Impact of Social Media Usage on Marital Conflict and Mental Well-Being Among Married Adults: Role of Social Comparison

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ABSTRACT: The present study included 330 married individuals, aged 20 and above, from Islamabad & Rawalpindi using social media and were selected to explore the relationship between social media usage, marital conflict, and the mental well-being of the married individuals, wherein social comparison is hypothesized as a mediator. The following scales were used to collect data: a Demographic Sheet, the Social Media Use Scale, Social Comparison Scale, Relationship Dynamics Scale, and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. The results showed that there was a positive correlation between the use of social media and social comparison. Both were, in turn, related to marital conflict positively and to mental well-being negatively. The results of the regression showed that social media use positively predicted social comparison and marital conflict, in addition to predicting negative mental well-being, which was the same. Additionally a mediation model showed that social comparison mediated the relationship between social media use and marital conflict and mental health. An independent-samples t-test indicated that men used social media more than women, while a one-way ANOVA showed no differences across age groups. Length of marriage significantly affected only social media usage, with those married 6–8 years reporting higher use. Few socio-demographic differences were found overall. Lower socio-economic groups used social media more and experienced greater marital conflict. These findings emphasize the importance of raising awareness about social media use and digital skills to protect marital relationships and psychological well-being.

KEYWORDS: Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, Mental Well-being, Married Adults, Pakistan

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Introduction

In today's society, social media is a part of our lives, and by January 2025 is expected to have more than 5.24 billion users around the world, equivalent to approximately 63.9% of the world's population (Backlinko Team, 2025). In addition, the use of social media has also been rapidly rising in Pakistan, as total internet users in Pakistan have reached 44.6 million with a significant improvement in the country's internet penetration rate (Karamat et al., 2019). Social media sites enable users to create profiles, to express themselves, to interact with other people and brands, and to interact with content by reading, sharing, uploading, and commenting on images, videos, and messages that are published on their feeds. (Phua & Jin, 2011) The platforms provide people with an insight into each other's lives, with the inevitable result that people can make comparisons on an almost unavoidable basis, as there is so much information available about similar people. Although these are important places to meet, to share

information, have fun, and to help raise public awareness, they can also have a negative impact on the individual's mental health and on society at large (Gottfried, 2024).

Beyond simply observing others' activity, active social media use (ASMU) is observable as online activities that involve behaviors such as interacting and communicating with others (Verduyn et al., 2017). Passive social media use (PSMU) is when someone scrolls through feeds and "likes" posts or watches others' curated pictures and updates, without direct interaction and communication with others. The negative effect of PSMU on well-being is thought to be due to the fact that it tends to lead to what researchers refer to as upward social comparison (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

Comparing is human nature and how people relate to each other to learn and develop to their potential. Watching others can help to make sense of one's own situation and progress; sometimes, this can lead to heightened self-worth, but on other occasions, it can also cause stress and unnecessary competition (Wang et al., 2017). As compared to negative comparisons, upward comparisons are likely to occur more often on social media, as users usually see their contacts' success rather than their failures (Verduyn et al., 2020). The heavy use of social media has been found to be associated with marital conflict in ways like infidelity, jealousy, marital conflict, and even divorce in research (Widiantari et al., 2019). There is also some evidence that Facebook use is associated with a specific decrease in overall well-being, and that certain features of Instagram can lead to negative self-perceptions; there has also been some evidence that using Facebook's "upward comparison" feature is associated with depressive symptoms (Trub et al., 2015). Passive involvement in these types of relationships can contribute to marital dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with the marital relationship itself.

There is conflict, almost a given, in marriage. Even if two people are very fond of each other, their differences in habits and ideas will lead to friction as time goes on. Typically, couples in healthy relationships are able to resolve such conflicts, and in unhealthy ones, conflict can arise from multiple sources. Where the roles of the spouses do not align with what is expected of them, then it is likely that the marriage will not turn out well, and in some cases, it will end. Marital conflict involves a state of tension between marital partners as they work to perform their respective roles, often as a result of differences in needs, values, or goals, and sometimes involving the entire household; it is manifested as conflict, disagreement, or clash of personalities (Tasew & Getahun, 2021).

When a marriage is on a constant collision course, it frequently degrades the levels of trust, satisfaction, and commitment between the two partners, and they often feel far apart although they are in the same home. As a conflict continues, intimacy becomes less regular, satisfaction less, which leads to feeling insecure and helpless, and resentment and/or emotional fatigue may enter into relationships (Hataway, 2020).

Mental health is not simply the absence of any mental disorders; it is the ability to thrive, function, and make a positive contribution to society. A state where people are able to live with the stress of life, reach their full potential, be productive, and contribute to community (WHO, 2022). Better well-being has been associated with better immune function, sleep quality, and length of life (Schonfeld et al., 2017; Sutton, 2019). Conversely, poor mental health or negative mental health can be detrimental to the individual and to society as a whole, as it can result in chronic stress, anxiety and depression, thereby raising the risk of suicide and, consequently, a risk to physical health such as heart disease, diabetes, and decreased immunity (Nogueira & Sequeira, 2024).

Literature Review

A number of studies, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, with varying study periods, have consistently shown a relationship between use of social media and social comparison, as well as the psychological negative consequences

of comparison activated through passive engagement (Burnell et al., 2019; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2019). Extensive use of social media seems to have a negative impact on marital relationships, reducing the amount of quality time spent with one's spouse and the quality of spouse communication. This has also been linked to an increase in jealousy between partners, which can lead to experiencing anger, fear, and dissatisfaction, and ultimately to conflict and even divorce (Abbasi, 2019; Muzaffar et al., 2019; Ozturk, 2015).

The effects of social comparison on romantic relationships are influenced more by the interpretation of the social comparison (Morry & Sucharyna, 2018). Upward comparisons can either inspire self-improvement or erode satisfaction and commitment, depending on their interpretation, and downward comparisons can provide comfort or vulnerability, which can reduce satisfaction. In conclusion, the results suggest that social comparison may have negative and/or positive consequences for romantic relationships and marriages, with negative interpretations contributing to the risk of relationship conflict. If a partner feels that their relationship is less than the idealized version, then the discontent with his/her relationship is likely to be followed by feelings of inadequacy and a lack of appreciation for the relationship as is. Likewise, it has been confirmed that higher materialism can positively correlate with reduced relationship satisfaction and relationship conflict (Cappetto & Tadros, 2021).

Mehmood et al. (2025) carried out a study to investigate the impact of social media on married couples' lives, and the findings revealed that social media helped couples stay connected and also caused feelings of jealousy, emotional isolation, misunderstandings, and conflict, which all brought down the satisfaction and closeness of the relationship. Similarly, Nasir et al. (2025) reported that there was a correlation between depression, anxiety, tension, and low self-esteem and high involvement in digital media. Similarly, in their study, Aksar et al. (2023) examined the connection between mental well-being and the different types of social media use, and the results showed that mental health effects of overuse of social media or unhealthy habits are associated with social media.

Involuntary use of social media can have a negative impact on social media users' well-being, and the comparison is one of the most significant factors that can affect a person's psychological health (Nor et al., 2025). The researchers, Sarfraz et al. (2025), assessed the psychological effects of the use of social media in a sample of 250 individuals, observing their social media consumption habits and psychological indicators, and found an association between the overuse of social media and mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and increased social isolation. They also found social comparison in terms of self-esteem and loneliness on these platforms.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, which posits that when there is no standard, individuals compare themselves to other people. Comparisons happen in upward, downward, and lateral directions, and individuals make judgments, opinions, and evaluations about themselves, their abilities, and their self-worth based on these comparisons, which can impact their self-perception, their behaviour, and overall psychological health (Cherry, 2024).

Social media sites are created to encourage engagement, and often that means people are exposed to well-crafted, idealized images of other people's lives. This can result in an unattainable level of looks, performance, and joy, fostering dissatisfaction and a feeling of lack. Comparing in this context has been linked to negative self-esteem and psychological well-being (anxiety, depression, loneliness) and can even be transferred to interpersonal relationships where jealousy, mistrust, and conflict can be present. In summary, although social media is a means of social connection, it is also a means of social comparison, and the effects on mental health and stability of relationships cannot be denied (Liang, 2024; Sisler, 2021; Song, 2021).

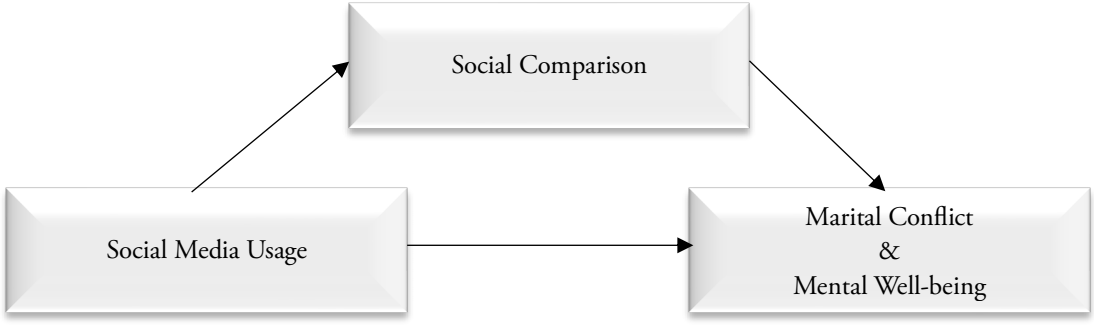
Rationale

While there are studies that link social media consumption to marital conflict, social comparison, and mental well-being, there are certain gaps in the literature about married adults in Pakistan. Most of the literature that exists is focused on adolescence, youth, or university students, making it somewhat limited in its applicability to marriage. Research on cross-national couples' interactions between India, Nigeria, China, and Bangladesh says that social media can help foster jealousy, envy, mistrust, and negative comparisons that can lead to decreased relationship satisfaction and mental health. However, research in Pakistan with married adults is restricted and fragmented, and does not consider the buffering impact that social comparison has on marital and psychological outcomes.

The present study aims to fill that gap by examining social media use and its impact on marital conflict and mental health among Pakistani married adults, specifically examining social comparison as a mediator, and to provide a comprehensive picture of the interpersonal and psychological effects.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Hypotheses

1. Social media usage has a positive relationship with social comparison among married adults.
2. Social media usage and social comparison have a positive relationship with marital conflict among married adults.
3. Social media usage and social comparison have a negative relationship with mental well-being among married adults.
4. Social media usage positively predicts social comparison among married adults.
5. Social media usage and social comparison positively predict marital conflict among married adults.
6. Social media usage and social comparison negatively predict mental well-being among married adults.
7. Social comparison mediates the relationship between social media usage and both marital conflict and mental well-being among married adults.
8. There are significant differences based on gender, age, marriage duration, and socio-economic status in social media usage, social comparison, marital conflict, and mental well-being among married adults.

Methodology

Research Design

The approach of this study was quantitative and cross-sectional. It aimed to understand the relationship between social media usage, marital conflict, and mental health in married adults, with social comparison mediating this relationship.

Sample

330 people were recruited in this study based on purposive sampling and were married and using social media. The study population included married men and women aged 20 years and over.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet

The demographic form gathered information from participants such as gender, age, length of marriage, socio-economic status, and a screening question to get an affirmation from the respondents whether they use social media or not.

Social Media Use Scale (SMUS)

The Social Media Use Scale (SMUS) developed by Tuck & Thompson (2024) assessed the frequency of respondents' use of different types of social media over the last seven days. Responses are captured on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Never" (1) to "Hourly or more" (9). Each subscale score reflects the mean of the items within it and consists of 17 items across four subscales: Image-Based (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), Comparison-Based (items 6, 7, 8), Belief-Based (items 9, 10, 11, 12), and Consumption-Based (items 13, 14, 15, 16, 17). Validity was confirmed by a study conducted in 2024 with a college student sample (Tuck & Thompson, Assessment), and a subsequent study in 2025 found high subscale reliability, with Image-Based ($\alpha = 0.88$), Comparison-Based ($\alpha = 0.89$), Belief-Based ($\alpha = 0.92$), and Consumption-Based ($\alpha = 0.93$). The SMUS was indeed deemed reliable to capture patterns of social media engagement with all alpha values greater than 0.85 (Mahrukh et al., 2024).

Social Comparison Scale

Allan and Gilbert (1995) developed the Social Comparison Scale, which measures a person's social comparisons with others. It includes 11 bipolar items on which the respondents rate themselves globally against others on a 10-point scale, with the scores on each item added together to provide a total score using a semantic differential approach. High reliability was reported in both non-clinical and clinical samples, with alpha coefficients of .88 and .96 for Allan and Gilbert's own work in 1995 and 1997. The scale has good construct validity because it has been linked with depression, anxiety, and self-esteem, and lower scores indicated a sense of inferiority and lower levels of self-regard (Hassan et al., 2024).

Relationship Dynamics Scale (RDS)

Stanley and Markman (1996) created the Relationship Dynamics Scale (RDS), which is an 8-item scale that aims to assess negative interaction patterns between partners in intimate relationships, including criticism, withdrawal, escalation, and invalidation. Items are rated on a 3-point scale (1 = Never or almost never to 3 = Frequently) with a total range of 8-24 points. Its reported alpha coefficients range from 0.73 to 0.80, and the use of the RDS in premarital counseling and relationship education programs highlights the tool's value as a rapid indicator of problematic communication styles between couples (Qadir et al., 2013).

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007) can be used in adults (16 years old and above). It's made up of 14 statements that capture feelings and thoughts from the last 2 weeks, rated

on a 5-point scale from "none of the time" to "all the time" and scored from 14 to 70. It has a good level of reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.83 and 0.91 (Bano & Ahmad, 2021).

Procedure

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between social media usage, marital conflict, and mental well-being, and to see how social comparison is a mediating factor. Data collection was conducted both on paper and online; the participants were from Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Permission to use the scales used was obtained from the original scales' authors prior to data collection. All participants had their social media usage assessed, provided informed consent, and were given information about the goals, methods, possible risks, and benefits of the study. Afterwards, each participant filled out a demographic questionnaire and four standardized questionnaires (including the study variables) with support as necessary. All the data were then analysed using SPSS version 25 to examine the proposed relationships.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=330).

Demographic Variable	M(SD)	*f* (%)
Gender	1.51(0.50)	
Male		161(48.8)
Female		169(51.2)
Age	2.96(1.21)	
20-24		28(8.5)
25-29		111(33.6)
30-34		89(27.0)
35-39		49(14.8)
40 and above		53(16.1)
Marriage Duration	2.38(1.26)	
0-2 years		121(36.7)
3-5 years		64(19.4)
6-8 years		44(13.3)
9 years and above		101(30.6)
Socio-Economic Status	2.04(0.54)	
Lower Class		42(12.7)
Middle Class		234(70.9)
Upper Class		54(16.4)

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, f= frequency, %= percentage

Table 1 presents the summary of the demographic composition of the sample in terms of frequencies and percentages, namely gender, age, duration of marriage, and socio-economic status. Of the 330 participants, 169 were female (51.2%), and 161 were male (48.8%). The age group 25-29 comprised the largest number of respondents (n = 111, 33.6%), and the group with 0-2 years married the largest (n = 121, 36.7%). Socio-economic status (SES) of the participants was identified as mostly middle class (n = 234, 70.9%).

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of the Study SCALES (N = 330).

Range								
	k	α	M	SD	Potential	Actual	Skewness	Kurtosis
SMUS	17	.88	48.71	19.14	17-153	18-116	1.00	.62
SCS	11	.92	64.13	25.54	11-110	11-110	-.28	-.98
RDS	08	.83	13.06	4.33	08-24	8-24	.95	-.03
WEMWBS	14	.86	47.95	8.97	14-70	16-70	-.19	.50

Note: k= No. of items, α = alpha reliability, M= mean, SD=standard deviation, SMUS=Social Media Use Scale, SCS=Social Comparison Scale, RDS=Relationship Dynamic Scale, WEMWBS=Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale.

The psychometric properties of the instruments used for the study's psychological constructs are presented in Table 2, in which internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha. In general, the scales had good psychometric characteristics to be used in this research. The 17-item Social Media Use scale provided a reliability score of .88, and a potential range of 17-153, with an observed range of 18-116. The Social Comparison scale, which was made up of 11 items, had a reliability of .92 and a potential range of 11 to 110. The 08-item scale for Relationship Dynamic had a reliability of .83 and potential and observed ranges of 08-24. Lastly, the 14-item Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being scale had a reliability of .86 and a range of 14 – 70 and an observed range of 16 – 70.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation for Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and Mental Well-being among Married Adults (N =330).

	1	2	3	4
SMUS	-	.21**	.27**	-.14*
SCS	-	-	.20**	-.13*
RDS	-	-	-	-.18**
WEMWBS	-	-	-	-

Note: SMUS=Social Media Use Scale, SCS=Social Comparison Scale, RDS=Relationship Dynamic Scale, WEMWBS=Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. ** p < . 0 1 , * p < . 0 5 ,

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlations between the various social media uses, social comparison, marital conflict, and mental well-being for the married sample (N = 330), indicating a number of positive and negative correlations. Social Media Usage (SMU) was positively correlated with Social Comparison (SC) (r=.21, p < .01), suggesting that the more social media users used, the more often they were to compare themselves to others. The same pattern was found for Marriedness (MW) – SMU was positively correlated (r = .27, p < .01) with marital conflict (MC), indicating that those who use social media more often also experience more marital conflict. Conversely, SMU was negatively related to Mental Well-being (MWB) (r= -.14, p< .05), indicating that heavier social media users reported poorer mental wellness. All three were also correlated positively, with MC also being negatively correlated with MWB (r=-.13, p<.05), indicating that increases in social comparison are associated with increases in marital disputes and decreases in well-being. There was also a negative correlation between MWB and MC (r = -.18, p< .01), meaning that greater conflict was associated with lower MWB. Overall, the pattern of correlations indicates that higher social

media usage is associated with higher marital conflict and social comparison, which in turn are associated with lower levels of mental health.

Table 4

Regression Analysis of social media usage, social comparison, marital conflict, and, mental well-being among married adults (N=330).

Variables		*B*	*SE*	*β*	*p*	95% Confidence Interval	
						LL	UL
SCS	Constant	50.79	3.77	-	.00	43.36	58.21
	SMU	.27	.07	.21	.00	.13	.42
	R^2	.04					
	F	14.42					
RDS	Constant	8.82	.78	-	.00	7.29	10.35
	SMU	.05	.01	.24	.00	.03	.08
	SC	.03	.01	.15	.01	.01	.04
	R^2	.09					
	F	16.81					
WEMWBS	Constant	53.09	1.66	-	.00	49.82	56.37
	SMU	-.06	.03	-.12	.04	-.11	-.00
	SC	-.04	.02	-.11	.05	-.08	.00
	R^2	.03					
	F	5.24					

Note: SE = Standard Error, CI= Confidence Interval, LL=Lower Limit, UL=Upper Limit, R^2=Regression Coefficient, B= Unstandardized Coefficients, β= Standardized Coefficients, SCS=Social Comparison Scale, RDS=Relationship Dynamic Scale, WEMWBS=Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05,

The relationships between Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Mental Well-being, and Marital Conflict were examined with regression analysis among the Married Adults (N=330), as presented in Table 4. Social Media Usage (SMUS) was found to be a statistically significant predictor of Social Comparison (SC) (B = 0.27, SE =.07, β = 0.20, p< .001), indicating that the more the children used social media, the more they engaged in social comparison. This model explained 4% of the variance in SC (R^2 = .04) and was statistically significant, F (1, 328) = 14.42, p <.001, with a modest yet significant positive correlation between SMUS and SC, with the 95% confidence interval of the unstandardized coefficient from .13 to 0.42. The constant was also significant (B = 50.79, p <.001), placing the predicted SC score at 50.79 (95% CI [43.36, 58.21]) when SMU equals zero.

Further analysis showed that both Social Media Usage (SMU) and Social Comparison (SC) significantly predicted marital conflict (MC). SMU emerged as a significant predictor (B = 0.05, SE = 0.01, β = 0.24, p < .001), indicating that higher SMU is associated with more marital conflict, while SC also contributed significantly (B = 0.03, SE = 0.00, β = 0.15, p < .01). The overall model was significant, F (2, 327) = 16.81, p < .001, explaining approximately 9% of the variance in MC (R^2 = .09). The constant (B = 8.82, p < .001) indicated the predicted amount of marital conflict when SMU (0.0) and SC (0.0) are both at their lowest possible values (95% CI [7.29, 10.35]). These results validate that both SMU and SC have positive and small but significant effects on marital conflict.

Finally, Social Media Usage (SMU) and Social Comparison (SC) were significantly associated with mental well-being (MWB). SMU showed a significant negative effect (B = –0.06, SE = 0.03, β = –0.12, p = .04), as did SC (B =

–0.04, SE = 0.02, β = –0.11, p = .05), indicating that higher levels of both variables correspond with reduced MWB. The model was statistically significant, F (2, 327) =5.24, p< .01, accounting for roughly 3% of the variance in MWB (R^2 = .03). The constant (B = 53.09, p < .001) reflected the predicted MWB score when SMU and SC equal zero (95% CI [49.82, 56.37]). The results of these confirm statistically significant negative relationships between SMU, SC, and MWB, but with a limited proportion of variance.

Table 5

Mediation Analysis for The Role of Social Comparison in the Relationship between Social Media Usage and Marital Conflict among Married Adults (N=330).

Paths	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*p*
Model 1				
Total effect	8.82	7.29	10.35	.00
SMU – SC	.27	.13	.42	.00
SC – MC	0.03	.01	.04	.01
SMU– MC (Direct Effect)	.05	.03	.08	.00
SMU – SC – MC (Indirect effect)	.03	.01	.06	.00
R^2	.09			
F	16.81***			

Note: ***p < .001, B= Unstandardized coefficient, R^2= R-squared, F= F statistic, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit, SMU= Social media usage, SC=Social comparison, MC=Marital conflict.

To test the mediation between social media use and marital conflict among married adults (N = 330), a mediation analysis was used in this study, as reported in Table 5. The overall effect of social media use on marital conflict was large (B = 8.82, 95% CI [7.29, 10.35], p<.001), which indicates that marital conflict increased with social media use. Social media use also significantly predicted social comparison (B = 0.27, 95% CI (0.13, 0.42), p<.001), which in turn significantly predicted marital conflict (B = 0.03, 95% CI (0.01, 0.04), p<.01). Despite the mediation of social comparison, the direct effect of social media use on marital conflict remained significant (B = 0.05, 95% CI (0.03, 0.08), p < .001), indicating that social comparison partially mediated the relationship between social media use and marital conflict. The indirect effect via social comparison was also statistically significant (B = 0.03, 95% CI (0.01, 0.06), p <.001), and thus provided additional partial mediation. Altogether, the model accounted for 9% of the variance in marital conflict, R^2 =0.09, F (2, 327) =16.81, p <.001.

Figure 2

Mediating Role of Social Comparison in the Relationship between Social Media Usage and Marital Conflict among Married Adults.

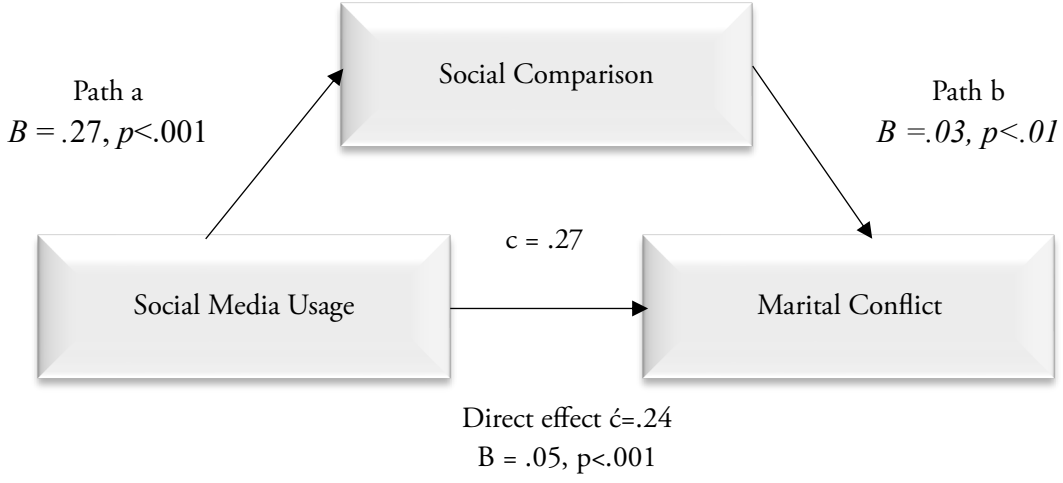


Table 6

Mediation Analysis for The Role of Social Comparison in the Relationship between Social Media Usage and Mental Well-being among Married Adults (N=330).

Paths	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*p*
Model 1				
Total effect	53.09	49.82	56.37	.00
SMU – SC	.27	.13	.42	.00
SC – MWB	-.04	-.08	.00	.05
SMU– MWB (Direct Effect)	-.05	-.11	.00	.05
SMU – SC – MWB (Indirect effect)	-.02	-.05	.00	.00
R^2	.03			
F	5.24***			

Note: ***p < .001, B= Unstandardized coefficient, R^2= R-squared, F= F statistic, LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit; SMU= Social media usage, SC=Social comparison, MWB=Mental well-being.

A parallel mediation analysis was conducted to test the mediation effect of social comparison between social media use and mental well-being (N = 330) (see Table 6). The total effect of social media use on mental well-being was significant (B = 53.09, 95% CI (49.82, 56.37), p < .001), and social media use significantly predicted social comparison (B = 0.27, 95% CI (0.13, 0.42), p<.001). The smaller, though negative (B= -0.04, 95% CI (-0.08, 0.00), P= 0.05), social comparison to mental well-being showed that higher comparison was associated with lower mental well-being. The effect of social media use on mental well-being remained just significant and negative, with B = -0.05 (95% CI (-0.11, 0.00), p=0.05), indicating slightly poorer well-being associated with more social media use, regardless of comparison levels. The indirect effect via social comparison was also statistically significant (B = -0.02, 95% CI -0.05, 0.00, p <.001), signifying a small, but also meaningful mediation effect. Overall, the model explained 3% of the variance in mental well-being, R^2 =.03, F (2, 327) = 5.24, p <.001.

Figure 3

Mediating Role of Social Comparison in relationship between Social Media Usage and Mental Well-being among Married Adults

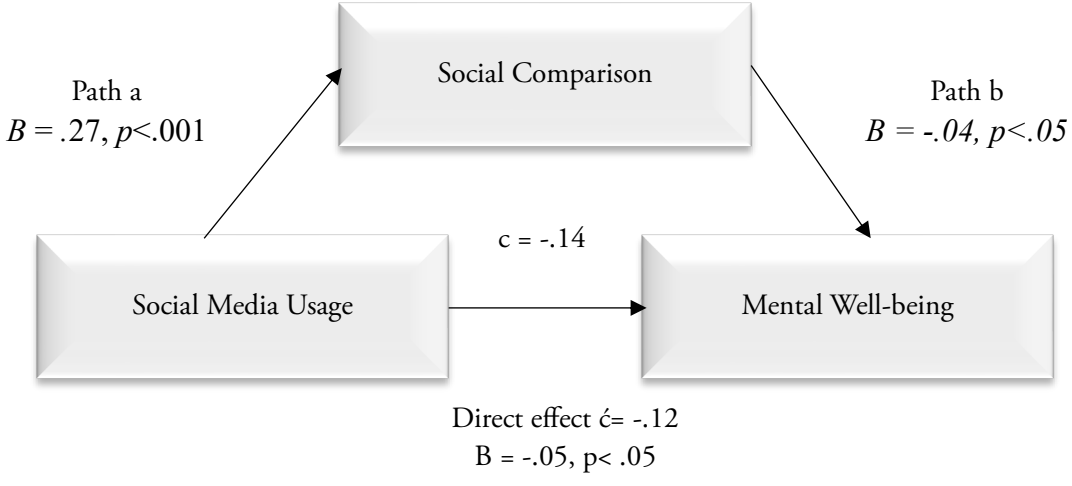


Table 7

Mean Comparison of Gender with Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and, Mental well-being among Married Adults (N =330)

	Male (n= 161)	Female (n= 169)			95% Confidence Interval		
	M(SD)	*M(SD)*	*t(328)*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	*Cohen's d*
SMU	50.78 (20.58)	46.73 (17.48)	1.93	.05*	-.10	8.19	0.2
SC	64.77 (25.58)	63.52 (25.57)	.44(n.s)	.66	-4.29	6.79	0.04
MC	13.07 (4.40)	13.05 (4.27)	.03(n.s)	.98	-.93	.96	0.00
MWB	48.21 (9.46)	47.69 (8.50)	.53(n.s)	.60	-1.43	2.47	0.05

Note: *p<.05 M= mean, SD=standard deviation, n.s= Non-Significant, SMU= Social media usage, SC=Social comparison, MC=Marital conflict, MWB=Mental well-being.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare men and women for Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Mental Well-being, and Marital Conflict (N = 330; 161 males, 169 females) and the results are reported in Table 7. A significant gender difference emerged for Social Media Usage, t (328) = 1.93, p<0.05, with married men (M=50.78, SD= 20.58) reporting higher use than married women (M=46.73, SD=17.48). No significant differences were observed for Social Comparison, t (328) = .44, p = .66; Marital Conflict, t (328) = .03, p = .98; or Mental Well-being, t (328) = .53, p = .60 — meaning that there were no meaningful differences between men and women on these three variables.

Table 8

One way Anova on Age of the Participants with Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and Mental well-being among Married Adults (N =330).

	20-24 (n= 28)	25-29 (n= 111)	30-34 (n= 89)	35-39 (n=49)	40 and above (n=53)		
	M(SD)	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*F(4, 325)*	*p*
SMU	47.43(14.02)	48.31(18.08)	46.84(19.06)	51.61(19.54)	50.66(23.17)	.67(n.s)	.61
SC	61.54(24.65)	63.41(25.12)	68.27(26.30)	61.65(26.46)	62.36(25.84)	.86(n.s)	.49
MC	13.07(4.85)	12.41 (4.25)	13.09 (4.67)	14.10 (3.91)	13.42 (3.90)	1.44(n.s)	.22
MWB	48.43(10.32)	47.10 (9.85)	47.74 (8.52)	48.73 (7.70)	49.08 (8.23)	.59(n.s)	.68

Note: M= mean, SD=standard deviation, n.s= Non-Significant, SMU= Social media usage, SC=Social comparison, MC=Marital conflict, MWB=Mental well-being.

A one-way ANOVA was used to determine if there was a difference in Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and Mental Well-being among Married Adults (N=330) by Age (20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40 years and older). None of the comparisons reached significance: social media usage, F (4, 325) = 0.67, p = .61; social comparison, F (4, 325) = 0.86, p = .49; marital conflict, F (4, 325) = 1.44, p = .22; and mental well-being, F (4, 325) = 0.59, p = .68. That is, there were no meaningful differences in age group membership in each of the four study variables.

Table 9

One way Anova on Marriage Duration with Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and Mental well-being among Married Adults (N =330).

	0-2 Years (n=121)	3-5 Years (n= 64)	6-8 Years (n= 44)	9 Years and above (n=101)				
	M(SD)	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*F(3,326)*	*p*	n^2	*I-J*
SMU	48.55(17.68)	43.17(17.00)	54.43(18.77)	49.91(21.46)	3.30*	.02	0.02	3>4>1>2
SC	61.36(26.23)	63.64(25.81)	69.23(24.77)	65.54(24.79)	1.17(n.s)	.32	-	-
MC	12.51 (4.23)	12.78(4.82)	13.93 (4.64)	13.51(3.93)	1.71(n.s)	.17	-	-
MWB	47.48(9.13)	47.53(10.67)	47.50 (8.38)	48.96(7.83)	.62(n.s)	.60	-	-

Note: *p<.05, M= mean, SD=standard deviation, n.s= Non-Significant, SMU= Social media usage, SC=Social comparison, MC=Marital conflict, MWB=Mental well-being.

Table 09 shows a one-way ANOVA test of differences in the Marriage Duration (0-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9 years and above) variables of Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and Mental Well-being among Married Adults (N=330). A significant difference emerged only for social media usage, F (3, 326) = 3.30, p = .02, η^2 = 0.02. Post-hoc comparisons showed that couples married 6-8 years (M = 54.43, SD = 18.77) reported significantly higher usage than those married 9 years or more (M = 49.91, SD = 21.46), those married 0-2 years (M = 48.55, SD = 17.68), and those married 3-5 years (M = 43.17, SD = 17.00), with the 9-years-and-above group also reporting greater use than the 0-2-years group, which in turn exceeded the 3-5-years group (3 > 4 > 1 > 2). No significant differences by marriage duration emerged for social comparison, F (3, 326) = 1.17, p = .32; marital conflict, F (3, 326) = 1.71, p = .17; or mental well-being, F (3, 326) = 0.62, p = .60. This means that only the duration of marriage was meaningfully associated with the four variables of social media, as the other three variables didn't vary significantly.

Table 10

One way Anova on Socio-Economic Status with Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict, and Mental well-being among Married Adults (N =330)

	Lower Class (n= 42)	Middle Class (n= 234)	Upper Class (n= 54)				
	M(SD)	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*F(2, 327)*	*p*	n^2	*I-J*
SMU	58.55(19.68)	45.76(17.73)	53.83(21.21)	10.89***	.001	0.06	1>3>2
SC	68.24 (22.60)	62.72(25.40)	67.04(28.06)	1.25(n.s)	.29	-	-
MC	14.76 (4.58)	12.77 (4.21)	12.98 (4.42)	3.83*	.02	0.02	1>3>2
MWB	48.57 (10.05)	47.86 (8.62)	47.81 (9.74)	.12(n.s)	.89	-	-

Note: ***p<.001, *p<.05, M= mean, SD=standard deviation, SMU= Social media usage, SC=Social comparison, MC=Marital conflict, MWB=Mental well-being

A One-Way ANOVA was conducted to determine if Socio-Economic Status (lower class, middle class, upper class) was associated with Social Media Usage, Social Comparison, Marital Conflict and Mental Well-being among Married Adults (N=330) as shown in Table 10. Social media usage varied significantly by class, F (2, 327) = 10.89, p < .001, η^2 = .06, with the Lower class reporting the highest usage (M=58.55, SD=19.68), followed by the Upper class (M=53.83, SD=21.21) and then the Middle class (M=45.76, SD=17.73) (1 > 3 > 2). Marital Conflict also differed significantly by class, F (2, 327) = 3.83, p = .02, η^2 = .02, again following a 1 > 3 > 2 pattern, with the

Lower class reporting the most conflict (M = 14.76, SD = 4.58), followed by the Upper class (M = 12.98, SD = 4.42) and the Middle class (M = 12.77, SD = 4.21). No significant class differences appeared for Social Comparison, F (2, 327) = 1.25, p = .29, or Mental Well-being, F (2, 327) = .12, p = .89. The findings suggest that socio-economic factors were related to variation in social media use and marital conflict, but not in social comparison or mental health in this sample.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationships between social media usage, social comparison, marital conflict, and mental well-being among married adults, specifically whether social media usage influences social comparison, and how these two types of variables relate to marital conflict and mental well-being. The study also explored the mediating role of social comparison in the relationships, and differences in the four variables by gender, age, marriage duration, and socio-economic status were compared.

The first hypothesis suggested that there was a positive relationship between social media usage and social comparison among married adults, which was supported by the data, as increased use of social media was associated with increased social comparison. This is consistent with previous research: McComb et al. (2023) note that the heavier the use of social media, the greater the opportunities for comparison, which leads to more frequent comparisons and more frequent self-evaluations of others, and Bonfanti et al. (2024) also state that social media increases the frequency and intensity of comparative thinking, creating the conditions for people to engage in more upward comparisons.

The second hypothesis predicted that there would be positive correlations between social media usage, social comparison and marital conflict, with the results supporting this hypothesis as all three variables were found to be significantly correlated. The results are in line with previous research which showed that excessive use of social media negatively impacts quality time, enjoyment and causes feelings of envy, lack of trust and conflict within relationships, including marriage (Gull et al., 2019; Jarai, 2023). Likewise, for married couples, Petrilli et al. (2024) found that, for heavy users of social media, they were more likely to compare themselves, their lives, and their relationships to themselves and others as a way to earn approval, acceptance, or recognition, which can lead to feelings of envy, self-evaluation, conflict, and reduced relationship commitment.

The third hypothesis predicted that social media usage and social comparison will have a negative relationship with mental well-being, and the data supported this hypothesis. This aligns with the meta-analyses of social media and its impact on mental health, which showed that greater exposure to social media was linked to greater upward comparison, lower self-esteem, higher depression symptomology, and overall negative effects on mental health (Carraturo et al., 2023; Naslund et al., 2020; Park & Baek, 2018).

The fourth hypothesis, which stated that social media usage would positively predict social comparison was also supported, and is consistent with recent literature. For instance, Chowdhary (2025) identified a high level of social comparison orientation among adults, who who used social media more often and the relationship between social media use and social comparison was found to be high. Likewise, Tripathi et al. (2024) found a high correlation between social media use, social comparison, and SWB.

The fifth hypothesis, which stated that social media usage and social comparison would positively predict marital conflict was also tested. The findings indicated that higher levels of social media usage and social comparison were associated with increased marital conflict. In line with previous studies, it has been proposed that excessive

consumption of social media can lead to breakdown of marital relationships, such as through decreased quality time, diminished respect, jealousy, and privacy violations, which can ultimately result in mistrust and instability (Yalinawa, 2025; Arikewuyo et al., 2020). Likewise, an upward comparison on social media sites has been tied to greater negative feelings of envy, relationship evaluations and reduced positive emotions (Morry & Sucharyna, 2018), which can negatively influence satisfaction, lowered levels of trust and risk for conflict.

The sixth hypothesis stated that social media usage and social comparison would negatively predict mental well-being; this was supported by the results and is consistent with previous studies. As demonstrated previously, frequent social media use is related to decreased mood and feelings of less overall well-being (Faelens et al., 2021; Wirtz et al., 2020), and Verduyn et al. (2020) hypothesize that social comparison on social networking platforms is an actual determinant of poorer mental health because it tends to trigger negative emotions and feelings of less well-being.

The seventh hypothesis was that the link between social media usage and marital conflict and mental well-being would be mediated by social comparison; this hypothesis was supported by the findings, which indicated that social comparison was a significant factor in this relationship. This indicates that the impact is not necessarily just on the use of social media, but also on the tendency to compare oneself with idealized representations of others that are seen online, which is supported by the findings of Le Blanc Brillon et al. (2025) that increased social media use was related to increased negative and decreased positive emotions and that this association was mediated by social comparison.

Collectively these findings suggest that social comparison is a pivotal mechanism between social media use and well-being outcomes. Frequent use of social media can also have a negative impact on mental health, as it can contribute to discontent and to people thinking about themselves in comparison with others (Missaoui, 2024). The findings in the present study are consistent with this perspective, as the social comparison proved to be an influential psychosocial mechanism in the association between social media use and marital conflict/marital problems among married adults and their effect on mental health.

The eighth hypothesis predicted the existence of differences between the genders, age, marriage duration, and socioeconomic status on all four of the study variables. The only difference between genders was in terms of social media usage; males tended to report greater use than females, a finding which aligns with previous studies that married men were more likely than married women to engage in problematic use of social media (Alnjadat et al., 2019; Enrique & Rosales, 2023).

This finding is in line with previous studies, as the scores of social comparison did not differ between gender for both the studies by Maiben (2021) and Lau (2020), and Perinchery (2023) found similar results for the scores of self-comparison, self-compassion, and self-improvement motivation between males and females.

Likewise, the absence of gender difference in marital conflict is consistent with the work of Wanic and Kulik (2011) who suggest that relational factors (communication style, expectations, stress) are the most influential factors in marital conflict rather than gender. Other studies also reveal no significant difference between the mental health of men and women (Bakhshi & Wani, 2018; Batz Barbarich et al., 2018; Phiri & Priyanka, 2023).

The results showed no significant age differences across the study variables, which is consistent with previous research demonstrating that social comparison is less prevalent after age 25 (Buunk et al., 2020) and that social media use increases during adolescence, but stabilizes during adulthood (Politte Corn et al., 2023). There is also evidence of the stability of marital conflict across young, middle and older adulthood (Zietlow and Sillars, 2014); and some studies show that mental health does not necessarily deteriorate as adults grow older, and that older adults can report levels of mental health similar to those of younger adults (Lopez et al., 2020). In light of the fact that

most of the current sample was in middle adulthood, it is reasonable to assume that age differences did not appear due to the fact that well-being does not vary significantly across this life stage.

Regarding marriage duration, only social media usage was significantly different with those married 6–8 years using the most social media compared to other marriage groups, while social comparison, marital conflict, and mental well-being did not have similar differences. This means that while your social media usage may change during various stages of marriage, the psychological and relational impacts are relatively stable. This is similar to that found by Konyar and Ersanly (2022), who concluded that people who are married for less than 10 years use social media significantly.

The present results also indicated that there were no significant relation between marriage duration and social comparison as Lockwood et al. (2004) suggested that the effect of social comparisons is dependent on the level of identification and not just the duration of the relationship. They discovered that the definition of such comparisons did not have a relationship between length of relationship and the partner's perception of closeness, but it did have a direct relationship with the partner's perception of closeness.

No significant relationship existed between the marriage duration and marital conflict, congruent with the findings of Kamp Dush and Taylor (2011) who found that marital conflict levels are fairly constant during marriage. This outcome is not statistically significant, but fits the general trend of the literature that finds that the length of time is a poor predictor of conflict, and that the nature of the conflict, couple dynamics, and external stressors play a greater role.

Similarly, marriage duration did not significantly correlate with mental well-being, whereas previous studies have suggested that length of marriage or marital status does not always predict mental wellbeing, for example, Gibb et al. (2018) found no significant relationship between mental wellbeing and having a relationship.

Finally, SES was significantly related to social media usage, marital conflict and not mental well-being and social comparison. Similar to past studies, the lower family socio-economic status participant was more likely to use social media than the middle and the higher family socio-economic status participant was less likely to use social media (Conselice et al., 2019; He et al., 2021). Additionally, a higher percentage of those in lower-SES reported marital conflict compared to those in middle- and high-SES, which also supports a recent qualitative study conducted in Indonesia, in which both low and high SES couples reported marital conflict, though the nature of the conflict varied; for lower-SES, it was associated with financial issues, division of household tasks, childcare, and the home environment (Fachrina et al., 2025).

No significant SES difference was found for social comparison, which aligns with Liao's (2021) argument about the diminishing comparison effects in situations of less inequality. Similarly, there was no significant difference among socio-economic groups in mental well-being, as also found by Navarro-Carrillo et al. (2020) who concluded that the socio-economic status is no longer a significant predictor of psychological well-being, and Diener et al. (1993), who reported a weak association between income and well-being overall. The smaller difference in perceived socio-economic status in this study could account for the lack of significance in the differences, as most of the respondents were middle class.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Its cross-sectional design precludes any causal interpretation of the results, and reliance on self-report measures leaves room for social desirability bias. The quantitative approach, too, limits the

depth of insight into participants' lived experiences. Regarding generalizability, the sample was confined to 330 married adults in Pakistan, predominantly from middle-class backgrounds, which may restrict how well the findings apply to other cultural, demographic, or economic groups. Several potentially relevant variables — including social support, personality, attachment style, in-law relationships, and number of children — were also left unexamined, and time and resource constraints limited both the scope and depth of data collection.

Suggestions

Longitudinal and experimental designs which could identify cause and effect, and the addition of other variables such as social support, personality, attachment style, number of children, in-laws and communication, could all benefit future research. In the Pakistani context, there are also culturally specific factors that need to be explored, such as extended family pressure, joint family systems and gender norms. More representative samples of couples from a wider variety of socio-economic statuses and urban/rural environments would enhance the results of future studies, and qualitative methods including interviews and focus groups would provide greater depth of understanding of how couples experience social media use and social comparison.

Implications

Theoretically, this study is important, and clinically and socially as well. In a theoretical sense, the results demonstrate that social comparison processes are important to understand the relationship between social media usage, marital conflict and mental well-being issues in the Pakistani context.

In a clinical context, marriage therapists and mental health workers might find it useful to discuss social comparison and positive social media usage in their clinical sessions. This research at a wider societal level highlights the importance of digital literacy and awareness-raising campaigns for couples to understand the emotional and relational risks associated with social media. The results also provide justification for the integration of social media education into pre- and post-marital counseling programs, and policy initiatives to encourage healthy social media use in relationships.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate the impact of social media usage on marital conflict and mental well-being among married adults in Pakistan with specific focus on social comparison as a mediating variable. Social comparison was significantly and positively related to social media use; both social comparison and social media use were significantly related to marital conflict, and negatively related to mental well-being. Further regression and mediation results indicate that high social media use is a predictor of high social comparison, which in turn predicts high marital conflict and low mental well-being. Demographically the men were more likely than women to be using social media. The couples who were married for 6-8 years reported significantly higher social media usage while those from less privileged socio-economic status reported more marital conflict and higher social media consumption. Overall, this research confirms social comparison as a key pathway between social media use and relational and psychological outcomes, highlighting the importance of being mindful of social media use, digital literacy and raising awareness of social comparison in marital counseling and in mental health services.

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