

The Impact of Culture Factors on the Relationships between Social Media, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction among College Students between the United States and China

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of cultural factors on the relationships between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among college students in the United States and China. It employs a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and questionnaires to examine how cultural differences shape social media engagement and psychological outcomes. The findings reveal that individualistic and collectivistic cultural orientations lead to distinct patterns of social media use, emotional support, and life satisfaction. While American students emphasize self-expression and social comparison, Chinese students prioritize collective harmony and emotional connection through social media. Despite cultural differences, common factors such as academic success and social bonds were identified as key contributors to life satisfaction. This research underscores the importance of cultural context in understanding social media's impact on psychological well-being and suggests directions for future cross-cultural studies.

Keywords

Social Media, Self-Esteem, Life Satisfaction, Cultural Differences

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has evolved into a dominant global phenomenon, becoming an integral part of how individuals communicate, connect, and entertain themselves (Stollfuß, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and

YouTube are now embedded in daily routines, particularly among young adults who use social media for communication, social validation, and information exchange (Kaakinen et al., 2020; Tajvidi et al., 2020). The rapid growth of social media has also prompted extensive research on its impact on psychological well-being, particularly on self-esteem and life satisfaction (Schimmack, 2008). Life satisfaction, which is often seen as synonymous with happiness, involves individuals' subjective evaluations of their lives and is strongly linked to mental health, even after accounting for factors such as income, general health, and gender (Lombardo et al., 2018).

The relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction is complex. Studies suggest that social media usage can influence self-esteem and life satisfaction both positively and negatively, depending on the underlying psychological and cultural factors. For instance, excessive social media usage can lead to addiction, which in turn correlates with lower self-esteem, loneliness, and reduced life satisfaction (Uram & Skalski, 2022). Social comparison and envy are also critical factors in understanding the effects of social media, as individuals often compare themselves with idealized representations of others on these platforms, which can decrease self-esteem and life satisfaction (Abdellatif, 2022). Hawi and Samaha (2017) emphasize the role of self-esteem as a mediator, suggesting that individuals with higher self-esteem may be more resilient to the negative effects of social media.

Despite this body of research, there is still a lack of understanding regarding how cultural factors influence the relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Culture plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals engage with social media and perceive their interactions. For example, individualistic cultures like that of the United States may promote self-expression and personal achievement, which could heighten the effects of social comparison on self-esteem. Conversely, collectivistic cultures like China may emphasize group harmony and collective success, which could mitigate these effects (Sim & Prihadi, 2020). Thus, this study aims to explore the cultural factors influencing the relationships between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among college students in the United States and China, addressing a gap in the existing literature.

This research is significant as it contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between social media use, cultural influences, and psychological outcomes. Additionally, understanding the mediating role of self-esteem in these relationships could help inform interventions aimed at reducing the negative psychological impacts of social media use across different cultural settings (Chasanah et al., 2020; Xuan & Amat, 2021).

Most previously employed quantitative methodologies explore the relationships between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. For instance, many studies employed surveys and self-reported questionnaires to collect data on social media addiction, FOMO, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (e.g., Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Uram & Skalski, 2022; Abdellatif, 2022). Analysis techniques such

as Pearson correlations, regression analyses, and structural equation modeling (SEM) were frequently used to examine relationships between the variables and validate hypotheses (Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Xuan & Amat, 2021).

While these quantitative approaches have yielded valuable insights, they primarily focus on statistical relationships between the studied variables, often neglecting the rich, subjective experiences of individuals regarding their use of social media and its effects on their self-esteem and life satisfaction. Furthermore, most of these studies are cross-sectional, limiting the ability to understand causality or deeper psychological mechanisms (Chasanah et al., 2020; Sim & Prihadi, 2020).

To fill this gap, the current study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the nuanced experiences of social media users across different cultural contexts. Qualitative methods allow for a deeper understanding of individuals' lived experiences, cultural perspectives, and subjective interpretations of how social media impacts their self-esteem and life satisfaction. This approach is especially important for uncovering the cultural factors that may shape social media experiences in the United States and China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction

The relationship between social media use, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and various psychological variables has been extensively explored in recent research, particularly concerning how these factors interact to affect individuals' well-being. Self-esteem is commonly understood as an individual's overall assessment of their worth, whether positive or negative (Smith et al., 2014). Self-esteem has been shown to mediate the relationship between social media addiction and life satisfaction. Hawi and Samaha (2017) found that individuals with higher self-esteem experienced greater life satisfaction, even when dealing with social media addiction. Similarly, research by Chasanah et al. (2020) supports the role of self-esteem as a mediator between problematic social media use and life satisfaction.

Another critical factor influencing self-esteem and life satisfaction is the fear of missing out (FOMO), which describes the anxiety individuals feel when they cannot participate in social events, primarily through social media (Hetz et al., 2015). Uram and Skalski (2022) found that individuals with high levels of FOMO tend to have lower self-esteem and life satisfaction, highlighting how social media can contribute to psychological distress through social comparison. Giagkou et al. (2018) further examined how passive social media use, specifically on Facebook, along with FOMO and social comparison, differentially affect life satisfaction. They found that passive social media use, in conjunction with FOMO, can negatively impact users' self-esteem, leading to lower life satisfaction.

Platform-specific differences in how social media use impacts self-esteem and life satisfaction have also been observed. Tian et al. (2019) found that YouTube engagement tends to enhance self-esteem and life satisfaction, whereas Instagram use was associated with a decline in both, due to the platform's emphasis on

image-based social comparison. This aligns with research by [Serra and Campa-niço \(2024\)](#), who demonstrated that the number of Instagram followers significantly mediates the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. More followers were associated with higher self-esteem, suggesting that social media metrics can strongly influence psychological outcomes.

Demographic factors also play a role in how social media use affects self-esteem and life satisfaction. [Acun \(2020\)](#) examined social media use among Turkish university students and found that trust levels and self-esteem were influenced by variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, and GPA. [Đurić et al. \(2024\)](#) further highlighted that problematic social media use (PSMU) was associated with lower life satisfaction, particularly among younger individuals, females, and those with higher levels of neuroticism.

In addition to the direct effects of social media use, [Luo \(2023\)](#) explored the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between social anxiety and problematic mobile social media use. The study revealed that social anxiety had both direct and indirect effects on PSMU, with self-esteem acting as a significant mediator. This suggests that interventions aimed at reducing social anxiety and improving self-esteem could be effective in addressing problematic social media use among university students. Similarly, [Koçak et al. \(2021\)](#) found that higher levels of self-esteem and education were associated with greater life satisfaction, which in turn reduced social media addiction, highlighting the importance of promoting self-esteem to mitigate the negative effects of social media.

Finally, [Xu and Zheng \(2022\)](#) examined the relationship between childhood emotional abuse (CEA), problematic social media use, and cyberbullying. Their study revealed that CEA and PSMU were positively associated with cyberbullying perpetration, while self-esteem had a negative correlation. Moreover, self-esteem and PSMU sequentially mediated the relationship between CEA and cyberbullying, suggesting that childhood emotional abuse lowers self-esteem, which increases problematic social media use and, consequently, cyberbullying behaviors.

Overall, the existing literature consistently demonstrates the central role of self-esteem in mediating the effects of social media use on life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Various factors, including FOMO, platform-specific features, and demographic variables, influence how individuals engage with social media and how this engagement affects their self-esteem and life satisfaction. Addressing these mediating factors, particularly through interventions that enhance self-esteem, could help mitigate the negative psychological impacts of social media use.

2.2. Social Media Usage and Culture in the U.S. and China

Cultural factors, particularly individualism and collectivism, significantly influence social media usage patterns in the United States and China. [Jackson and Wang \(2013\)](#) found that participants from the U.S., characterized by individualistic cultural traits, spent more time on social networking sites (SNSs), considered these platforms more important, and had larger friend networks compared to their Chinese counterparts, who come from a collectivistic culture. In the U.S.,

personal characteristics strongly predict SNS use due to the emphasis on self and broad social networks. In contrast, cultural values play a more significant role in China, where group and family ties are prioritized.

Cross-cultural theories, such as those proposed by Hofstede (2001) and Triandis (2001), suggest that distinct cultural values influence social media engagement. For instance, social media users in collectivist cultures, like China, often maintain denser social networks and face greater pressures to conform to in-group norms compared to users in individualist cultures (Choi, Chu, & Kim, 2014). A meta-analysis by Cheng et al. (2021) indicates that the prevalence of social media addiction is notably higher in collectivist nations (31%) compared to individualist ones (14%).

The platforms themselves also exhibit differing engagement styles influenced by these cultural frameworks. For example, while Twitter emphasizes personal pronouns and emotional expression, Weibo employs more unique address forms and discourse particles. This divergence is evident in user behaviors, as Tang et al. (2017) reported that Chinese students exhibited higher levels of addiction to Internet use and online social networking than U.S. students, although the latter were less prone to online gaming addiction.

Contrasting uses and gratifications between U.S. and Chinese social media platforms further illuminate these cultural distinctions. Billings et al. (2019) revealed that while Facebook dominated in motivational measures in the U.S., WeChat excelled in fostering camaraderie and entertainment in China. Furthermore, Chinese users reported higher overall gratifications across various factors than American users.

Notably, Fang et al. (2017) found that American college students effectively utilized social media, particularly Facebook, as a coping mechanism for stress, aided by perceived social support. In contrast, Chinese students did not exhibit the same adaptive coping effects despite their involvement in social media. Yu (2012) also highlighted differences in engagement styles, noting that U.S. users on Facebook tended to express themselves more in interactions with brand posts, while Chinese users on Kaixin engaged in a relationship-focused manner.

Luo (2014) examined self-disclosure behaviors, revealing that Chinese college students engaged in greater breadth and depth of self-disclosure on social media compared to their American peers. Gender differences also emerged, with females generally disclosing more than males; however, only U.S. females exhibited greater breadth in self-disclosure compared to their male counterparts.

In summary, cultural influences shape social media usage and self-expression in significant ways between the U.S. and China. Individualistic and collectivistic orientations lead to different patterns of engagement, coping mechanisms, and self-disclosure on social media platforms.

2.3. Culture and Life Satisfaction

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping individuals' life satisfaction, with

various studies highlighting the influence of age, cultural differences, and gender on this psychological construct. [Mallard et al. \(1997\)](#) found that culture does not significantly moderate the relationship between overall life satisfaction and satisfaction in specific life domains. Conversely, [Bibi et al. \(2015\)](#) revealed that life satisfaction tends to increase with age, indicating that while culture is a predictor of life satisfaction, gender differences do not significantly affect satisfaction levels.

Comparative studies between different cultures have provided insights into life satisfaction variations. For instance, [Leelakulthanit and Day \(1993\)](#) reported that Americans generally exhibited higher life satisfaction across most domains compared to Thais. Similarly, [Diener et al. \(1995\)](#) revealed that both Chinese and Korean students reported lower life satisfaction and positive feelings than their American counterparts. This aligns with findings from another study by [Bibi et al. \(2015\)](#), which identified satisfaction with family, finances, self, and friends as key variables related to life satisfaction across 31 nations.

The relationship between life satisfaction and self-satisfaction varies across cultural contexts. [Diener et al. \(1995\)](#) noted that this relationship was stronger in individualistic cultures like the United States, where personal achievements and self-worth are more salient. In collectivistic cultures, such as Korea, community and social harmony often take precedence over individual fulfillment.

Psychologists emphasize the importance of understanding how cultural differences shape emotions, thoughts, and actions, as these variations significantly influence life satisfaction judgments. [Suh et al. \(2008\)](#) argues that life satisfaction is heavily based on inner emotional experiences, while [Markus and Kitayama \(1991\)](#) assert that cultural elements—such as values, practices, and beliefs—shape individuals' self-perceptions and inform their judgments of life satisfaction. These cultural dimensions influence whether people rely on personal emotions or socially nuanced information when evaluating their satisfaction with life.

Furthermore, [Voicu and Vasile \(2014\)](#) found that both origin and host cultures significantly impact immigrants' life satisfaction, suggesting that “cultures of life satisfaction” not only exist but can also evolve over time. [Schimmack et al. \(2002\)](#) indicated that personality traits, such as extraversion and neuroticism, similarly influence hedonic balance across cultures, although hedonic balance serves as a stronger predictor of life satisfaction in individualistic cultures compared to collectivistic ones. [Diener et al. \(1993\)](#) also highlighted that individuals in individualistic cultures often prioritize personal attitudes, emotions, and cognitions in their life satisfaction judgments, while collectivists focus on community duties and social roles.

Overall, the existing literature underscores that life satisfaction is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and individual factors. Based on the above literature review, this study proposes the following three research questions that can guide your study:

RQ1: How do cultural factors influence the relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among college students in the United States

and China?

RQ2: In what ways do individualistic and collectivistic cultural orientations shape the experiences of social media users regarding self-esteem and life satisfaction?

RQ3: How do specific social media platforms differentially affect self-esteem and life satisfaction among college students in the U.S. and China, considering the mediating role of social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO)?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The sampling technique used is a convenient sample. Even with the use of acquaintances and convenience sampling, qualitative research can provide the depth and contextual richness of the insights. They first provide informed consent. An interview was given, which asked about their social media usage, perceived self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Descriptive data was collected as their opinions on social media usage and social comparison (**Table 1** and **Table 2**).

Table 1. Information of members of in-depth interview from China.

Depth Interviewee Chinese Respondents	Age	Gender
Depth Chinese Interviewee 01	20	Female
Depth Chinese Interviewee 02	20	Female
Depth Chinese Interviewee 03	22	Female
Depth Chinese Interviewee 04	23	Female
Depth Chinese Interviewee 05	18	Female
Depth Chinese Interviewee 06	19	Male
Depth Chinese Interviewee 07	19	Male
Depth Chinese Interviewee 08	21	Male
Depth Chinese Interviewee 09	N/A	Male
Depth Chinese Interviewee 10	20	Female
Depth Chinese Interviewee 11	19	Female

Table 2. Information of members of in-depth interview from the United States.

Depth Interviewee American Respondents	Age	Gender	Major
Depth American Interviewee 01	19	Male	Undecided
Depth American Interviewee 02	21	Female	Biology
Depth American Interviewee 03	19	Female	Bio-medical engineering
Depth American Interviewee 04	21	Non binary	Psychology
Depth American Interviewee 05	19	Female	Computer science
Depth American Interviewee 06	19	Male	Biology
Depth American Interviewee 07	19	Male	N/A
Depth American Interviewee 08	19	Male	N/A

The above tables indicate that there are more female respondents than male respondents, with only one non-binary participant in the study, an imbalance that could stem from recruitment methods such as reliance on acquaintances or convenience sampling, which might naturally result in a skewed sample. As females might have been more willing to participate or provide detailed responses, this imbalance raises concerns about the representativeness of the findings across genders, particularly since gender can significantly influence experiences with social media, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

3.2. Procedure

Participants are recruited through opportunity sampling, who are researcher's acquaintances. American participants are all from University of Wisconsin-Madison. Chinese participants are studying in different Chinese local colleges. The reason why American participants are exclusively from one university while Chinese participants are from multiple colleges is that the researcher selects the participants for convenience. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and informed that the study would take 20 - 30 minutes. They were asked whether they preferred questionnaires or interviews, and the majority of them chose questionnaires. For those who underwent interviews, permission for recordings was given, which was used for analysis.

3.3. Measurement

The questionnaire primarily measures variables related to social media usage, self-esteem, and life satisfaction among Chinese university students. The questionnaire aligns closely with the research plan by focusing on core variables and their interactions. Both emphasize the relationship between social media usage, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, with the questionnaire including questions designed to explore mediating factors like FOMO and social comparison. Furthermore, it captures cultural dimensions, such as the influence of Chinese collectivistic values on social media usage, which are central to the research plan's comparative analysis of cultural impacts. Overall, the questionnaire provides a comprehensive framework for examining the interplay of social media usage, self-esteem, and life satisfaction within the Chinese cultural context. Its design reflects the research plan's objectives, particularly in understanding the mediating roles of cultural factors and subjective experiences.

3.4. Research Ethics

This study upholds high ethical standards to ensure participants' rights and well-being. Participants are fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits through a detailed consent form. Participation is entirely voluntary, and participants can withdraw or skip questions without consequences. Confidentiality is strictly maintained by anonymizing data, securely storing it, and ensuring that only the research team has access. Findings will be published or

presented without any identifying information, safeguarding participants' privacy.

4. Results

4.1. Thematic Analysis: Cultural Dynamics in Social Media Use in China

Theme 1: Social Media Usage

Participants reported using a variety of platforms such as WeChat, QQ, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, tailored to specific purposes. For instance, C01 (C means Chinese, and the following is the same) noted, "I scroll through Douyin for fun, to make myself happy, and I check it for suggestions from online sisters, which helps me feel better and more satisfied with life." Similarly, C02 highlighted the dual purpose of these platforms, saying, "I use WeChat, QQ, and Douyin mainly for chatting and browsing videos, as well as exchanging information." C12 shared, "I use Bilibili, WeChat, QQ, Lofter, and Xiaohongshu. Bilibili runs in the background all day, while I open Xiaohongshu for about 80% of the day. WeChat is for work, QQ for chatting, and Lofter at night." This indicates that social media is deeply integrated into daily routines, serving both emotional and practical needs.

Theme 2: Impact of Social Media

Social media's influence on users varies, with participants sharing both positive and negative experiences.

Social media impacts self-esteem in nuanced ways. C01 described a situation where "If I post a comment and someone disagrees, pointing out my mistake, it makes me feel ashamed and lowers my self-esteem. However, I see it as an opportunity for growth, preventing me from being blindly confident." In contrast, C04 reflected on the empowering aspects of social media: "Social media allows me to showcase myself and gain recognition, which boosts my confidence and social skills."

Participants noted varying impacts on their life satisfaction. C12 rated their satisfaction as moderate, "5 out of 10. Factors include family, work, good food, comfortable living, and time for hobbies like drawing. Social media contributes to this, but not getting traffic on my Xiaohongshu posts can feel discouraging." Similarly, C11 said, "Social media allows me to connect with like-minded people, relieving study stress and providing emotional support."

Some participants reported minimal involvement in social comparison. For example, C03 stated, "I don't engage in much social comparison. My close friends and I mutually include each other in activities, and if I'm not involved, it's probably not important." Conversely, C10 admitted, "I often compare myself to others. Sometimes, I feel my life is better than most, but I also envy those with both wealth and free time. Even though I know I can't change my circumstances, I can't help but feel a sense of longing." C12 shared, "I frequently compare myself with others, such as families in harmonious environments, which affects me negatively. When I see someone post about buying a house in full, I envy them and try to learn from

their strategies to work toward my goals.”

The fear of missing out (FOMO) emerged as a recurrent theme. C09 shared, “I often fear missing out on social activities, which leads me to frequently check social media. If I miss something, I feel guilty and try to make up for it by buying gifts.” C12 reported no significant anxiety about missing social activities, others highlighted situational anxieties.

Theme 3: Cultural Influence

Participants highlighted the influence of Chinese cultural values on their social media use. C06 emphasized how the internet is not a lawless space in China: “The internet isn’t a lawless zone. Spreading rumors online is prohibited, which reflects our legal and cultural consciousness.” Similarly, C01 connected their patriotic sentiments to social media content, saying, “When I see videos showcasing Chinese technology on Douyin, I feel proud. It reflects our socialist core values of patriotism.” C12 reflected on traditional Chinese values, saying, “On WeChat, conversations mirror those offline but use emojis for emotional expression, reflecting a more reserved communication style.”

Theme 4: Emotional Support and Connection

Social media plays a vital role in maintaining emotional support networks, especially for those living away from home. C01 expressed, “When I’m away at college, I use video calls on WeChat to not only hear my family’s voices but also see their faces, which greatly eases my homesickness.” Similarly, C03 highlighted the importance of social media in building emotional bonds: “There are many posts on social media about relationships, and I’ve learned a lot from them.” C12 remarked, “It’s very important. I use WeChat to connect with family, and other platforms help me maintain friendships.” Social media also provided emotional support during tough times. C12 added, “When I feel down, I go to Bilibili or Lofter for comfort, reading posts or chatting with friends on WeChat.”

Participants also observed differences between online and offline interactions. C06 stated, “In real life, we can use eye contact to convey emotions, but on social media, emojis often serve to bridge this gap.” Despite its benefits, social media communication was perceived as less intimate than face-to-face interactions. C04 reflected, “Chatting online can’t replace the closeness of in-person communication; long-term online exchanges can weaken relationships.”

Theme 5: Social Media and the Future

Participants expressed diverse expectations about the future of social media. C04 envisioned technological advancements, saying, “I hope for innovations like 3D video calls or virtual reality shopping experiences.” However, privacy concerns were a recurring issue. C12 anticipated its growing influence, stating, “Social media will become inseparable from our lives. However, I worry that AI’s development may dilute the emotional connection in face-to-face interactions.”

Some participants anticipated continued reliance on social media for personal and professional communication. C09 remarked, “In the future, social media will become even more integrated into our lives. I plan to reduce my dependence on

it and focus more on offline interactions.”

In all, these findings reveal how social media usage is intricately tied to cultural values, emotional needs, and future aspirations among Chinese users. This thematic analysis provides rich insights into the interplay of individual experiences and broader societal influences.

4.2. Thematic Analysis for American Respondents

Theme 1: Social Media Use

The most common social media platforms reported include Instagram and Snapchat, whose main purposes are socializing and entertainment. As A01 (A means American, and the following is the same) stated, “I use Instagram for Instagram reels and viewing posts of people I know, snapchat (and iMessage if that counts) for direct communication, and reddit for general infotainment (sports, video games, local news).” A06 also reported, “I use Snapchat and Instagram to socialize mostly but I sometimes do entertainment on there too.” Other communication apps include Discord. According to A07, “Discord I use for the sake of communication, both between friends and clubs/jobs I’m in.”, while entertainment app includes YouTube. Both A03 and A08 reported using YouTube most often. “I use YouTube almost every day, about 3 hours each day. I use it way more during the summer. Mainly for entertainment, and socializing, and sometimes for information sharing.” Twitter and Tumblr also mentioned being used to engage with art.

Theme 2: Impact of Social Media

Participants tended to report self-esteem as being about average or higher. Some reported they improve their self-esteem as they grow older. “My self-esteem is better than when I was younger. I used to have low self-esteem. I do think I use social media a bit more, and it does affect my self-esteem since it’s a major source of stimuli.” said A02. Evidence of social media playing a role in self-esteem during their growth was also found on A03, “back in the days when I was a teenager, I must keep posting stuff on Instagram, making it seem like I have a life outside of school. When I stop using social media, I stop caring, which affects self-esteem.”

Negative impacts found such as A04 noted, “Social media negatively affects my self-esteem because I see posts/videos of people in their positive moments (e.g., graduation) and it tends to make me rethink my life decisions and regret my past and present choices.” Body dysmorphia is also a way social media exerts a negative force on self-esteem. According to A07, “Even as a male, I feel like the posts I see set a high standard for what’s considered ‘attractive,’ such as the plethora of posts showing off muscles and jawlines.”

Others reported social media played little influence when they didn’t use it often. “I don’t rely on social media to make me happy. Social media has impacted me probably negatively because when I see other people hanging out when I wasn’t invited lets me down,” reported A06. A similar tendency was also found for A08, “Social media has negligible impact on my self-esteem. Although I don’t

use Twitter/facebook/Instagram, etc., on YouTube, I do see people have cool projects and cool skills that I don't have. That could make me feel dumb."

There is evidence supporting that social media is a vector for life satisfaction, in both positive and negative ways, while for some people there is little impact. When there are news and accomplishments posted online, participants' perception of life satisfaction could be affected. As A05 noted, "There's a lot of people on social media that are around my age that are already successful, and this makes me feel like I'm not doing much with my life." A07 also reported, "Seeing people succeed and not facing these issues over social media can work to make me feel self-conscious, which affects overall life satisfaction somewhat." News about bad things happening in the world can make people feel negatively. "Conflict decreases life satisfaction. There is so much information on social media, especially terrible things such as the war, violence and discrimination. People boost controversial posts because they make money through that." It can also be a source of distraction, which in a way makes people less satisfied with their work. According to A04, "Whenever I am working on an assignment, I would stop every couple of minutes just to scroll through social media." On the other hand, social media can positively impact life satisfaction, as A03 said, "YouTube gives me entertainment, and with social media, I get to talk to my friends abroad, which is nice."

Outside of social media, factors affecting life satisfaction include current accomplishments, such as A01 stated, "I realize that I'm in a good position relative to others and I believe I am doing what is right." A03 also reported "I feel pretty accomplished being in college doing what I want to do. And I am productive for the first time in a while." Hobbies can also play a role in terms of accomplishment. "I know I can do better and I will strive to do better. I can run faster (I'm very satisfied in this aspect) and can accomplish more. I'm happy with what I've already accomplished." noted A08. A05 shared that when she liked how her art looked at the moment it would contribute to life satisfaction. At the same time, A02 shared that when she posted art and earned people's "likes", it made her feel good. Apart from that, there are factors such as bonds with people, money and academic experiences in college.

Some participants reported minimal involvement in social comparison. According to A03, "I know they have a very different life from me, so there is no point judging." However, comparison in social media seems hard to avoid, as A02 shared, "Many people are showing up, which affects me. Sometimes it does make you feel a bit sad, but sometimes I see the things I want to do, such as some new areas online, and that seems cool."

Comparison in social media does generate negative feelings, impairing self-image. As A04 stated, "Social comparison happened very often. Whenever I compare myself to other people online, I become ashamed of who I am and doubt my worth as a human being which then turns into depression." A06 also noted, "I sometimes compare myself to others when I see their stories etc. This makes me wonder if I'm doing the right things in life." Aspects of comparison involve body images, as

well as accomplishments of others, like A05 shared, “I saw that the great artist was younger than me. It made me feel a little angry.” At the same time, the Internet provides insights for people on how to handle things better, especially when they talked about issues like some social problems online. A02 mentioned that “I saw people protest, but I don’t think I can do it. At least I would like to help them with something, such as carrying bottles of water for the protesters.”

Fomo is one component of negative emotions being investigated, which seems to be a common theme among college students. In general, posts on social media involve announcements of school club events, enabling students to figure out what is happening. For some participants, Fomo is not a significant issue. “I sort of look down on people who post everything they do, or post ‘recaps’ and I don’t feel impressed by the things they post.” Even if not being invited to friend group activities can make people feel upset, those who are not passionate about engaging in social activities don’t relate to this issue. “I will never drink and do not ever want to go to parties. I find satisfaction in accomplishing new feats and running,” noted A08.

Theme 3: Cultural Influence

English and American culture appear to be saturated on the Internet. A02 shared her thoughts, “A lot of social media is based around the United States. It seems to me like everything is always related to the US in some way. It is also related to how American people act.” The dominance of the language has mostly been pushed out by companies who are making this platform who are American when those companies’ owners are rich and able to make the platforms accessible to the majority of users.

American culture has “individualism” as a trait. A05 noted “Look for something that they never heard of, and made that a part of their personality.” While A02 felt “People are trying to be the most popular, the most unique one, rather than trying to have a good time”.

Nowadays when social media is widely used, it is playing a significant role in American culture. “The U.S sometimes influences social media use and many people rely on social media for their social status,” noted A06. It was also noted by A04 that “It seems like a requirement to have social media. there is always a social media you GOT to have to exchange socials.” This could be a negative trend, as A07 stated, “I think it devalued the notion of a friend; I think there’s more of an imperative to get followers and form a great number of superficial relationships rather than smaller, more intimate groups of friends.”

Theme 4: Emotional Support and Connections

Social media is important in staying connected with families and friends, especially when they are not physically close by. A03 noted, “I have lots of long-distance friends. We send each other memes and talk about stuff that’s going on in our days. We wouldn’t be able to do that if it wasn’t for social media.” A02 also shared that “Internet helps me know what’s going on with my family. Although my close family is still in the same state, there are family friends in other states.

Because of messengers, I can interact with my cousin and know what she's doing in school."

Others perceive real-life interaction as more important than texting. A04 noted, "In terms of international friends, social media is essential. But it's not that important because my main support network is my real-life friends and family. A01 also shared "Any important conversation or interaction usually happens through calling, maybe through messaging which might start on Instagram, but not at all through 'social' functions." When they can make in-person interactions, they tend not to rely on social media. "Social media doesn't impact my connections with friends/family too much. I make great efforts to connect with people often in person, and social media works to aid in maintaining connections with people I'm unable to be with physically." shared A07.

Theme 5: Social Media and Future

Some participants perceive social media as addictive, keeping them from being more productive. Therefore, they want to improve by spending less time on social media. A03 expressed "I hope they can delete any form of short videos on the Internet. I waste so much time on them when I need to study." Even if social media has been a major component of life these days, someone shared the wish to be less engaged on social media and more focused on real life.

Others want to maintain the usage for certain aspects they perceive as valuable while cutting back the usage on something that made them feel negatively "I want to be more consistent in posting my art and interacting with activism. I want to do more about things I like and less about things that are stressful." reported A02. A05 also noted that "I feel like seeing fewer influencers and more people who are similar to me will help me be more satisfied with the achievements I've gotten so far since it's not realistic for everyone to be as successful as some influencers."

There are also concerns about the content as it develops. A02 reported "I think the way social media platforms are constructed made people fall into more and more extreme thought patterns. If something makes you angry, they will keep showing it to you. It could easily get worse in the future."

4.3. Comparison of Thematical Analysis between American Respondents and Chinese Respondents

1) Social media use

Even if American and Chinese respondents' most common social media they used are very different, they share the same purpose, browsing short videos for entertainment, and staying in touch with families and long-distance friends. There is a tendency found in Chinese participants that there exists a difference between when they are socializing online and in real life. Another aspect is information sharing. Both Chinese and American participants found social media helps them to know what is going on in the world and understand social issues; they also find social media makes them understand new things, which broadens their horizons.

Chinese people may be shy in real life while being more extroverted and open

when interacting online, which is why Chinese students may use social media more often than face-to-face interaction. They perceived it as helpful to use “stickers” to express their feelings on social media. In contrast, American respondents express less about this aspect, and they tend to engage more in personal interaction. This difference may be due to the impact of how culture shapes their personalities; Chinese people don’t make small talk and express their feelings as much as American people do.

2) Impact of social media

American respondents tend to have a clearer idea about their self-esteem, while Chinese respondents are ambiguous about the definitions of self-esteem. This may be because self-esteem is perceived differently between cultures; American people usually understand self-esteem as self-images and perceptions, which in other words is how good they perceive themselves; Chinese people see self-esteem as something they either have or not and if they have, it means they won’t allow others hurt them at a personal level.

Social media have more or less impact on respondents from both countries. For Chinese participants, someone reported that when they have arguments about controversial topics online if they receive negative and aggressive comments from others, their self-esteem might be impaired. This may be because American social media platforms provide a more friendly environment for discussion, and American online users may be better at critical thinking, taking other perspectives into thought, rather than meaningless attacking the naysayers.

There are no significant differences between the level of life satisfaction between American participants and Chinese participants, given that their socioeconomic status may be different. This may due to United State is a developed country, while China is developed. It may be concluded that for students, life satisfaction has little connection with how good their material conditions are. Common factors contributing to life satisfaction for both countries are similar, which include work and academics, as well as bonds with others.

Both American and Chinese participants don’t report much tendency to compare on social media; they share the same thoughts that given individuals have very different life circumstances and backgrounds, there is no point in comparing. When it comes to the moment they unavoidably feel jealous, they may find distractions and forget about it, or seek advice online and look for content that makes them feel positive. For American respondents, more details are provided on the aspects that they make comparisons, such as projects on YouTube and artwork.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) is a more common topic among American students than Chinese students. Chinese participants reported less about the experiences of Fomo, for reasons such that they don’t like to go to social events; American students use social media as a tool to check information about social events. This may be because parties and social events are not as big a part of Chinese culture as they are in America, and Chinese people usually stick with their social circles, rather than seeking new connections in events.

3) Cultural differences

Social media is an important part of both cultures; they both use social media frequently in their life and post their stories online. American and Chinese cultures share different values. The themes of cultural values they mentioned are very different. American respondents mentioned that people want to be popular and unique as individuals, seeking cool projects online; Chinese respondents reported that social media inspire patriotism, and they shared a greater sense of unity, honor and traditional national values of their country, which social media help boost.

4) Emotional support and connection

American respondents reported a greater preference for finding emotional support in person, while Chinese respondents showed less of this preference. Even though they both reported that social media is essential in keeping in touch over long-distance relationships, Chinese respondents expressed more about its importance in making video calls with friends and families when they are not together. In particular, some Chinese participants report social media helps them find online friends who share the same interests as them and develop deeper bonds with online friends. This may be because China has a bigger overall area and population than the United States, which made long-distance relationships more common in China, given that they may study in places that are far from their family. Also, Chinese respondents have a less clear idea about emotional support networks. This may be because Chinese culture has the trait of being implicit, thereby not showing their emotions to others as much as Americans.

5) Social media and future

Participants from both countries respond by either stating that they may use social media less often in the future or no plan to change social media usage. The majority of Chinese participants noted that technology and social media will be more and more related to their daily lives in the future. As a scientific tool, social media will become independent of people's lives. They tend to share more optimistic views of social media development. On the other hand, American participants reported more detailed aspects that they wished to improve, such as more engagement in real life and exploring new areas. Some Chinese participants mentioned the wish for government to be more active in solving issues being discussed online, rather than avoidance to address those. For some Chinese participants, privacy and confidentiality were reported as issues that they hoped to improve in the future. In comparison, American people tend to use their real name as ID online and be more open in posting their photos, and they seem to be less concerned about privacy.

6) Difference in the way they respond

American participants tend to be more open and detailed in answering these questions. They have a clearer idea about concepts being discussed, such as self-esteem, life satisfaction and Fomo. They know what the researcher is looking for, and be able to provide corresponding information.

In contrast, Chinese participants need further guidance and explanation to

generate a more detailed response. Interviews tend to work better for Chinese participants. This may be due to that American students are more conscious of these issues and their impact, since they spend more time thinking and discussing about these topics as they grow.

On the other hand, Chinese students don't have as many opportunities to address these issues, since their academic workload has already been very high, which makes them cognitively busy and have fewer thoughts about social issues. Specifically, for Chinese students, female participants tend to provide more rich information than male students. This may be due to male students in China don't usually express their thoughts and feelings, while female students are more open to expressing their thoughts and feelings with their friends.

4.4. Differences in Self-Esteem Definitions between American and Chinese Participants

The differences in how American and Chinese participants defined self-esteem were derived from the way they contextualized their experiences during discussions. American participants emphasized individualistic notions of self-worth tied to personal achievements and external validation, while Chinese participants framed self-esteem as a binary construct connected to social harmony and resilience against external judgments. What these distinctions align with are broader cultural values of individualism and collectivism.

American participants tended to describe self-esteem in terms of personal achievements, body image, and online validation. For example: Some participants discussed how positive feedback or recognition online (e.g., through social media likes or comments) boosted their self-esteem, while others mentioned the role of body image and societal standards of attractiveness, with one male participant specifically addressing the pressure to conform to physical ideals (e.g., muscularity and jawlines). By comparison, Chinese participants often described self-esteem as something one either has or does not have, which suggests less focus on nuanced self-perceptions and more on a general sense of dignity or integrity. An example is that one participant noted self-esteem involves not allowing others to hurt them personally, reflecting a collectivistic cultural emphasis on maintaining face and social harmony.

In the U.S., self-esteem is closely tied to self-expression, personal accomplishments, and self-image, reflecting culturally valued ideals. Participants were more articulate and reflective about how social media and other factors influenced their sense of self-worth, aligning with the American focus on individuality. In contrast, self-esteem in China is understood within a more social and collective context. This perspective may explain why Chinese participants described self-esteem in broader, less detailed terms, which focus on resilience against criticism and maintain harmony rather than individual self-perception.

4.5. Observed Gender Differences in the Analysis

Female participants from China provided richer and more detailed responses than

male participants, which could be attributed to cultural norms in China, where males are less likely to express thoughts and feelings openly. American males noted negative impacts of social media on body image, with one mentioning the pressure to meet societal standards of attractiveness (e.g., muscles and jawlines). This reflects a shift in the discussion of body image traditionally associated with females.

Female participants in China emphasized the importance of social media for maintaining emotional bonds and support networks, and male participants were less expressive about emotional connections. Similarly, American respondents placed varying importance on real-life versus online emotional support, and females appeared more open to discussing emotional impacts.

Both male and female participants reported engaging in social comparison, but the details varied. For example, one American male highlighted dissatisfaction with body image, while another male respondent described avoiding FOMO by engaging in offline activities. In addition, it is female participants that generally provided more nuanced examples of comparison and its emotional toll.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates the relationship between social media use and self-esteem and life satisfaction, with Fomo, social comparison, emotional support network etc. as mediating factors. It is proposed that cultural factors play a role in the differences between the social media usage of American college students and that of Chinese college students. There is evidence for both countries that social media has an impact on participants' life satisfaction, which in general varies from negative to minimal, due to factors such as social comparison. Negative emotional response during the usage also contributes to this impact. Specifically, Fomo is being investigated, and its impact varies from the social habits and personalities among participants. In addition, there is evidence found that Chinese college students and American college students may perceive social media differently in some ways.

The first question investigated is in what way culture causes differences in the relationship mentioned above. In one way, the different types of social activities between China and the United States contribute to this impact. "Club events" and "parties" are key words in the response of American college students. This may be because they are more common in United States campuses. In contrast, while for the response of Chinese students, tend to refer to social activities such as hanging out with close friend groups, or academic meetings. In another way, Chinese culture makes participants more implicit or shy; there is less response about emotional interaction in real life than for American respondents. This may be the reason why there are Chinese people prefer texting and expressing emotions using "stickers" online. Moreover, for Chinese participants, engaging with online friends, sharing daily life through texting and making calls with families far away from them seem to be more common. This indicates that the ways social circles

are formed may be different in the United States and China; only a few American participants briefly mentioned engaging with like-minded online or international friends.

The second research question is how do individualism and collectivist culture results in the different experiences of social media usage, in terms of self-esteem and life satisfaction. One thing being noted is that patriotism is a more common topic for Chinese respondents than for Americans. Most Chinese participants reported that social media enables them to appreciate more the achievements of their country and things the government has done for them so far, which inspires them to be more loyal and grateful for the motherland, and inspires the willingness to be a better, law-abided citizens. They also indicate that when viewing these achievements of their country, they will feel satisfied and be looking forward to future technological development. In comparison, American students didn't mention these topics. Their self-esteem and life satisfaction appear to depend on more personal factors, such as when people give them positive comments online, body image, and achievements in academics and hobbies. There is evidence supporting that American social media users may tend to try to be popular, and unique online.

The third question being investigated is the different impact of social media platforms on self-esteem and life satisfaction among college students in the United States and China, in terms of mediating factors of social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO). They tend to use social media for the same purpose. In terms of specific social media platforms, the function of Instagram, Snapchat, WeChat, and QQ is all for maintaining contact with others, which are among most used apps for college students from both countries. Except for discords, these platforms mentioned all have the function of posting content, either in the form of words or videos. Even though students from both countries didn't show much engagement in social comparison, American students showed more indications that seeing successful online influencers makes them rethink their achievements, which is a factor influencing their self-esteem and life satisfaction. In terms of FOMO, it is less common for Chinese students; some of them indicate that their social activities are not for them and if those events are not important, they would rather not care about them. This is significant compared to American respondents. Some of them indicate that they would keep an eye on social events posts in case anything is interesting.

In previous similar studies, there were investigations of the relationship between social media and life satisfaction. For example, results found that self-esteem mediated the relationship between social media addiction and satisfaction with life (Hawi & Samaha, 2017). In addition, there are findings from past studies proving that self-esteem has a mediating role between life satisfaction and problematic social media use (Chasanah, Mulawarman, & Ali Murtadho, 2020). There are also results about FOMO as a factor, which highlighted that social media users with high FOMO were characterized by lower levels of self-esteem (big effect size)

and satisfaction with life (big effect size as well) compared to people with low FOMO (Uram & Skalski, 2022). For social comparison, Abdellatif (2022) found that the mediating role of social comparison and envy increases the negative impact of social media use on life satisfaction, while self-esteem leads to reducing this negative impact. Current studies not only intend to investigate this relationship but also consider cultural differences by investigating the differences between individualism and collectivist culture, taking the United States and China as examples.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while the study provides valuable insights into cross-cultural differences, the sample size and demographic diversity within each country could be expanded to account for regional and subcultural variations.

Second, while the study identifies some gender-based differences, the imbalance among participants limits the depth and scope of the analysis.

Additionally, the study relies heavily on self-reported data through questionnaires and interviews, which may be subject to response bias or inaccuracies due to participants' subjective perceptions.

Finally, the study's focus on social media platforms is insightful but limited in scope. While some platform-specific behaviors were discussed, a more in-depth analysis of unique platform features and their psychological impacts would provide a richer understanding of the mechanisms at play.

7. Future Research Directions

Future research should consider adopting longitudinal study designs to better understand the causal relationships between social media use, self-esteem, and life satisfaction over time. Expanding cultural comparisons to include participants from other regions, such as Europe, Africa, and South Asia, would provide a more global perspective on the influence of cultural factors.

Second, A more representative sample and gender-specific insights would enhance the robustness and inclusivity of future research. Future studies should aim for more balanced gender representation by diversifying recruitment methods, such as targeted outreach to underrepresented groups (e.g., males, non-binary individuals). Next, incorporating a more focused analysis of gender differences would enrich the findings. For instance, examining how male, female, and non-binary participants experience and cope with social comparison, FOMO, and emotional support could highlight unique patterns. Finally, including more non-binary participants and discussing their specific experiences with social media, self-esteem, and life satisfaction would provide a fuller picture of how these factors interact across gender identities.

Furthermore, while the study touched on SES and academic pressure through participant responses, it did not explicitly control for these factors. Instead,

cultural frameworks and the mediating role of social media provided the primary lens for analysis. The similarities in life satisfaction between participants from the U.S. and China suggest that subjective experiences and cultural values were more influential than SES or academic pressures in this study. However, a more detailed examination of these confounding factors would strengthen future research.

Additionally, a deeper investigation into the platform-specific dynamics of social media, such as how algorithms and content curation impact psychological outcomes, could yield actionable insights for improving platform design.

Finally, as emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality increasingly shape social media experiences, future research could explore their psychological impacts. Investigating these changes will be critical to understanding and addressing the evolving role of social media in individuals' lives.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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