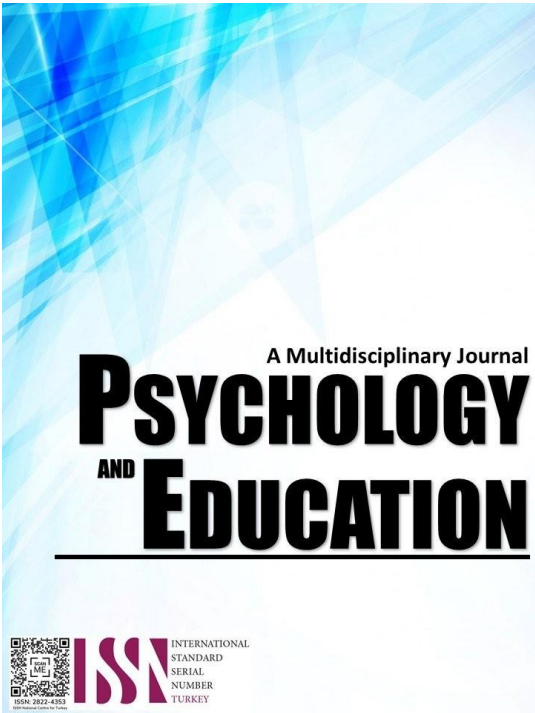


# STUDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND SEVERITY OF DEPRESSION



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## Students' Social Media Use and Severity of Depression

Jefrey N. Tungol,\* Fernando B. Enad

For affiliations and correspondence, see the last page.

### Abstract

Social media has transformed global communication and become deeply embedded in the daily lives of Filipino youth, shaping how they connect, express themselves, and engage with society. This study employed a descriptive-comparative research design to determine and examine the differences in the severity of depression among college students in Tagbilaran City during the academic year 2019–2020. It also examines the patterns of social media usage and the extent to which students engage in social comparison. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and Cognitive Theory of Depression (Beck, 1967), the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how digital engagement influences student experiences. Survey data were collected from 450 college students across two universities in Tagbilaran City. Results show that Facebook is the most frequently used platform (92.44%), followed by Instagram (51.56%) and Twitter (32.00%). The top reasons for social media engagement include staying connected with family and friends (88.40%), entertainment (79.33%), and news consumption (68.22%). Findings also indicate that 78.44% of students engage in upward social comparison, while 21.56% engage in downward comparison. Depression severity was assessed, revealing that 34.67% of respondents exhibit moderate symptoms, while 3.33% experience severe depression. Further analysis shows that the amount of time spent on social media is not a significant factor in determining depression severity. However, the manner in which students interact with digital content has notable implications. The results underscore the importance of mental health awareness and digital well-being programs in educational institutions. The study suggests the development of targeted interventions to promote responsible social media use, self-awareness, and coping mechanisms for managing digital exposure. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions on digital engagement and mental health, offering insights that can inform institutional policies and student support programs.

**Keywords:** *social media use, tendency in social comparison, severity of depression*

### Introduction

Social media has rapidly transformed global communication, with 62.3% of the world's population, actively using social media (Chaffey, 2024). In the Philippines alone, social media penetration is even higher, reaching 73.4%, with 86.75 million users (Kemp, 2024). Filipinos are among the most active social media consumers worldwide, spending an average of over four hours daily on these platforms. While social media facilitates connection, self-expression, and access to information, it also serves as a lifeline for mental health support. Studies suggest that social media can help alleviate social isolation by offering anonymity and self-expression opportunities for individuals struggling with mental health conditions (Naruse, 2017). Additionally, it has played a crucial role in suicide prevention, enabling individuals in distress to seek help through online communities and crisis hotlines (Singh, 2019).

Despite these benefits, social media also introduces significant risks to users' mental health. Excessive use has been linked to psychological distress, including cyberbullying, social comparison, anxiety, depression, and addiction. Stegner (2020) emphasized that social media fosters Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), unrealistic body image standards, and unhealthy sleep patterns, all of which contribute to mental health deterioration.

Furthermore, Mammoser (2018) established a causal link between excessive social media use and declining well-being, particularly in terms of increased loneliness and depressive symptoms. This growing body of research highlights the paradoxical nature of social media—while it offers support, it can also amplify psychological distress in vulnerable individuals.

Depression remains a pressing global mental health concern, affecting 3.8% of the world's population, with women experiencing higher rates than men (WHO, 2023). In the Philippines, 8.3% to 9.6% of young adults experience moderate to severe depressive symptoms, with loneliness emerging as the most commonly reported experience (Puyat et al., 2021). Alarming, suicide rates continue to rise, with the Bohol Provincial Police Office (BPPO) reporting 189 suicide cases in 2023, followed by an increase to 200 cases in 2024. This disturbing trend among Filipino youth underscores the urgent need for proactive mental health interventions (Boiser, 2022; Alibudbud, 2023).

Given these concerns, this study aims to determine the level of depression severity among college students in Tagbilaran City during the academic year 2019–2020. Specifically, it seeks to examine their social media usage patterns, social comparison tendencies, and how these factors may be associated with variations in depression severity. Given the growing concerns over mental health among young adults, this study provides a localized perspective on the role of social media in shaping students' psychological well-being in Bohol, Philippines. The findings from this study will be valuable for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in designing targeted interventions, awareness programs, and support systems tailored to students' needs.

## Research Questions

This study aimed to determine the level of depression severity among college students in Tagbilaran City for the academic year 2019-2020. Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the respondents' profile in terms of social media usage in the following aspects:
  - 1.1. social media platforms mostly used;
  - 1.2. reasons for using social media; and
  - 1.3. average daily social media use?
2. What is the respondents' tendency in social comparison?
3. What is the respondents' level of depression severity?
4. Is there a significant difference in respondents' level of depression severity when respondents are grouped in terms of:
  - 4.1. average daily social media use and
  - 4.2. tendency in social comparison?

## Literature Review

Understanding the psychological and behavioral effects of social media use requires a strong theoretical foundation. This study is anchored on Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and Cognitive Theory of Depression (Beck, 1967) to explain how college students in Tagbilaran City engage with social media, develop social comparison tendencies, and experience varying levels of depression severity.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by Katz et al. (1973), posits that individuals actively seek out media, including social media, to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. Unlike passive media consumption models, UGT emphasizes that users engage with digital platforms for various purposes, such as entertainment, social interaction, self-presentation, information-seeking, and escapism.

In the context of this study, UGT provides a framework for analyzing respondents' social media usage patterns, addressing which platforms they use most frequently, their motivations for engaging with social media, and the amount of time they spend online. The theory helps explain why individuals may use social media for social validation, connection, or distraction, which are factors that could influence their mental well-being. By applying UGT, this study seeks to categorize social media usage behaviors among students.

On the one hand, the Social Comparison Theory (SCT) by Festinger (1954), explains how individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and status to those of others. Festinger (1954) proposed that people engage in social comparison as a means of self-evaluation, either by looking upward (toward those perceived as better off) or downward (toward those perceived as worse off).

In the context of social media, users are constantly exposed to curated content showcasing others' achievements, lifestyles, and personal successes, which can lead to either upward or downward comparisons. Upward comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to those they perceive as more successful, attractive, or accomplished, which may motivate self-improvement but can also lead to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and lower self-esteem. Conversely, downward comparison happens when individuals compare themselves to those they perceive as less successful or in worse situations, which may boost self-esteem temporarily but could also encourage complacency.

This study utilizes SCT to examine the social comparison tendencies of college students, identifying whether they engage more frequently in upward or downward comparisons and how these tendencies may affect their emotional well-being. Understanding these patterns provides insights into how social media contributes to self-evaluation and potential mental health challenges.

On the other hand, the Cognitive Theory of Depression by Beck (1967), proposes that depression is largely influenced by negative thought patterns and cognitive distortions. According to Beck, individuals who develop negative self-perceptions, automatic negative thoughts, and cognitive distortions (e.g., overgeneralization, catastrophizing, or self-criticism) are more likely to experience depression.

In the context of this study, social comparison on social media may serve as a trigger for negative cognitive patterns, particularly among individuals who engage in frequent upward comparisons. Exposure to idealized images of success, wealth, beauty, or happiness can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, contributing to the development or exacerbation of depressive symptoms. Conversely, those who engage in downward comparison may experience temporary relief or self-validation, but this does not necessarily prevent the onset of depressive thoughts.

By incorporating Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression, this study aims to analyze the severity of depression among college students and explore how social comparison tendencies contribute to their mental well-being. The theory provides a psychological explanation for why certain individuals may be more vulnerable to depression due to their cognitive responses to social media comparisons.

Together, these three theories form a comprehensive framework for understanding how social media usage, social comparison, and depression severity are interconnected. The Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why students engage with social media, the Social Comparison Theory explains how they evaluate themselves based on social media exposure, and the Cognitive Theory of Depression

explains how these comparisons may contribute to depressive symptoms. By applying these theories, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the role of social media in shaping students' self-perception and mental health, offering valuable insights for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers to develop targeted interventions and digital well-being programs.

Mental health, indeed, is an essential component of overall well-being, yet for many years, it remained underrecognized and underprioritized in the Philippines. In response to the growing need for accessible and comprehensive mental health care, the Philippine government enacted Republic Act No. 11036, also known as the Mental Health Act of 2018. This law establishes a national framework for mental health services, awareness, and policies, ensuring that mental health is treated with the same level of importance as physical health. It promotes access to mental health care, the integration of mental health programs in schools and workplaces, and the protection of individuals with mental health conditions from discrimination and stigma.

In relation to this study, RA 11036 provides a strong legal foundation for investigating depression severity among college students and highlights the importance of understanding factors that may contribute to mental health challenges, such as social media use and social comparison tendencies. Given the increasing prevalence of depression among young people and the potential role of social media in influencing self-perception, this study aligns with the law's objectives by generating empirical data that can support mental health advocacy, interventions, and policymaking.

In addition to the theoretical and legal foundations, the researchers conducted a thorough review of relevant literature published within the last five years. The literature search included academic journals, research papers, and reputable sources that explored social media usage, social comparison, and the severity of depression. This review examines recent studies from 2019 to 2024, providing a contemporary perspective on social media usage patterns, social comparison tendencies, and depression severity among college students. By synthesizing existing studies, this section aims to contextualize the study within the broader academic discourse on social media and mental well-being.

Social media has become an integral part of modern digital life, influencing communication patterns, social interactions, and even psychological well-being. Understanding the profile of social media users, including the platforms they use most frequently, their reasons for engagement, and their average daily usage, provides valuable insights into digital behavior trends and their potential effects on mental health. This section reviews recent literature that explores social media usage patterns, particularly among adolescents and young adults.

The increasing number of social media platforms has led to a shift in user preferences, with certain platforms dominating specific demographic groups. According to Backlinko (2024), there are over 5.24 billion social media users globally, and the average user accesses approximately 6.83 different platforms monthly. Among young individuals, YouTube and TikTok remain the most popular platforms, with teenagers spending an average of 1.9 hours and 1.5 hours per day on these sites, respectively (Gallup, 2024).

In the Philippines, social media usage remains among the highest in the world, with Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube ranking as the top three platforms among Filipino users (Statista, 2024). A study by Kemp (2024) reported that over 86.75 million Filipinos are active social media users, with Facebook being the dominant platform, followed closely by YouTube and TikTok. These findings suggest that visual and interactive content plays a significant role in engagement, particularly among younger demographics.

Given this growing preference for video-based and short-form content, this study seeks to assess whether students in Tagbilaran City exhibit similar social media platform preferences. Understanding these trends will provide insights into how students navigate digital spaces and which platforms may have the most influence on their mental health and social behaviors.

Beyond platform preference, understanding why individuals engage with social media is crucial for identifying potential emotional and psychological effects. Studies indicate that social media fulfills various needs, including social connection, entertainment, education, and self-expression.

A report by Exploding Topics (2024) found that 48.7% of global social media users primarily use these platforms to stay connected with friends and family. Similarly, a study by Auxier and Anderson (2021) revealed that users also engage with social media for news consumption, entertainment, and educational purposes. Among teenagers and young adults, social media is frequently used for self-expression and identity formation, where users curate their online personas and interact within digital communities (Anderson & Jiang, 2021).

However, studies also indicate that passive social media use, such as scrolling without engaging, can contribute to feelings of loneliness and depression (Twenge et al., 2018). Conversely, active engagement (e.g., commenting, posting, and interacting with others) has been linked to higher levels of social fulfillment (Verduyn et al., 2021). These findings highlight the dual nature of social media, where engagement type can determine whether it serves as a tool for connection or a potential stressor.

In this study, students' motivations for using social media were analyzed to determine whether their usage aligns with trends observed in previous studies. By identifying whether students use social media for social connection, entertainment, or academic purposes, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of digital engagement patterns among Filipino college students.

Time spent on social media has also been widely studied as a potential factor influencing mental health outcomes. The average global

daily social media usage in 2024 is reported to be 143 minutes per day, down from 151 minutes in 2023 (Statista, 2024). However, among teenagers and young adults, the numbers are significantly higher, with U.S. teens averaging 4.8 hours per day on social media platforms (Gallup, 2024).

Filipinos, in particular, are known for their high levels of social media engagement, ranking among the world's top users in terms of screen time. Reports indicate that Filipino internet users spend an average of 3.5 to 4 hours per day on social media, often engaging in continuous scrolling, content sharing, and online interactions (Kemp, 2024). This prolonged exposure has raised concerns regarding its potential psychological effects, particularly in relation to social comparison, self-esteem, and emotional well-being.

Previous studies suggest that excessive social media use can contribute to higher stress levels, sleep disturbances, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Keles et al., 2020). However, findings also indicate that moderate use, especially when geared toward productive or educational engagement, does not necessarily lead to negative mental health outcomes (Orben et al., 2019). Given these conflicting perspectives, this study will assess how much time college students in Tagbilaran City spend on social media daily and whether excessive usage aligns with existing global and local trends.

Social comparison is another critical factor that plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' self-perception, motivation, and emotional well-being. Among college students, this tendency manifests in academic settings, social interactions, and digital engagements, particularly through social media. Recent studies have examined how students compare themselves to peers and how these comparisons influence their confidence, anxiety, and overall adjustment.

Academic environments naturally foster comparative behaviors as students evaluate their abilities against those of their classmates. A study by Sachu et al. (2023) found that students who frequently engaged in upward comparison—measuring themselves against high-achieving peers—tended to experience lower self-esteem and higher academic anxiety. In contrast, downward comparison, or comparing oneself to lower-performing peers, often leads to increased confidence but reduced motivation for self-improvement. Similarly, Brown and Lee (2023) observed that students in competitive academic settings, particularly in STEM fields, experienced a heightened fear of negative evaluation due to frequent social comparison. Their findings suggest that while comparison can serve as motivation, excessive upward comparison may lead to stress and self-doubt.

Beyond academics, social comparison also affects students' psychological well-being. Martinez et al. (2021) reported that students who habitually compared themselves to more socially active or successful peers exhibited greater stress, anxiety, and difficulty adjusting to university life. Gonzalez et al. (2019) further emphasized that social media intensifies these effects, as students are constantly exposed to highly curated and idealized portrayals of success. Their study found that frequent upward comparison through social media led to increased feelings of inadequacy and loneliness, reinforcing concerns that digital spaces amplify self-doubt. The relationship between social media and social comparison is particularly relevant in the context of Filipino students, given the country's high engagement rates on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube (Kemp, 2024).

Social media not only facilitates comparison but also influences students' self-perception and motivation. Li et al. (2021) examined how exposure to fitness-related content shaped students' self-image and drive for self-improvement. The study found that individuals with a high social comparison orientation—those naturally inclined to compare themselves to others—were more likely to feel dissatisfied with their appearance and exhibit reduced motivation for physical activity. Similarly, Verduyn et al. (2020) highlighted that passive social media use, such as scrolling without interacting, was more strongly associated with negative emotions than active engagement. These findings suggest that the way students engage with social media—whether they are actively participating or passively consuming content—may influence the emotional impact of comparison.

In educational settings, social comparison tendencies shape learning behaviors as well. Miller and Thompson (2022) explored how different forms of comparison influence students' motivation in writing courses. Their study found that students exposed to high-achieving peers' work experienced cognitive anxiety, while those exposed to lower-performing peers reported higher self-efficacy but demonstrated less effort. These results suggest that the way the comparison is framed within academic contexts can determine whether it acts as a source of stress or a means of encouragement.

Given these findings, it is clear that social comparison tendencies influence students' academic motivation, emotional well-being, and self-esteem. While some forms of comparison can foster resilience and self-improvement, excessive upward comparison—especially through social media—can contribute to negative mental health outcomes. Most existing studies focus on Western contexts, with limited studies examining how social comparison behaviors manifest among Filipino college students. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring whether students in Tagbilaran City predominantly engage in upward or downward comparison and how these tendencies shape their psychological well-being and academic experiences. Findings will provide insights that can inform mental health initiatives, digital literacy programs, and student support strategies to promote healthier self-perception and resilience.

Mental health studies have also explored the prevalence and severity of depressive symptoms among Filipino college students, revealing significant mental health challenges within this demographic. A study by Aranas et al. (2022) involving 2,436 university students found that 16.3% exhibited at least mild depressive symptoms, a higher percentage than anticipated in comparable populations. This finding underscores the urgency for systematic identification and support mechanisms for students at greater risk of depression.



Another investigation by Reyes and Dela Cruz (2021) assessed the prevalence and risk factors of depression, anxiety, and stress among college students. Their study reported that 35.77% of students experienced depression, 48.46% anxiety, and 13.46% stress, highlighting the psychological burden faced by young adults in academic settings. The study identified age, sexual orientation, family history of anxiety, living situation, and academic performance as significant risk factors contributing to these mental health concerns. These findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of depression among college students and the need for personalized interventions addressing both social and academic pressures (Reyes & Dela Cruz, 2021).

Further study by Santos et al. (2023), involving 519 participants from six Philippine universities, examined students' mental health literacy and psychological well-being. The study revealed that while students had average mental health literacy scores, their mental health inventory scores were below average, suggesting that awareness does not always translate to positive mental health outcomes. Additionally, students from state universities demonstrated higher mental health literacy compared to those from private institutions, yet students from private institutions reported higher anxiety levels. These findings suggest that institutional factors, access to mental health resources, and academic expectations may contribute to variations in mental health severity among students (Santos et al., 2023).

Collectively, these studies indicate a substantial prevalence of depressive symptoms among Filipino college students, influenced by socio-demographic and academic factors. Addressing these issues necessitates targeted interventions, stronger support systems, and mental health programs within educational institutions to mitigate the impact of depression on students' overall well-being and academic performance. Given these findings, this study aims to further examine the severity of depression among college students in Tagbilaran City, contributing to localized insights that can guide mental health awareness campaigns, institutional policies, and student support programs.

Recent studies have also examined the relationship between social media usage, social comparison tendencies, and the severity of depression among adolescents and young adults. Understanding how these factors interrelate is crucial for developing effective mental health interventions.

Several studies have examined the association between the amount of time spent on social media and depressive symptoms. A study by Primack et al. (2019) found that adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media are at heightened risk for mental health problems, particularly internalizing issues such as depression and anxiety. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Keles et al. (2022) reported a significant association between problematic social media use and increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among young individuals. These findings suggest that excessive social media use correlates with higher levels of depressive symptoms, reinforcing the need to examine whether similar patterns exist among college students in Tagbilaran City.

The manner of social media engagement also plays a critical role in mental health outcomes. A study by Hunt et al. (2018) found that limiting social media use to 30 minutes daily over three weeks led to significant improvements in depression severity, particularly among individuals who already exhibited high baseline levels of depression. This suggests that not only the quantity but also the quality of social media interaction influences mental health outcomes. Engaging in mindful and intentional use, rather than passive scrolling, may mitigate the negative effects associated with excessive social media exposure.

Social comparison tendencies have also been identified as significant mediators in the relationship between social media use and depression. According to Vogel et al. (2014), individuals who frequently engage in social comparisons on social media platforms are more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes, including heightened depressive symptoms. Upward social comparisons, where individuals compare themselves to more successful, attractive, or affluent peers, have been found to contribute to increased feelings of envy and inadequacy (Appel et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the tendency to compare oneself with others online may influence emotional well-being, an aspect that this study seeks to examine among Filipino college students.

Moreover, studies have shown that social comparison can exacerbate depressive moods, particularly among younger individuals. A study by Nesi and Prinstein (2021) explored the effects of depression and social comparison on adolescents' social decision-making, finding that depressive moods can influence self-perception and worsen mental health outcomes. These results emphasize the importance of addressing social comparison behaviors in mental health interventions, especially for students who may be vulnerable to self-esteem fluctuations due to their digital interactions.

In summary, existing literature indicates that both the amount of time spent on social media and the tendency to engage in social comparisons are associated with the severity of depression among adolescents and young adults. Excessive social media use and frequent upward comparisons are particularly linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms, reinforcing concerns about how digital interactions shape mental health. These insights highlight the need for interventions that promote healthy social media habits and address social comparison behaviors to improve mental health outcomes. Given these findings, this study aims to investigate whether similar patterns are evident among college students in Tagbilaran City and how social media habits and social comparison tendencies contribute to their depression severity levels.

While existing literature has extensively examined the effects of social media use, social comparison, and depression severity, most studies focus on Western contexts, with limited studies exploring how these dynamics manifest among Filipino college students, particularly in regional settings like Tagbilaran City. Additionally, while prior studies have established that excessive social media engagement and frequent upward comparison contribute to higher stress and depressive symptoms, there is a lack of focused

investigation on how social media usage and social comparison tendencies—whether upward or downward—specifically affect the level of severity of depression. This study aims to bridge that gap by determining whether social media use and social comparison tendencies influence depression severity among Filipino college students. It does not seek to establish causality but rather to assess the extent of their effect on depression levels. The findings will contribute to mental health advocacy, institutional policy development, and student-centered interventions that promote healthy digital engagement and psychological resilience.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-comparative research design to examine the differences in the level of depression severity among college students in Tagbilaran City during the academic year 2019-2020. Descriptive-comparative research is a non-experimental design that aims to identify variations between groups based on a specified characteristic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the level of depression severity was compared among students grouped according to their average daily social media use and social comparison tendencies.

This approach was particularly suited to the study's objectives, as it ensured that findings remained focused on differences in depression severity without implying causation or correlation. The results of this study may contribute to educational and mental health initiatives by identifying which student groups experience higher levels of depression severity, thus supporting the development of targeted mental health awareness programs.

### Respondents

The respondents of this study were college students aged 18-24 who were active social media users from two universities in Tagbilaran City, Bohol—one private and one state university. This age group was selected as they are in a critical phase of personal, academic, and professional transitions, where they begin making significant life decisions while navigating increasing social and emotional pressures. According to Auxier and Anderson (2021), 72% of individuals in this age bracket engage with social media daily, making them highly relevant to this study's focus on social media usage patterns, social comparison tendencies, and depression severity.

A total of 450 respondents participated in the study, ensuring a representative sample from both universities. The sampling method employed was cluster sampling, facilitated by an online sample size calculator to ensure equitable distribution across different academic departments. Each university contributed 50 respondents per college, with an equal gender distribution of 25 males and 25 females per cluster. This approach provided a balanced and comprehensive dataset, allowing for a meaningful comparison of depression severity levels among students with varying academic backgrounds and social media engagement habits.

By employing a structured and methodologically sound sampling process, the study ensured accurate, diverse, and representative insights into the mental health landscape of college students in Tagbilaran City. The selection of this respondent group was integral to the study's objective of contributing to mental health awareness and support initiatives within higher education institutions.

### Instrument

The study utilized a three-part questionnaire to assess social media usage patterns, social comparison tendencies, and depression severity among college students. The first part, a researcher-made tool, captured demographic data, platform preferences, reasons for use (with multiple responses allowed), and daily screen time. Items were adapted from prior studies and validated by experts in psychology and digital media. A pilot test among students in Tagbilaran yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .967, indicating high internal consistency.

The second part measured social comparison using the standardized 20-item Social Comparison Orientation Scale by Gibbons and Buunk (1999), rated on a four-point Likert scale. The third part assessed depression severity using the APA DSM-5 Level-2 Depression-Adult tool, an eight-item measure scored on a five-point Likert scale. Both standardized instruments have demonstrated strong psychometric properties in previous research.

### Procedure

Following the approval of the study by the Holy Name University (HNU) Ethics Review Board, the researchers proceeded with the necessary preparations to ensure an ethical and systematic data collection process.

With ethical clearance secured, formal letters were sent to the administrators of the selected universities in Tagbilaran City, requesting permission to conduct the study within their institutions. Upon receiving approval, the researchers directly coordinated with faculty members to schedule the administration of the questionnaire within their classrooms. This approach ensured a structured and controlled environment for data collection while maximizing student participation.

The researchers personally visited each classroom on the scheduled date and conducted an orientation session before administering the questionnaire. During this session, the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations were explained in detail. Each student was then provided with an informed consent form, which they reviewed and signed before proceeding with the questionnaire.

Once consent was obtained, the researchers personally distributed the three-part questionnaire to the respondents. The survey was conducted in a supervised classroom setting, ensuring that all participants had an equal opportunity to complete the questionnaire in an environment free from external distractions.

Throughout the session, the researchers remained present to provide clarifications and answer any questions to ensure that respondents fully understood each item. Students were encouraged to answer independently and honestly, and they were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire at their own pace.

After completion, the researchers personally retrieved all the questionnaires, ensuring that every response was accounted for before leaving the classroom. Each questionnaire was immediately reviewed for completeness and accuracy, with any incomplete responses set aside to maintain the reliability of the data.

Following retrieval, the researchers securely encoded and stored the collected data, adhering to strict confidentiality protocols to protect respondents' information. Access to the data was restricted to authorized personnel only. With the retrieval phase completed, the data were prepared for processing and analysis, marking the conclusion of the data collection stage.

## Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of respondents' rights, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process. Before conducting data collection, the study proposal underwent review and approval by the Holy Name University (HNU) Ethics Review Board to ensure compliance with ethical standards for studies involving human participants. This approval signified that the study upheld principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and data security.

Prior to answering the questionnaire, respondents were given a clear orientation about the study's objectives, procedures, and their role as participants. The researchers emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. Each respondent was provided with an informed consent form, outlining the nature of the study, potential risks, and measures taken to protect their privacy. Respondents were required to read and sign the consent form before proceeding with the questionnaire, ensuring that their participation was based on a full understanding of the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study. No identifying information was collected from respondents, and responses were coded to ensure that data could not be traced back to individual participants. The researchers took necessary precautions to store and handle the collected data securely, limiting access to authorized personnel only. Hard copies of the questionnaires were stored in a locked facility, while digital responses were kept in a password-protected file to prevent unauthorized access.

The study also ensured that the questions asked did not pose psychological distress or discomfort to the respondents. Since the study involved assessing social media behaviors, social comparison tendencies, and depression severity, the researchers remained available during the data collection process to provide clarifications and emotional support if necessary. In the event that any respondent expressed distress, they were reminded that they had the option to stop answering the questionnaire at any time. Furthermore, information about mental health support services available at the university was provided, ensuring that participants were aware of professional resources they could access if needed.

Throughout the study, the researchers upheld the principles of honesty, integrity, and respect for human dignity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes, and the findings were presented in a way that maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents. By adhering to these ethical considerations, the study ensured that the research process was conducted in a responsible, ethical, and respectful manner, prioritizing the rights and well-being of all participants.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the data gathered from college students in Tagbilaran City regarding their social media usage patterns, social comparison tendencies, and severity of depression. The findings are systematically arranged based on the research questions outlined.

To examine their social media usage profile, the study analyzed three key aspects: the platforms they use most frequently, their primary reasons for using social media, and their average daily social media usage. The data presented in Tables 1-3 are ranked according to their percentage.

Table 1. *Respondents' most frequently used social media platforms (N=450)*

<i>Social Media Platform</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Facebook	92.44%	1st
Instagram	51.56%	2nd
Twitter	32.00%	3rd
Snapchat	20.22%	4th

*Note. Respondents were allowed to select more than one social media platform.*



Table 2. Respondents' reasons for using social media (N=450)

Reason for Using Social Media	Percentage	Rank
Staying connected with family and friends	88.40%	1st
Entertainment	79.33%	2nd
News	68.22%	3rd
Networking	62.44%	4th
Inspiration	29.56%	5th
Business	13.56%	6th
Dating	7.11%	7th
Finding a job	4.67%	8th

Note. Respondents were allowed to select more than one reason for using social media.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents based on daily social media usage (N=450)

Social Media Usage Category (Daily)	f	Percentage
Less Frequent ( $\leq 1H$ )	139	31.89%
Frequent (Between 1H and 5H)	180	40.00%
Most Frequent ( $> 5H$ )	131	29.11%
Total	450	100.00%

Table 4 shows the classification of respondents according to their social comparison tendencies, distinguishing between upward comparison (comparing oneself to those perceived as more successful, attractive, or accomplished) and downward comparison (comparing oneself to those perceived as less fortunate or lower in status).

Table 4. Respondents' tendency of social comparison (N=450)

Tendency	f	Percentage
Upward	353	78.44%
Downward	97	21.56%
Total	450	100.00%

Table 5 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their depression severity scores, categorized into four levels: None to Slight, Mild, Moderate, and Severe.

Table 5. Respondents' level of severity of depression (N=450)

Level of Severity of Depression	f	Percentage
None to slight ( $< 55.00$ )	128	28.44%
Mild (Between 55.00 and 59.99)	151	33.56%
Moderate (Between 60.00 and 69.99)	156	34.67%
Severe ( $\geq 70.00$ )	15	3.33%
Total	450	100.00%
Overall Index: 57.85		
Overall Descriptor: Mild		

Table 6 presents the statistical comparison of depression severity based on two factors: (1) Average daily social media use and (2) Tendency in social comparison.

Table 6. Differences in depression severity

Category	Group	Mean	SD	Computed p-Value	Critical p-Value	Decision
Average daily social media use	Less Frequent	57.52	7.18	0.51	0.05	Failed to reject Ho
	Frequent	57.80	6.47			
	Most Frequent	58.42	7.16			
Tendency in social comparison	Upward	50.57	7.11	0.0001	0.05	Reject Ho

## Respondents' Social Media Usage Profile

**Frequently Used Social Media Platforms.** The findings reveal that Facebook is the most widely used platform, with 92.44% of respondents actively engaging with it. This overwhelming preference underscores Facebook's role as the primary digital space for Filipino students, offering a range of functionalities such as messaging, group discussions, and information-sharing. Its dominance aligns with national trends, as reported by Kemp (2024), which states that Facebook remains the most used platform in the Philippines, with over 86.75 million Filipino users. The platform's widespread adoption suggests that it continues to be a go-to source for social interaction, academic collaborations, and content consumption.

Following Facebook, Instagram ranks second, with 51.56% of respondents actively using the platform. This highlights the increasing preference for visual-based social media, where students engage with image and video content to express themselves, follow trends,

and interact with curated digital experiences. Instagram's emphasis on aesthetically pleasing content and lifestyle portrayal suggests that students are drawn to platforms that facilitate self-expression and online identity formation. The relatively high engagement on Instagram indicates that many students may be susceptible to these comparison-driven psychological effects.

Twitter ranks third, with 32.00% of respondents indicating active usage. While not as widely used as Facebook or Instagram, Twitter remains relevant as a platform for real-time updates, academic discourse, and social awareness. Its role in facilitating news consumption and public engagement suggests that students use it for information-seeking rather than personal interactions.

Lastly, Snapchat ranks fourth, with only 20.22% of respondents using it actively. This suggests that Snapchat has limited adoption among Filipino students, possibly due to the availability of similar features on Facebook Messenger and Instagram Stories, which offer ephemeral messaging and multimedia sharing. Unlike in Western countries, where Snapchat remains widely used for private and casual communication, Filipino students appear to prioritize platforms that offer broader functionalities and social integration. The relatively low engagement on Snapchat indicates that it does not play a significant role in the daily digital routines of most students.

The rankings in Table 1 reflect the overall digital behavior of college students in Tagbilaran City, emphasizing the continued dominance of Facebook and Instagram, with Twitter serving as an information hub and Snapchat remaining relatively niche. These findings suggest that individuals select media platforms based on their needs for communication, entertainment, and self-presentation. The data also suggest that the visual and interactive nature of social media continues to shape student engagement, highlighting the importance of understanding how digital interactions influence students' well-being.

**Reasons for Using Social Media.** Social media serves multiple functions beyond communication, providing users with entertainment, information, networking opportunities, and even professional advantages. To understand the primary motivations behind college students' social media engagement, respondents were asked to identify their top reasons for using social media. The results are presented in Table 2, which ranks these reasons according to the percentage of students who selected them.

The data reveals that the most common reason for social media usage is staying connected with family and friends, with 88.40% of respondents citing it as their primary motivation. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that social networking remains the core function of digital platforms, particularly in cultures where family relationships and peer interactions hold significant value (Kemp, 2024). Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Messenger, serve as crucial tools for maintaining long-distance communication, strengthening relationships, and fostering social bonds. The strong emphasis on connection and social interaction suggests that students use social media primarily as a means of bridging physical gaps and sustaining relationships, fulfilling social and emotional needs.

The second most cited reason is entertainment, with 79.33% of respondents using social media for leisure activities such as watching videos, listening to music, scrolling through memes, and engaging with interactive content. This aligns with study by Gallup (2024), which found that younger users engage with social media primarily as a source of stress relief and relaxation. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram cater to this demand by offering short-form videos, viral trends, and personalized content algorithms.

Following entertainment, 68.22% of respondents reported using social media to access news and current events, making it the third most common reason. This finding underscores the increasing reliance on social media as an information hub, particularly among younger demographics who prefer real-time updates over traditional news outlets. Studies by Statista (2024) indicate that platforms like Twitter and Facebook serve as primary sources for breaking news, social movements, and public discourse.

The fourth most common reason is networking, with 62.44% of respondents using social media to build connections, expand professional circles, and engage with academic or career-related communities. This aligns with findings by Tuten and Solomon (2023), who emphasized that digital platforms now function as networking hubs for students, professionals, and entrepreneurs. LinkedIn, Facebook Groups, and Twitter allow individuals to collaborate on projects, share industry insights, and seek mentorship opportunities. This suggests that a significant portion of students recognize social media's role beyond entertainment, leveraging it as a tool for professional development and career growth.

Other notable reasons include seeking inspiration (29.56%), engaging in business activities (13.56%), and using social media for dating (7.11%). The relatively lower percentages for business and job-seeking (4.67%) indicate that while some students use social media for entrepreneurial ventures and employment opportunities, these functions remain secondary compared to social and entertainment-based motivations.

The findings in Table 2 reaffirm that social media plays a multifaceted role in students' daily lives, with a strong emphasis on social connection, entertainment, and information consumption.

**Daily Social Media Usage.** Social media has become an essential tool in students' daily routines, facilitating communication, entertainment, academic engagement, and networking. The varying levels of engagement among respondents highlight differences in digital consumption habits, which reflect both personal preferences and broader social trends. Table 3 presents the distribution of respondents based on their daily social media usage, categorized into three groups: less frequent users ( $\leq 1$  hour), frequent users (1-5 hours), and most frequent users ( $> 5$  hours).

The findings indicate that 40% of respondents fall under the “frequent” category, using social media for 1 to 5 hours daily. This suggests that a significant portion of students integrate social media into their academic, social, and leisure activities, making it a standard part of their routine. This usage pattern aligns with global trends reported by Kemp (2024), which show that the average social media consumption among users worldwide typically ranges from 2.5 to 3 hours per day. Platforms that serve as common avenues for information-sharing, social interactions, and personal expression, contribute to the widespread use observed in this study.

Meanwhile, 31% of respondents are categorized as “less frequent users” ( $\leq 1$  hour per day), indicating a preference for minimal social media engagement. This suggests that a considerable number of students choose to allocate their time to offline activities, academics, or other forms of recreation. While this group may still engage with social media occasionally for updates and communication, their limited screen time reflects a more selective approach to digital consumption. Studies by Orben et al. (2019) suggest that individuals who use social media minimally tend to engage in more structured digital interactions, relying on these platforms primarily for specific needs rather than continuous engagement.

On the other hand, 29% of respondents belong to the “most frequent users” category, spending over 5 hours daily on social media. This level of engagement suggests a strong digital presence, where students actively participate in social networking, content consumption, and online communities. The integration of social media into entertainment, education, and networking opportunities may explain why a significant portion of students dedicate extended hours to these platforms.

The varying levels of social media engagement among respondents reflect diverse digital habits and preferences. The findings suggest that individuals actively engage with media to satisfy specific needs—whether for social connection, information-seeking, entertainment, or self-expression. The presence of different usage categories highlights the dynamic role of social media in students’ daily lives, serving multiple functions that cater to both professional and personal needs.

### **Tendency in Social Comparison**

The results reveal that 78.44% of respondents engage in upward social comparison, indicating that most students evaluate themselves against individuals they perceive as more accomplished, attractive, or socially successful. Meanwhile, 21.56% of respondents engage in downward comparison, meaning they compare themselves to those in less favorable situations, which may serve as a self-esteem booster or a source of gratitude.

The dominance of upward comparison among respondents reflects the nature of content prevalent on social media platforms, where curated and idealized portrayals of success, wealth, and beauty are widely shared. Social media algorithms often prioritize high-engagement content, which tends to highlight luxury lifestyles, personal achievements, and physical attractiveness, reinforcing a tendency for users to compare themselves to these idealized standards. According to Fardouly et al. (2015), platforms such as Instagram and TikTok particularly amplify upward comparison, as users are consistently exposed to edited and selectively shared moments that may not reflect real-life struggles or challenges.

On the other hand, 21.56% of respondents engage in downward social comparison, meaning they evaluate themselves in relation to those who appear to be in less favorable circumstances. This form of comparison may provide temporary self-esteem boosts, as individuals feel a sense of competence or achievement in contrast to others’ struggles. According to Gibbons and Buunk (1999), downward comparison can reinforce self-worth and personal validation, particularly in competitive environments where individuals seek reassurance about their academic progress, career standing, or social status.

To summarize, the data from Table 4 indicates that social comparison is a prominent aspect of social media engagement, with the majority of students engaging in upward comparison due to the aspirational nature of digital content.

### **Severity of Depression Among Respondents**

The overall Severity of Depression Index (57.85) classifies the overall severity as Mild, indicating that most respondents experience some level of depressive symptoms, though only a small percentage (3.33%) fall under the severe category. The largest proportion of respondents (34.67%) fall within the moderate depression range, followed closely by those in the mild category (33.56%). Meanwhile, 28.44% of students reported experiencing none to slight depressive symptoms, suggesting that while some students are relatively unaffected, the majority deal with mild to moderate levels of emotional distress.

These findings align with previous studies highlighting the prevalence of mild to moderate depression among students. Twenge et al. (2018) found that university students often report persistent stress and mood fluctuations, particularly in highly competitive academic environments. Similarly, Keles et al. (2020) observed that students who spend extended hours on social media are more likely to exhibit higher depressive symptoms, likely due to social comparison, negative online interactions, and the pressure to maintain an idealized digital identity. Since the majority of respondents in this study engage in social comparison (Table 4), it is possible that this tendency contributes to their depressive symptoms, particularly for those in the moderate category.

The low percentage of students in the severe category (3.33%) suggests that while depression is present, most cases do not reach clinically severe levels. This is consistent with findings by Orben et al. (2019), who noted that while many students report depressive symptoms, the severity often remains mild or moderate rather than extreme. However, students with moderate symptoms (34.67%)

may still experience significant distress, difficulty concentrating, and emotional exhaustion, which can impact their academic performance and social interactions.

Moreover, Fardouly et al. (2015) found that frequent exposure to idealized portrayals on social media contributes to increased depressive symptoms, particularly among individuals who engage in upward social comparison. Since Table 4 shows that 78.44% of respondents compare themselves to those they perceive as more successful, it is likely that this behavior plays a role in reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and emotional distress.

The findings also suggest that social support, coping mechanisms, and academic workload may influence students' depression severity. Twenge et al. (2018) emphasized that students who engage in strong peer support systems, physical activity, and offline social interactions tend to report lower depression levels, which may explain why 28.44% of respondents report none to slight symptoms. Meanwhile, those with higher engagement in social media comparisons and academic stress are more likely to experience mild to moderate depressive symptoms, reflecting the trends observed in previous studies.

In summary, Table 5 highlights that while severe depression is not widespread among respondents, mild to moderate depressive symptoms are common, aligning with prior studies on student mental health.

### Differences in Depression Severity

The results indicate that social media usage alone does not significantly affect depression severity, as the mean depression scores across less frequent (57.52), frequent (57.80), and most frequent (58.42) users show only minor variations. Additionally, the computed p-value (0.51) is greater than the critical p-value (0.05), meaning that the study fails to reject the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). This suggests that differences in time spent on social media do not lead to significant changes in depression levels among students. These findings align with Orben et al. (2019), who argued that screen time alone is not a strong predictor of mental health outcomes. Similarly, Twenge et al. (2018) found that while excessive social media use may be associated with lower well-being, the content consumed and the way individuals engage with social media have a more substantial impact on emotional health than just the number of hours spent online.

In contrast, social comparison tendencies play a significant role in depression severity, as indicated by the computed p-value (0.0001), which is lower than the critical p-value (0.05), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). The mean depression score for students engaging in upward comparison (50.57) is significantly higher than that of those engaging in downward comparison (38.72), indicating that students who compare themselves to more successful or privileged individuals are more likely to experience heightened depressive symptoms. This finding aligns with Fardouly et al. (2015), who found that frequent exposure to idealized online portrayals fosters negative self-perception, increased dissatisfaction, and elevated depression levels. Keles et al. (2020) further supported this claim, noting that individuals who engage in repetitive upward comparison on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are more likely to develop feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, contributing to heightened depressive symptoms. Since Table 4 previously showed that 78.44% of respondents engage in upward social comparison, it is likely that this behavior has contributed to the mild to moderate depressive symptoms observed in Table 5.

On the other hand, students engaging in downward comparison report significantly lower depression severity, which is consistent with the findings of Gibbons and Buunk (1999). Their study suggested that comparing oneself to individuals in less favorable situations can provide temporary self-esteem boosts and a sense of gratitude, thereby reducing negative emotions. Twenge et al. (2018) also observed that individuals who engage in downward comparison tend to experience greater psychological resilience, as it reinforces a sense of competence and security. However, while downward comparison may provide short-term emotional relief, over-reliance on this behavior could lead to complacency rather than motivation for self-improvement.

The findings underscore the importance of understanding how students interact with social media content and how these interactions influence their emotional well-being. While time spent on social media alone does not necessarily lead to increased depression severity, the way students engage with digital content—especially in the form of social comparison—has a measurable impact on mental health.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study provide important insights into the complex relationship between social media usage, social comparison tendencies, and depression severity among college students. While screen time alone does not significantly influence depression, the way students interact with digital content—particularly in the form of social comparison—has a strong impact on their mental health. The high prevalence of upward comparison highlights the need for mental health programs that address self-esteem issues, unrealistic digital portrayals, and the psychological effects of constant online exposure. By implementing proactive interventions, schools and policymakers can contribute to a healthier, more balanced approach to digital engagement among young individuals.

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## Affiliations and Corresponding Information

**Jefrey N. Tungol**

Holy Name University – Philippines

**Fernando B. Enad**

San Agustin National High School– Philippines