Sick of Social Media? Social Comparison, Fear of Negative Evaluation, and the Decline of Posting among Gen Z

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Dissertation written under the supervision of Professor

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I. ABSTRACT

Are we Sick of Social Media? This dissertation investigates whether exposure to idealized content on social media influences Generation Z users' intention to post and whether fear of negative evaluation mediates the relationship. Based on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and studies on social anxiety (Leary, 1983), three hypotheses were formulated: (1) exposure to idealized feeds would reduce the intention to post; (2) this effect would occur indirectly via fear of negative evaluation; and (3) differences in self-esteem and social comparison orientation would moderate the relationship.

A between-subjects experiment with 178 participants (randomly assigned to an idealized or neutral feed) was conducted. Measures included posting intention, Brief Scale of Fear of Negative Evaluation, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and INCOM scale. Reliability tests indicated high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.87$) and balanced groups. However, additional measures of perceived comparison and self-evaluation showed no significant differences between conditions, suggesting that the stimuli were not intense enough to elicit the expected effect.

Although the hypotheses were not confirmed, the results revealed striking trends: most reported passive use of social media; more than half considered abandoning them; Instagram was the most cited for disconnection. Dispositional traits proved to be predictors of fear of negative evaluation: greater orientation toward social comparison was associated with greater fear, and higher self-esteem was associated with less fear. These results may indicate widespread digital fatigue in Generation Z, highlight the dispositional roots of fear of negative evaluation, and underscore the methodological challenges in capturing subtle effects of social comparison.

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II. RESUMO

Estamos fartos das redes sociais? Esta dissertação investiga se a exposição a conteúdos idealizados em redes sociais influencia a intenção de postagem de usuários da Geração Z e se o medo de avaliação negativa medeia a relação. Baseada na Teoria da Comparação Social (Festinger, 1954) e em estudos sobre ansiedade social (Leary, 1983), formulou-se três hipóteses: (1) a exposição a feeds idealizados reduziria a intenção de postar; (2) esse efeito ocorreria indiretamente via o medo da avaliação negativa; e (3) diferenças de autoestima e orientação à comparação social moderariam a relação.

Experimento intergrupos com 178 participantes (alocados aleatoriamente a um feed idealizado ou neutro) foi conduzido. Medidas incluíram intenção de postagem, Escala Breve do Medo da Avaliação Negativa, Escala de Autoestima de Rosenberg e escala INCOM. Testes de confiabilidade indicaram alta consistência interna ($\alpha > 0,87$) e grupos equilibrados. Contudo, medidas adicionais de comparação percebida e autoavaliação não mostraram diferenças significativas entre as condições, sugerindo que os estímulos não foram suficientemente intensos para provocar o efeito esperado.

Embora as hipóteses não tenham sido confirmadas, os resultados revelaram tendências marcantes: a maioria relatou uso passivo das redes; mais da metade considerou abandoná-las; o Instagram foi o mais citado para desconexão. Traços disposicionais mostraram-se preditores do medo de avaliação negativa: maior orientação à comparação social associou-se a maior temor, e maior autoestima associou-se a menor temor. Esses resultados documentam a fadiga digital disseminada na Geração Z, evidenciam as raízes disposicionais do medo de avaliação negativa e ressaltam os desafios metodológicos ao captar efeitos sutis de comparação social.

Título: Cansado das redes sociais? Comparação social, medo de avaliação negativa e o declínio das publicações entre a Geração Z

Autora: Sara Penazzi

Palavras-chave: Palavras-chave: Redes sociais, comparação social, medo de avaliação negativa, intenção de publicar, fadiga digital, Geração Z, comportamento online

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and research motivation

Are we becoming sick of social media? Bombarded for years, every single day, with glossy images, perfect lives and content increasingly designed to attract more and more attention…lately, something has started to change: people have started to post less.

Indeed, in the last few years Generation Z's use of social media has undergone a significant shift: from active sharing… to a more passive and silent use, marked by a tendency to observe rather than expose oneself. Although socials are still central in day-to-day life, there are signs of a growing retreat from personal posting (Pew Research Center, 2022). According to Morning Consult (2023), over 60% of users report being more selective in what they post, often due to anxiety, loss of spontaneity, or the 'need to protect their public image'.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the constant exposure to idealized content, which can trigger upward social comparisons and feelings of inadequacy (Meier & Johnson, 2022). According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), these comparisons profoundly influence self-perception, especially in visual environments such as social media. In this context, fear of negative evaluation (FNE) can inhibit the willingness to expose oneself publicly, generating avoidance behavior (Leary, 1983; Shabahang et al., 2021).

Moreover, lately, it seems that people are posting less on Instagram than before. A report from Rival IQ (2025) notes that, for the first time in three years, the average frequency of posts has dropped and it's not just a nuance: many users are simply posting less. Influencers, as usual, are the exception and continue to raise the average, but the majority of people slowed down their posting activity.

Metricool (2023) adds that the decline mainly affects traditional posts: we are seeing fewer and fewer 'classic' photos and updates. On the other hand, Reels and short videos formats are growing, but not everyone is using them: smaller accounts, for example, remain more inactive.

Habits are changing among publishers: the tendency to post daily on social media is declining, and a growing number of companies are limiting their frequency to a few posts per week, with a greater focus on quality and variety of content (HubSpot, 2025; Enhance Digital Agency, 2024).

Brands are also showing a steady decline in posting frequency, particularly for single-image posts, while the use of alternative formats such as carousels and short videos is growing.

This strategy allows engagement to be maintained despite the slowdown in posting (Enhance Digital Agency, 2024; Hootsuite, 2025; SocialInsider, 2025).

With this thesis I aim to experimentally investigate whether exposure to idealized content influences the intention to post, and whether FNE mediates this effect. The study aims to understand some of the psychological dynamics that regulate the digital behavior of Gen Z, with implications for communication strategies.

1.2 Research problem and hypotheses

This research stems from a desire to understand whether the type of content we are exposed to can influence our desire to actively participate online and how it does so. In particular, it is hypothesized that viewing highly idealized content (such as personal successes, luxurious experiences, or perfect bodies) can generate an upward social comparison effect, eliciting feelings of inadequacy and reducing the motivation to post something of our own

This first hypothesis is based on Festinger's social comparison theory (1954), according to which the way we evaluate ourselves depends heavily on comparison with others, especially those we perceive as "better" than us. This mechanism uses also another concept that is fundamental to the study: fear of negative evaluation (Leary, 1983). Fear of negative evaluation is a form of social anxiety that is triggered when we fear the judgment of others and can lead us to avoid presenting ourselves altogether. Recent studies confirm that those who experience high levels of fear of negative evaluation tend to feel more vulnerable online and less willing to post personal content (Shabahang et al., 2021). In other words, social comparison may indirectly influence posting intent by activating fear of negative evaluation.

Alongside these mechanisms, it is also important to consider individual differences. We do not all interact with idealized content in the same way: people with low self-confidence or a strong social comparison orientation (SCO) may be more susceptible to this type of exposure and therefore more likely to feel discouraged from posting. Finally, the study also includes an exploratory dimension to see differences in those who prefer Instagram and those who prefer Tiktok. In the literature, it has been noted that Instagram is often perceived as a more curated and performative space, while TikTok appears more authentic, spontaneous, and subjective. Therefore, it is possible that the same exposure to idealized content could lead to different

effects depending on the platform on which it occurs. The aim of this research is to verify, through an experimental design, whether content type does indeed influence posting intention, whether this effect is mediated by FNE, and whether variables such as self-confidence, SCO, and perceived authenticity of the platform influence its intensity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Since its invention, social media has profoundly changed the way people communicate, express themselves and also construct their identities, mutating year after year and shaping our lives; this was particularly true among Generation Z, which consists of people born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019) and who have lived in an environment permeated by digital technologies since childhood. Generation Z is thus considered the first 'digital native' generation and is therefore a privileged vantage point for analyzing the dynamics of interaction and participation in online contexts (Turner, 2015).

Social media platforms have become vital, with some of them reaching billions of active users, just considering that in 2025 it is estimated that approximately 5.24 billion people use social media, equal of almost 65% of the world's population (DemandSage, 2024).

Despite this, recent studies indicate a change in the active participation behaviour of young adults. A survey by Morning Consult (2023) found that 61% of US users with a social media account say they have become more selective about posting personal content. This trend seems to be particularly pronounced within Gen Z users, who, compared to previous generations, seem to have much more difficulty in posting their private lives (Wall Street Journal, 2023; Pew Research Centre, 2022).

The reasons of this shift are not clear: some studies refer to 'digital burnout' (da Silva et al., 2023), i.e. a form of exhaustion associated with the constant flood of social content and notification; others emphasise a growing concern about the opinions of others (Shabahang et al., 2021), the perceived quality of one's own content, and the potentially negative impact that public exposure can have on self-esteem.

Another debating topic is the changing nature of the platforms themselves: while Instagram is often perceived as a performative space where filtered and idealised content prevails, TikTok is starting to be associated with greater spontaneity and authenticity (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

In this context, posting behaviour – i.e. the tendency to actively share personal content on social media – appears to be a sensitive indicator of these changes. The decline in this activity especially among young people, raises important questions from a psychological and sociological perspective: What cognitive and emotional factors influence the decision to post something or not? To what extent does exposure to idealised content change self-perception and the willingness to expose oneself publicly?

Although these questions are receiving increasing attention in the scientific literature today (Meier & Johnson, 2022; Kim, 2020), they have not yet been systematically answered at the experimental level and in the European context. In particular, there is a lack of studies that combine a controlled design with the simultaneous evaluation of mediating and moderating psychological constructs such as social comparison, fear of negative evaluation, and self-esteem. Furthermore, it remains to be clarified whether and how differences between platforms (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok) affect behaviour and perceptions of authenticity.

Against the backdrop of these observations, the present study aims to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon by using an experimental methodology to investigate the effects of exposure to idealised or neutral social content on the intention to post, with a particular focus on individual factors that may mediate or moderate this relationship.

2.2 Social Comparison Theory and the Comparison Trap

Social comparison theory was first proposed by Festinger (1954), suggesting that individuals tend to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others, especially when there is a lack of objective auto-evaluation criteria. According to this theory, social comparison represents a cognitive strategy that people utilize in order to reduce uncertainty regarding personal traits, opinions or abilities.

A central element of the theory is the direction of the comparison: There are two types of social comparisons discussed in the research literature: upward comparisons and downward comparisons. Upward social comparisons involve comparing oneself to someone else that is perceived as “better”. In a social media context, this can look like scrolling past a picture of an influencer and thinking “this person is so much more pretty/athletic/wealthy/fun/happy etc. than

I am". In contrast, downward social comparisons involve comparing oneself to someone else perceived as "lesser" or "worse". For example, this could look like reading a post about someone moving to a new house or apartment and thinking "my house is so much larger/more attractive/more expensive etc. than their house is". Although both upward and downward comparisons take place on social media, research indicates that when individuals make upward social comparisons (perceiving someone else is "better"), their mental health may be negatively affected (McCarthy and Morina, 2020), especially as these harmful comparisons take place while on social media (e.g., Wang et al., 2020).

These dynamics are indeed exacerbated in the digital era, where through their features such as profile photographs or personal feed, online profiles offer a perfect basis for social comparison processes. By looking at the profile photograph, the user gains an impression of a person's physical attractiveness, with social media becoming a fertile environment for constant social comparisons exposing people to a continuous flux of information and images, most of the times idealized and very selective ones (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011).

This can led to the so called 'Highlight Reel Effect' also known as the comparison trap, the tendency to only see the curated, best moments of other's lives on social media, creating the perception that those are the standards. This curated content, often carefully crafted to present an idealized version of reality, can negatively impact mental health through increased feelings of inadequacy, social anxiety, and depression. In particular, scientific literature emphasizes that this practice of social comparison, often unconscious, can act as a mechanism that mediates the relationship between compulsive social media use and depression: the more people use social media compulsively and the more they tend to compare themselves negatively with others, the greater the risk of depressive symptoms and low self-esteem. The "highlight reel" effect therefore contributes to generating social pressure and unrealistic expectations, making it easy to fall into the trap of constant comparison, which is harmful to one's psychological well-being (Weinstein, 2017).

2.3 Impact of social comparison on self-Perception and behaviour

Social comparison acts as a key contributor in the formation of one's self-perception and can thus exert deep effects on self-esteem and self-worth (liang, 2024).

Exposure to highly idealized images and narratives, typical of visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, has a significant influence on self-perception, particularly on body image, content produced, and the evaluation of one's abilities or performance. According to Qiu

(2024), prolonged and repeated exposure to content that shows high standards, unattainable bodies, or seemingly perfect lifestyles contributes to the formation of unrealistic expectations and constant negative self-evaluation.

This is especially relevant for adolescents and young adults pertaining to the Gen Z constantly immersed in a hypercompetitive and globalized environment (Liang, 2024).

The constant observation of models of success, popularity, and aesthetic perfection tends not only to distort perceptions of one's physical appearance but also affects confidence in one's digital content and online performance. This dissonance between personal reality and perceived standards accentuates feelings of dissatisfaction, can trigger a reduction in self-esteem, and encourage the phenomenon of digital withdrawal, a tendency to distance oneself from social media platforms to protect one's psychological well-being (Qui, 2024).

Prolonged exposure to idealized content on social media can profoundly influence the perception of the value of one's own online contributions, affecting the dynamics of active participation and motivation to share personal content. As highlighted by Meier and Schäfer (2018), when users are confronted with posts that are considered highly inspirational but also perceived as very distant or difficult to achieve in relation to their own reality, they may devalue the relevance or interest of their own content. This perception not only reduces the intention to publish but also promotes the onset of a sense of creative inferiority and increasing self-limitation in personal expression.

The literature emphasizes that while, in some cases, comparison can stimulate personal growth and creativity through inspiration and motivation, when the distance between oneself and others appears insurmountable, frustration and a tendency to withdraw from the sharing process prevails (Meier, Schäfer, 2018).

Also, when observing how men and women experience social comparison on social media, it seems possible to identify certain distinctive trends. For example, some research suggests that women seem more inclined to engage with content that conveys particularly high ideals of beauty, and that this type of exposure may encourage critical reflection on their own image or personal value (Fardouly et al., 2015). For men, on the other hand, scientific literature invites us to consider a sensitivity that shifts to other areas, such as performance, perceived success, or social recognition (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). In these cases, comparison with others seems to be less related to judgments about physical appearance and more to dynamics of status and achievement of goals (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

2.3 Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)

2.3.1 Definition and Mechanisms

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) is a deep-rooted concern about the risk of being judged negatively by others: it is not just anxiety about being judged, but a set of experiences that include anxious anticipation of possible criticism, heightened sensitivity to the opinions of others, and deep discomfort at the idea of not being accepted (Leary, 1983). This dimension plays a crucial role in psychological models of social anxiety, being central to the processes that promote both the onset and maintenance of the relational difficulties characteristic of Social Anxiety Disorder (Heimberg et al., 2014).

From the point of view of mental processes, people who exhibit high levels of FNE often seem inclined to interpret ambiguous social cues in a negative light, attributing critical intentions even where there may be none. This way of perceiving interactions amplifies the feeling of being observed and judged, with the result that social participation is experienced as a minefield (Winton et al., 1995) . Thus, the tendency to avoid potentially evaluative situations becomes a reassuring strategy in the short term, but in the long term it can reinforce both isolation and feelings of insecurity (Winton et al., 1995). Often, those who frequently experience this fear find themselves carefully monitoring every aspect of their expressiveness and communication, almost in an attempt to never expose themselves to mistakes or misunderstandings that could attract unfavorable judgments: this leads to increased emotional fatigue and a constant sense of tension (Stopa & Clark, 2001).

An interesting aspect that has emerged more recently concerns the distinction between fear of negative evaluation (FNE) and fear of positive evaluation (FPE). Although both involve paying particular attention to the judgment of others, FNE is more closely linked to avoidance and social withdrawal, while FPE refers to apprehension about positive attention and the possible increasing expectations that come with it (Weeks et al., 2012). However, the clinical relevance of FNE remains predominant when observing the mechanisms of social anxiety from a psychological perspective.

In terms of consequences, high levels of FNE are frequently associated with low self-esteem, a marked sensitivity to the possibility of rejection, and widespread anxiety symptoms. All of this can lead to experiences of social isolation and, in some cases, greater vulnerability to depression or mood disorders (Carleton et al., 2011; Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Understanding FNE therefore means shedding light on one of the psychological pillars that

regulate the relationship between the individual and their social environment, with profound implications for personal well-being and the relational trajectories of everyday life.

2.3.2 FNE in social media contexts

In recent literature, fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is increasingly explored as a key element in understanding self-presentation behaviors on social media, particularly among young adults and college students. There is growing interest in investigating how FNE manifests itself and translates into digital social anxiety, with several studies suggesting an association between high levels of FNE and a marked reduction in the frequency of personal content posting. At the same time, these individuals seem to pay particular attention to the quality and care of their posts, sometimes at the expense of spontaneity (Shabahang, Aruguete & Shim, 2021).

Other lines of research investigate the relationship between FNE and perceived inferiority. Here, it emerges that low levels of self-esteem and a propensity to internalize social standards and aesthetic ideals increase vulnerability to the negative effects of FNE, with repercussions on both appearance-related anxiety and the tendency to adopt strategies to avoid online exposure (Li et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). These findings are echoed in studies linking FNE to increasing difficulty in expressing one's authenticity on social media: the pressure of social comparison and exposure to highly curated content contributes to rumination, anxiety, and progressive disengagement from digital contexts (Naidu et al., 2023; Frontiers, 2021).

A particularly discussed aspect concerns the role of FNE as a mediator between problematic social media use and psychological well-being. The literature suggests that FNE may be a transitional element between exposure to digital social comparison dynamics and the development of anxiety and depressive symptoms, especially in adolescence. In this context, some research highlights how FNE is often correlated with higher levels of social media addiction or phenomena of ‘social withdrawal’, manifested both as a reduction in active participation and as a progressive loss of emotional involvement in online interactions (Topino et al., 2023; Dam et al., 2023; Frontiers, 2025).

The issue of gender differences is another topic that is being actively explored by scientists. While some studies suggest greater caution and attention in managing self-presentation among women, surveys of large samples do not always find significant differences

between the genders in either FNE levels or the psychological effects produced by this construct (Shabahang et al., 2021; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Sunil et al., 2025). In this light, there is growing interest in investigating individual and situational factors that may influence the relationship between FNE and digital well-being, beyond traditional sociodemographic variables.

Overall, the available body of research suggests that FNE is a particularly fruitful interpretative lens for analyzing self-presentation practices, risks of exclusion, and paths of withdrawal from social media among younger generations. The continued exploration of this construct, using different methodologies and on heterogeneous populations, offers useful insights not only for understanding the underlying psychosocial processes, but also for defining preventive strategies and interventions aimed at supporting psychological well-being in an increasingly digital age.

2.4 Self-esteem and Social Comparison Orientation (SCO)

Self-esteem, defined as the subjective evaluation that a person has of themselves (Rosenberg, 1965), is a central construct in the study of individuals' reactions to the digital environment. Low self-esteem has been associated with greater vulnerability to social influences and an increasing propensity to compare oneself with others, factors that amplify the impact of external stimuli on individual perceptions and well-being (Orth & Robins, 2014).

Constant exposure to idealized content, typical of social platforms such as Instagram, is particularly problematic for users with fragile self-esteem. Several studies indicate that viewing perfect, curated, and often sugarcoated images and narratives promotes an implicit comparison between the real self and the idealized self-represented online, generating direct negative effects on personal self-evaluation. These comparisons are reflected in a worsened perception of one's body, personal success, and social life in general (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015).

A further element of complexity is offered by the concept of Social Comparison Orientation (SCO), i.e., the dispositional trait that describes the frequency and propensity with which an individual compares themselves to others (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). People with high SCO are more sensitive to social media exposure and more influenced by idealized content, as

their natural orientation toward comparison accentuates the perceived relevance of such stimuli to their self-image (Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018).

In individuals characterized by low self-esteem or a marked propensity for social comparison (Social Comparison Orientation, SCO), exposure to content perceived as superior to one's own can trigger specific anxiety linked to FNE. This reaction is not limited to momentary discomfort: on the contrary, this internal dynamic can turn into persistent insecurities, social anxiety, and a progressive reluctance to expose oneself, sometimes to the point of avoiding the publication of personal content altogether (Reichenberger et al., 2019).

The most recent surveys, conducted using conditional mediation models, suggest that the effect of social comparison on psychological well-being is not homogeneous: individual variables such as self-esteem and SCO play a crucial role, modulating the presence and intensity of FNE. This outlines a scenario in which FNE acts as a dynamic filter, accentuating the vulnerability of some individuals to the impact of idealized content and comparison dynamics (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020).

2.5 Alternative patterns: compensatory posting?

A topic that has attracted growing attention among researchers in recent years concerns the fact that not everyone, when exposed to frustrating social comparisons or idealized content, withdraws or tries to avoid the situation. On the contrary, some people react in the opposite way: they try to counterbalance their feelings of inadequacy by devoting even more time and energy to what they post on social media. This trend has been termed ‘compensatory posting’: some people, feeling threatened in their self-esteem by certain online content or dynamics, respond by increasing the quantity or care of their posts as a strategy to regain a sense of personal worth (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

This perspective can be viewed through the lens of self-enhancement theory, which posits that every individual has a fundamental need to preserve a positive view of themselves. For this reason, posting content on social media often becomes a way of seeking approval and recognition, especially when we perceive a gap between who we are and the (often unrealistic) standards conveyed by digital platforms (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

The most recent research on adolescents and young people suggests that the hunt for ‘likes’ and signs of approval online often represents a real strategy for coping with insecurities

and feeling more adequate. However, it is not all that straightforward: on the one hand, posting more and more carefully can temporarily boost self-esteem; on the other hand, it can also lead to an addiction to external validation and increase anxiety and dissatisfaction over time (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Chou, 2020). These mechanisms risk turning into a vicious circle, where the need for approval grows ever greater.

At present, it remains unclear whether these patterns are merely temporary reactions or whether they can become entrenched over time, and how they may potentially affect psychological well-being in the long term.

2.6 Summary and research gap

The theoretical framework suggests that in recent years, users, particularly young people of Generation Z, have progressively reduced their active participation in social networks: a US survey reports that over 60% of users said they had become more selective in sharing content and that 37% of young adults had reduced the number of posts compared to the previous year (Morning Consult, 2023). Despite the notoriety of this phenomenon, literature appears fragmented in providing unified explanations. On the one hand, research on social comparison dynamics highlights the effect of the so-called 'highlight reel', i.e. the tendency to compare oneself with idealised content that induces feelings of inadequacy and fuels self-criticism (Weinstein, 2017). On the other hand, recent studies show that the fear of being evaluated, both positively and negatively, reduces the amount of self-disclosure online: in a sample of 750 WeChat users, it was observed that the fear of evaluation has a negative effect on the frequency with which information is shared and a positive effect on the depth of the content shared, and that this relationship is mediated by the concern of 'losing face' (Zeng & Zhu, 2021). The same authors point out that the visibility and persistence of content on social media increase the perception of risk and encourages withdrawal from self-disclosure. However, the attention paid to fear of evaluation has so far been limited mainly to Asian contexts and correlational studies; there is a lack of experimental evidence on the possible mediating role of FNE in the link between social comparison and posting intention, especially in Europe.

At the same time, the literature on social media fatigue describes how information overload and social pressure can generate anxiety and fatigue, prompting many users to become passive observers or lurkers (Liu et al., 2024). However, the authors note that much of the research analyzes the phenomenon from a single perspective, neglecting the integration of

intrinsic factors (e.g., self-esteem, comparison orientation) and extrinsic factors (privacy, platform authenticity). In summary, although there is a growing body of research linking social comparison, FNE, and reduced participation, significant gaps remain: (1) few studies combine these constructs into a single analytical framework; (2) there is a lack of experimental focus on Generation Z in Western contexts; (3) it is unclear whether and how individual differences (self-esteem, social comparison orientation) modulate the effect of social comparison on the willingness to share. Filling these gaps will allow for a better understanding of the psychological motivations behind progressive digital silence and guide interventions aimed at online well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter offers a detailed account of the methodological framework adopted for the present study, outlining the data collection and analysis strategies employed to test the hypotheses.

3.1 Research Approach

The primary objective of this dissertation is to experimentally investigate whether and how exposure to highly idealized social media content affects the intention to post among members of Generation Z, and whether Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) operates as the psychological mechanism mediating this effect. To pursue this aim, a deductive approach has been adopted: starting from established theories such as Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954) and studies on the fear of negative evaluation (Leary, 1983), three research questions (RQ) were developed, each accompanied by specific hypotheses (H) that the experimental design seeks to test.

The first research question (RQ1) explores whether exposure to a feed composed of idealized content—such as depictions of luxury lifestyles, perfect bodies, and professional achievements—reduces individuals' willingness to share personal content on social media. The related hypothesis (H1) suggests that exposure to such content may elicit a sense of inferiority, leading users to view their own material as unworthy of being posted.

The second research question (RQ2) centers on Fear of Negative Evaluation. It examines whether this form of social anxiety mediates the relationship between upward social comparison and posting intention. In this case, the hypothesis (H2) proposes that exposure to

unattainable standards increases individuals' fear of being judged, which in turn reduces their willingness to engage in self-presentation online.

The third research question (RQ3) delves into the role of individual differences, asking to what extent self-esteem and social comparison orientation modulate the mediation effect through FNE. It is hypothesized (H3) that individuals with high self-esteem may be less affected by the inhibitory effect of upward comparison, whereas those with lower self-esteem or a heightened tendency to compare themselves with others may be more vulnerable to perceived judgment.

To answer these questions, a between-subjects experimental design was implemented, randomly assigning participants to one of two experimental conditions (idealized vs. neutral content). This design — methodologically aligned with the quantitative approach of the comparison thesis yet adapted to a different context — allows for the isolation of the causal impact of content type, minimizing the influence of pre-existing individual differences.

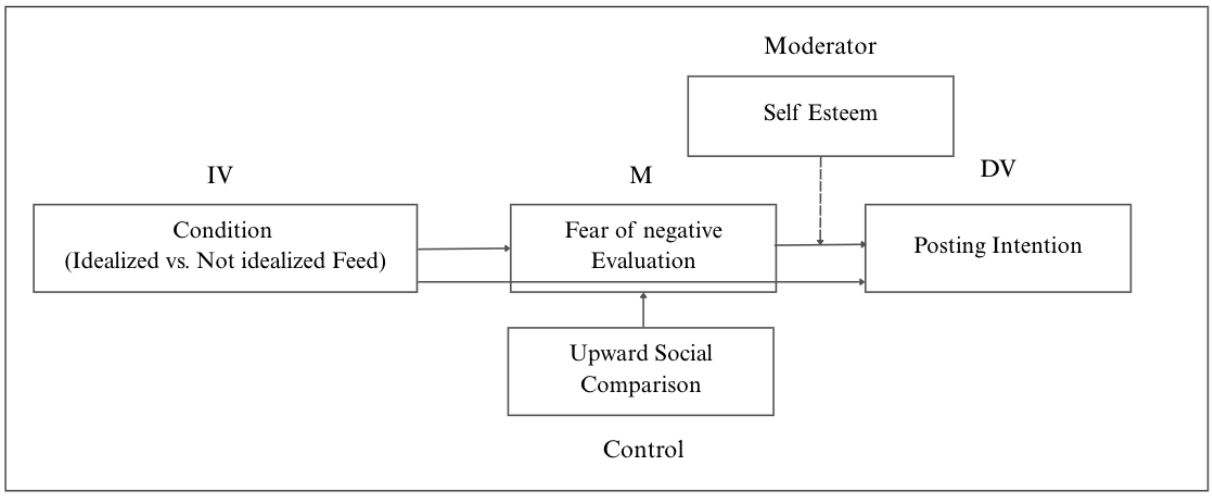


Figure 1. Conceptual research model. The model illustrates the hypothesized relationships between experimental condition (idealized vs. non-idealized feed) and posting intention, mediated by fear of negative evaluation. Self-esteem is modeled as a moderator of the link between fear of negative evaluation and posting intention, while social comparison orientation is included as a control variable, together with other demographic controls such as age and sex.

3.1.1 Inclusion Criteria & recruitment Procedure

Data collection was carried out entirely online using a Qualtrics questionnaire designed and distributed via social media which allowed the experimental stimuli to be presented in a controlled manner and the participants' responses to be recorded accurately.

To ensure that the sample accurately reflected the target population, specific inclusion criteria were established. Participants were required to be between 18 and 27 years old, consistent with the age range commonly used in the literature to define Generation Z.

Participants were primarily recruited through digital channels, leveraging the widespread use of social media among young adults. Recruitment announcements and invitations were disseminated via university group chats on platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Snapchat, and Facebook, frequented by students across various faculties. These channels proved effective in reaching individuals who met the specified age and platform-use criteria in a rapid and targeted manner.

The invitation messages briefly outlined the purpose of the study and the participation process, clearly stating the estimated duration of the questionnaire and ensuring the anonymity of the collected data. This strategy facilitated the recruitment of a sufficiently large sample.

3.2 Operationalization of Variables

During the operationalization phase, each construct emerging from the research questions is translated into a precise empirical indicator, allowing for systematic measurement and analysis. This section aims to describe in detail how independent, dependent, mediating, and control variables were defined and assessed.

To begin, the independent variable concerns the nature of the content to which participants were exposed during the experiment. Exposure consisted of two distinct conditions: one involving a curated feed composed of images and video clips depicting aspirational scenarios and personal achievements, accompanied by captions highlighting success, luxury, or outstanding performance; and the other featuring a feed composed of everyday scenes, like cute views and animals, devoid of references to status or extraordinary accomplishments. This contrast was intentionally designed to evoke, respectively, upward social comparison and a neutral perception of others' lives. For analytical purposes, the variable was binary coded (0 = notidealized; 1 = idealized), in alignment with the randomization procedures adopted.

The study includes multiple dependent variables, as the goal was to capture several facets of participants' reactions. The primary outcome is the intention to post, calculated as the average on a 7-point Likert scale, aimed at gauging the willingness to share content following exposure. In parallel, the study measured participants' perceived value of their own posts—also using a Likert-scale item—which evaluates how interesting or meaningful individuals consider their content to be, especially in response to potential comparisons with the viewed material. A further measure, referred to as the emotional response to comparison, asked participants to self-assess whether the posts they saw made them feel better or worse in comparison to the individuals depicted. These additional dependent variables make it possible to capture not only behavioral intention but also the subjective experience that may underpin it.

As for the mediating variable, the focus is placed on Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). This construct, rooted in Leary's theoretical model, was assessed using the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, adapted for the digital context. The scale includes twelve items yielding a composite score that reflects an individual's sensitivity to others' judgment. The mediating role of FNE will be analyzed to assess whether this fear serves as the mechanism through which upward comparison leads to reduced posting intention.

The model is completed by a set of control variables. Two psychological constructs serve as covariates: self-esteem, measured through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Social Comparison Orientation (SCO), assessed via the INCOM scale. These factors will also be explored as potential moderators of the mediation effect, particularly within the scope of the third research question. Additionally, the study includes demographic variables (gender, age, nationality, level of education) and behavioral variables related to social media use: daily time spent on platforms, preferred social network, and engagement style (passive scrolling, occasional posting, active interaction). Collecting this data will help verify the homogeneity of the experimental groups and control for potential sources of variance not accounted for by the theoretical model.

To provide a structured overview, the table below summarizes the key variables and the measurement methods employed.

3.2.1 Operationalization of Variables

Variable	Operational Definition	Scale / Measurement

Content Type (IV)	Exposure to a feed featuring idealized vs. neutral posts	Binary coding (1 = neutral; 2 = idealized)
Posting Intention (DV)	Willingness to share content following exposure	7-point Likert scale
Fear of Negative Evaluation (Mediator)	Fear of receiving negative judgments online	BFNE Scale (12 items, Likert scale from 1 to 5)
Self-Esteem (Covariate / Moderator)	Global self-assessment of personal worth	Rosenberg SES (10 items, Likert scale from 1 to 7,)
Social Comparison Orientation (Covariate / Moderator)	Habitual tendency to compare oneself to others	INCOM Scale (11 items, 7-point Likert scale)
Demographic Variables	Gender, age, nationality, education level	Closed-ended questions with predefined categories
Social Media Use Variables	Daily hours spent on social platforms, preferred platform	Closed-ended questions with predefined categories

To accurately interpret the findings, it is important to clarify how the scales in this study were applied. Each questionnaire was designed to capture a particular psychological trait, using several questions whose responses are averaged to obtain a score. The level of the score reveals the degree to which a person demonstrates the trait being measured.

(1) The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) evaluates how people generally perceive themselves. A higher result points to strong and positive self-esteem, whereas a lower result may suggest uncertainty or self-doubt. Note that some questions are worded negatively, so their scores need to be reversed before analyzing the data.

(2) The *Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure* (INCOM; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) investigates the tendency to compare oneself with others. People who score higher are more likely to regularly evaluate their own abilities and opinions in relation to those of others. Those with lower scores are less concerned with such social comparisons.

(3) With the *Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale* (BFNE; Leary, 1983; Carleton et al., 2011), the focus is on how anxious people feel about being judged by others. High scores indicate greater sensitivity to others' opinions and a tendency to avoid situations where they might be evaluated. Lower scores suggest more comfort with being visible to others.

(4) The *Intention to Post* scale, developed specifically for this study, asks about willingness to share personal content after viewing the experimental material. Here, a higher score signals strong motivation to post, whereas a lower score reflects hesitancy.

As is common in psychological research, the reliability of these measures was checked using Cronbach's alpha. If the value is 0.70 or above (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), that means the questions in the scale work well together and the average scores are suitable for statistical analysis.

3.2.2 Measurement Scales Used in the Study

Scale	**Items (examples/description)**	**Range of response**	**Interpretation of high vs. low scores**
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1965)	10 items (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities", "I take a positive attitude toward myself"; reverse-coded: items 3, 5, 8, 9, 10).	1–7 Likert	High = strong, positive self-esteem; Low = fragile or negative self-evaluation.
INCOM – Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999)	11 items covering both ability comparisons (e.g., "I often compare myself with others in terms of what I have accomplished in life") and opinion comparisons (e.g., "I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do").	1–7 Likert	High = strong dispositional tendency to compare oneself with others; Low = weak or absent tendency to compare.
BFNE – Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (Leary, 1983; Carleton et al., 2011)	12 items (e.g., "I worry about what others think of me", "I am afraid that others will not approve of me").	1–5 Likert	High = elevated fear of being judged negatively, social anxiety; Low = comfort with evaluation, low anxiety.
Posting Intention (ad hoc)	3 items (e.g., "After viewing this content, I would feel motivated to post something myself",	1–7 Likert	High = strong willingness to post after exposure; Low = reluctance or

			inhibition toward posting.

3.3. Experimental Conditions and Stimuli

To truly understand how social media influences people's thinking and behavior, participants were randomly divided into two groups: one saw idealized content, while the other browsed more neutral posts. The idea was to recreate the different digital environments we encounter every day and see if—and how—the type of content changes the desire to share something online

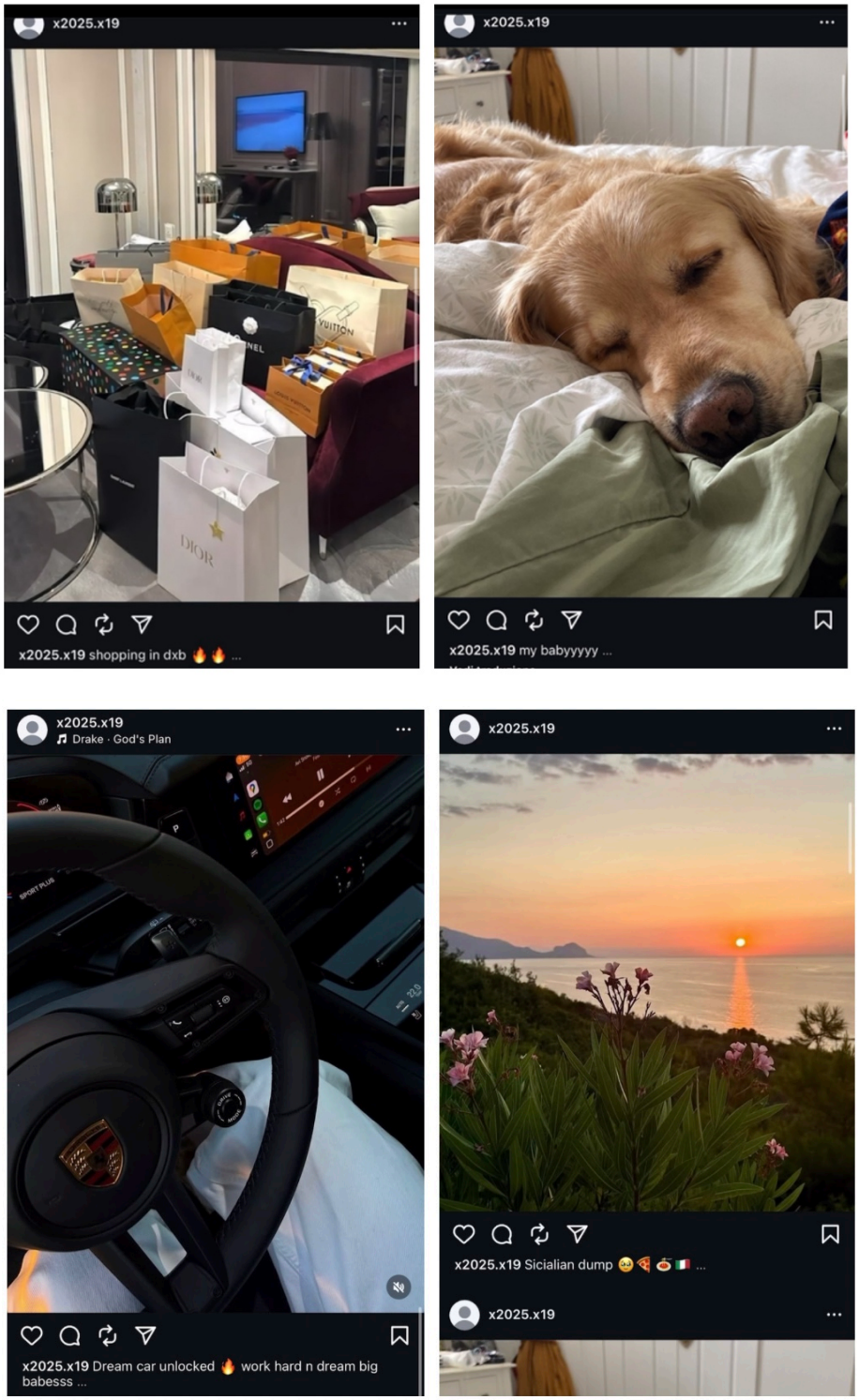
So, one group was shown an idealized feed: it is a video scrolling on ig and showing photos of influencers in Monaco and Maldives, rich people, luxury Shopping, and personal achievements. Even the captions were designed to induce upward social comparison. In contrast, a second group was shown a completely neutral feed: photos of animals, friends gathering, and natural landscapes. In short, nothing that would induce the idea of sensational above-average lives: just a comfortable normality. The idea was to have a baseline to check the differences with those who were exposed to more glossy content.

Immediately after viewing the feeds, three questions were asked:

(1) How likely are you to post on social media now? – to measure posting intention, the dependent variable of the study.

(2) To what extent did the content made you compare yourself to others? – process measure after exposure assessing perceived comparison.

(3) After viewing the posts, , to what extent did you feel better or worse about yourself compared to the people shown? – a process measure after exposure assessing self-evaluation.



Figures 2&3. Comparison between the Idealized and Not idealized Feed. The images illustrate an example of the different content exposed to the two groups. On the left, the idealized feed presents luxury shopping bags from high-end brands such as Dior, Chanel and a Luxurious car, symbolizing wealth, exclusivity, and aspirational lifestyles. On the right, the not idealized feed shows a casual and authentic everyday moment, with a dog peacefully sleeping on a bed and a landscape, representing simplicity. This contrast highlights the manipulation between exposure to idealized versus neutral content in the experimental design.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Dataset preparation

Before proceeding with the analyses, the dataset was carefully cleaned. First, all irrelevant or empty responses were removed. A filter was applied to the questionnaire to exclude participants above the age of 27, in line with the inclusion criteria of the study.
Missing values were handled systematically: when responses were completely absent, the cases were deleted.
The final number of valid cases is thus 178.
To guarantee comparability, the Likert scales were recoded and harmonized so that higher scores consistently reflected higher levels of the construct being measured. In particular, reverse-coded items within the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the INCOM Social Comparison Orientation Scale were recoded to align them with the direction of the remaining items. The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE) scale did not require recoding, as all items were phrased in the same evaluative direction.

4.2 Demographics

In this section, I will provide detailed information about the respondents' background, including their age, gender, education, country of residence, and patterns of social media use. Gathering these demographics is essential as it not only contextualizes the study but also ensures that the analysis accounts for variations in social and personal attributes that may influence online behavior. By examining demographic trends, the study lays the groundwork for interpreting subsequent findings and highlights the representativeness of the sample.

First of all, most respondents (56.74%) were aged 24–27, while 43.26% were aged 19–23. I divided into two age groups to ensure representation across late adolescence and early adulthood, both crucial developmental stages where social media plays an influential role in identity exploration and peer connection.
Continuing, most respondents were female (64.61%), followed by males (34.27%), with 1.12% choosing not to disclose. The gender imbalance highlights a stronger female representation.

Respondents came from multiple countries, creating cultural diversity in the dataset. This enhances generalizability, since cultural contexts strongly shape online behavior and attitudes

toward self-presentation. There is acute geographical concentration. Italian respondents predominate, constituting 63.48% of the sample, while Portuguese and German participants form the next largest groups at 14.04% and 8.43%, respectively. Contributions from Spain (5.06%) and France (3.37%) are minor, and respondents from the remaining European nations—Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Romania, and Sweden—aggregate to less than 1% each. The data thus reveal a marked bias toward Italy and the adjacent Mediterranean area.

Nearly half of respondents held undergraduate degrees (45.51%), followed by graduate degree holders (33.15%) and those with high school diplomas or less (21.35%). The education profile reflects a predominantly educated group, which may influence digital literacy and critical engagement with online spaces.

A large proportion of respondents (41.01%) reported spending 4–5 hours daily on social media, followed by 29.21% at 2–3 hours. Smaller groups reported either less than 1 hour (2.25%) or more than 6 hours (5.62%). These findings highlight the centrality of social media in daily life, with most participants falling into moderate-to-heavy usage categories.
Instagram was the dominant used platform (61.24%), followed by TikTok (26.97%) and other platforms (11.80%).

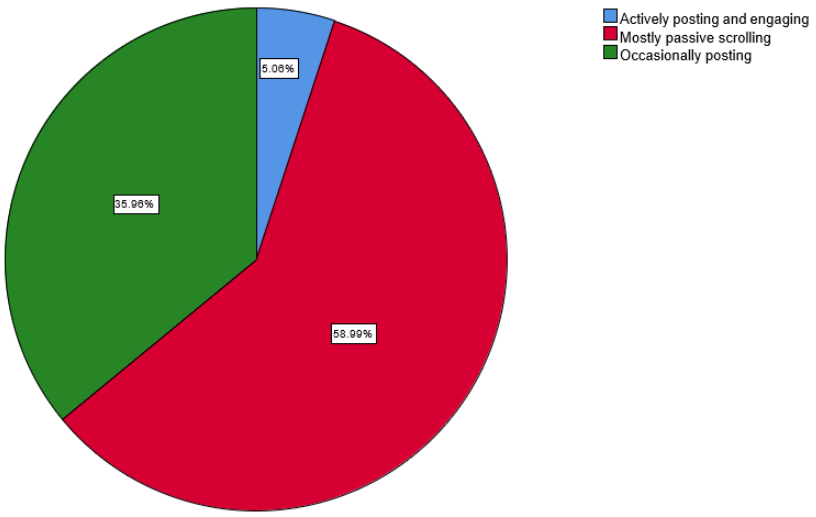


Figure 4. How would you describe your typical social media behavior?

An important finding is given by *Figure 4*, which tells that 58.99% of respondents most do passive scrolling on social media platforms while 35.89% occasionally post on social media platforms while only 5.06% are active users in regard to posting activity contents and engaging with other

users on social media. This is in line with the literature previously discussed.

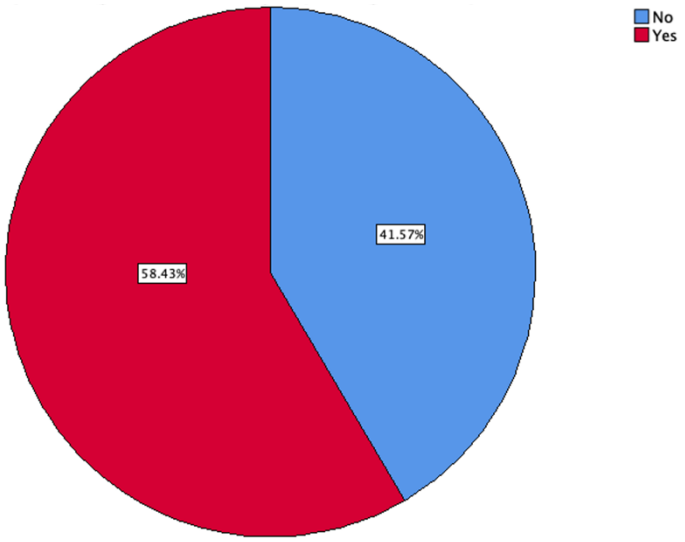


Figure 5. Have you thought about pausing or deleting some of your social media accounts recently?

At the question: 'have you thought about pausing or deleting some of your social media accounts recently', a majority of 58,43% (104) said yes, probably confirming the previously discussed 'social media fatigue' trend (*Figure 5)*. Finally, another important finding is that among those who stated they wished to pause or delete any of their accounts, 77 people said Instagram, marking an outstanding 74%, followed by Tiktok (15%) and 'other' with just 11%.

4.3 Findings of Exploratory Analyses and Hypothesis Testing

Before testing the hypotheses, I conducted several preliminary analyses to ensure the dataset was of high quality and that the two experimental groups were comparable. I first examined descriptive statistics for key demographic variables (age, gender, nationality, and education) as well as participants' social media use patterns. I then ran chi-square tests to verify that participants in the idealized and neutral feed conditions did not significantly differ in their demographic characteristics or in their baseline levels of self-esteem and social comparison orientation. We also assessed the internal consistency of the primary multi-item scales — the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, and the INCOM Social Comparison Orientation Scale — by calculating Cronbach's alpha for each. All of these measures showed excellent reliability. Finally, I set out some after exposure questions to to

explore whether the experimental stimuli (idealized vs. neutral social media feeds) produced the intended effects on participants' self–other comparisons and self-evaluations.

For clarity of presentation, the full set of descriptive tables, cross-tabulation results, chi-square test outputs, and reliability coefficients from these preliminary analyses are provided in the Appendix. The main analysis section below focuses on the inferential tests conducted to address the research questions and hypotheses

Table 4.3.1 Group Statistics

	Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Comparison	Idealized	89	3.2135	1.72858	.18323
	NotIdealized	89	3.2022	1.55344	.16466

From *Table 4.3.6* descriptive statistics show that participants in the Idealized condition (M = 3.21, SD = 1.73) and those in the Not-Idealized condition (M = 3.20, SD = 1.55) had almost identical mean scores on the combined *Comparison* variable.

Table 4.3.2 Reliability Scale for RSES, BFNE and SCO INCOM

Items	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
RSES	.904	10
BFNE	.948	12
SCO INCOM	.870	10

The internal consistency of the multi-item scales used in the study was assessed using Cronbach's alpha as reported in *Table 4.3.3*. The Rosenberg self-esteem (RSES) scale (10 items) demonstrated excellent reliability, α = .904. The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE) scale, consisting of twelve items, also showed excellent reliability, α = .948. The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (SCO INCOM) scale, with ten items, demonstrated good reliability, α = .870. The high reliability coefficients for all three scales indicate strong internal consistency, confirming their suitability for use in subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 4.3.3 Relationship between Self-Esteem Category and Condition

		Condition		Total
		Idealized	**NotIdealized**	
Self-Esteem Category	Low (< 15)	11	9	20
	Moderate (15-25)	41	49	90
	High (> 25)	37	31	68
Total		89	89	178

The distribution of self-esteem categories across the two conditions presented in *Table 4.3.1* and indicates that participants were fairly balanced between the idealized and not-idealized groups. Specifically, in the low self-esteem category, 11 participants fell into idealized condition compared to 9 in the not-idealized group. For the moderate category, 41 participants were in the idealized condition and 49 in the not-idealized group. In the high self-esteem category, 37 participants were in the idealized group compared to 31 in the not-idealized group. These results suggest that self-esteem levels were relatively evenly distributed across both conditions, with no strong indication of bias or imbalance in participant allocation.

Table 4.3.4 Chi-Square test results

	Value	**df**	**Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)**
Pearson Chi-Square	1.441[a]	2	.487
Likelihood Ratio	1.442	2	.486
N of Valid Cases	178		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.00.

A Pearson test is conducted to examine the relationship between self-esteem categories and condition assignment. Table *4.3.2* indicates that there is no statistically significant association between self-esteem categories and condition assignment (χ^2 (2,178) = 1.441, p = .487). This suggests that the distribution of participants across the idealized and not-idealized conditions does not significantly differ by self-esteem level, implying that condition assignment was independent of self-esteem.

Table 4.3.5 Report

Self-Esteem Category	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Low (< 15)	1.45	20	.510
Moderate (15-25)	1.54	90	.501
High (> 25)	1.46	68	.502
Total	1.50	178	.501

Descriptive statistics for each self-esteem scale category are presented in *Table 4.3.4.* Moderate (15-25) self-esteem has highest mean score (M = 1.54, SD = .501), followed by High (> 25) self-esteem (M = 1.46, SD = .502) and Low (< 15) self-esteem (M = 1.45, SD = .510).

Table 4.3.6 ANOVA Test Results

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Condition * Self-Esteem Scale Category	Between Groups	.360	2	.180	.714	.491	.008
	Within Groups	44.140	175	.252			
	Total	44.500	177				

The ANOVA results examining the association between condition (idealized vs. not idealized) and self-esteem categories (low, moderate, high) indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in self-esteem across the two conditions, $F(2,175) = 0.714$, $p = .491$. The effect size was very small ($\eta^2 = .008$), showing that only about 0.8% of the variance in self-esteem could be explained by the condition (*Table 4.3.5*). This suggests that participants' self-esteem levels were not systematically related to whether they were exposed to the idealized or not-idealized condition. Thus, the experimental manipulation did not differentially distribute participants by baseline self-esteem levels.

Table 4.3.7 Group Statistics

	Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Feeling Comparison	Idealized	89	3.5843	1.37187	.14542
	NotIdealized	89	3.7865	1.14288	.12115

Table 4.3.7 shows that participants in the Idealized condition reported a mean score (M = 3.58, SD = 1.37), while those in the Not-Idealized condition reported a slightly higher mean (M = 3.79, SD = 1.14).

Table 4.3.8 Exploratory process measure: perceived comparison using t-test for "To what extent did the content make you compare yourself to others?" (Idealized Case vs Not Idealized Case)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Comparison	Equal variances assumed	1.176	.280	.046	176	.964	.0112	.2463	-.4749	.4974
	Equal variances not assumed			.046	174.029	.964	.0112	.2463	-.4749	.4974

Table 4.3.8 indicates the independent samples t-test confirmed that this difference was not statistically significant, $t(176) = 0.046$, $p = .964$, with a negligible mean difference of 0.01. The 95% confidence interval of the difference [–0.47, 0.50] included zero, supporting the absence of any meaningful difference between the groups. Levene's test indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met ($F = 1.176$, $p = .280$).

This finding suggests that there is no overall difference in comparison tendencies between the idealized and not-idealized conditions.

Table 4.3.1 Exploratory process measure: self-evaluation using t-test for "After viewing the posts, to what extent did you feel better or worse about yourself compared to the people shown?" (Idealized Case vs Not Idealized Case)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Feeling Comparison	Equal variances assumed	4.528	.035	-1.06	176	.287	-.2022	.1892	-.5757	.17128
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.06	170.44	.287	-.2022	.1892	-.5758	.17136

The independent sample t-test is used. Although the Not-Idealized group's mean was marginally higher, the difference between groups was not statistically significant, $t(176) = -1.07$, $p = .287$. The mean difference (–0.20) was small, and the 95% confidence interval [–0.58, 0.17] included zero, further supporting the absence of a reliable effect (*Table 4.3.9)*.

Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($F = 4.53$, $p = .035$), but results under the "equal variances not assumed" condition yielded the same non-significant outcome ($t(170.44) = -1.07$, $p = .287$).

From the scope of analysis, this means that exposure to idealized versus not-idealized content did not significantly affect how participants felt in comparison to others. While there was a slight numerical trend toward higher self-other evaluations in the not-idealized group, the effect was not large enough to be considered meaningful in statistical terms

Table 4.3.2 Group Statistics

Preferred Social Media Platform	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean

Posting_Intention	Instagram	109	3.2569	1.73421	.16611
	TikTok	48	3.6458	1.68207	.24279

From *Table 4.3.10* descriptive statistics show that mean posting intention score for the TikTok was higher ($M = 3.64,\ SD = 1.68$), whereas for Instagram was slightly lower ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.73$). Although the posting intention has higher average for those who prefer TikTok platform rather than Instagram.

Table 4.3.3 Independent Samples Test to see posting intention between Who prefers Instagram and who prefers TikTok

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		**t-test for Equality of Means**						
		F	**Sig.**	**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**Std. Error Difference**	**95% Confidence Interval of the Difference**	
									Lower	**Upper**
Posting_Intention	Equal variances assumed	.106	.745	-1.307	155	.193	-.3889	.2977	-.9770	.19912
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.322	92.480	.189	-.3889	.2941	-.9731	.19525

Before interpreting the t-test results, the assumption of equal variances was checked using Levene's Test, which yielded ($F = .106, p = .745$). Since the significance value is greater than .05, the assumption of homogeneity of variance is satisfied, and therefore the "equal variances assumed" row of the t-test is used. The t-test result showed, $t(155) = -1.307, p = .193$, indicating that there was not statistically significant difference in posting intention between people who prefer Instagram and users who prefer TikTok (*Table 4.3.11*).

4.3.1 RQ1 (H1): Independent samples t-test comparing posting intention across conditions.

Table 4.3.4 Group Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posting_Intention	Idealized	89	3.0787	1.74659	.18514
	NotIdealized	89	3.3483	1.75228	.18574

To test H1, the independent samples t-test was conducted to assess whether there is a significant difference in posting intention between participants in the idealized and not-idealized conditions. From *Table 4.3.12* descriptive statistics show that the mean posting intention score for the idealized group was ($M = 3.08,\ SD = 1.75$), whereas for the not-idealized group was slightly higher ($M = 3.35, SD = 1.75$). Although the not-idealized condition demonstrated a marginally higher average, the overlap in variability indicates that the difference may not be meaningful.

Table 4.3.5 Independent t-test to assess significance difference in posting intention.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posting_Intention	Equal variances assumed	.035	.852	-1.02	176	.305	-.2696	.2622	-.7872	.2479

	Equal variances not assumed			-1.02	175.99	.305	-.2696	.2622	-.7872	.2479

Before interpreting the t-test results, the assumption of equal variances was checked using Levene's Test, which yielded ($F = .035, p = .852$). Since the significance value is greater than .05, the assumption of homogeneity of variance is satisfied, and therefore the "equal variances assumed" row of the t-test is used. The t-test result showed, $t(176) = -1.02, p = .305$, indicating that the difference between the two-group means was not statistically significant (*Table 4.3.13*).

The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference further supports this conclusion, with the upper bound reported as .2479 and the interval including zero. This means that the true population difference in posting intention could be zero, and the observed difference in sample means may be due to random variation rather than a systematic effect of the condition. Overall, these results suggest that posting intention does not differ significantly between the idealized and not-idealized conditions, and therefore, the null hypothesis is retained while the alternative hypothesis is not supported.

4.3.2 RQ2: Does fear of negative evaluation mediate the relationship between Posting Intention and Condition?

Table 4.3.6 PROCESS Model 4 Outcome for mediating role of BFNE_Scale between Condition and Posting Intention

Model: 4
Y : Posting_Intention
X : Condition
M : BFNE_Scale
Sample
Size: 178
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
BFNE_Scale

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.1279	.0164	1.0819	2.9289	1.0000	176.0000	.0888

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2.5871	.2465	10.4935	.0000	2.1005	3.0736
Condition	.2669	.1559	1.7114	.0888	-.0409	.5746

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

Posting_Intention

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.1195	.0143	3.0523	1.2675	2.0000	175.0000	.2841

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2.4112	.5280	4.5669	.0000	1.3692	3.4532
Conditon	.2286	.2641	.8658	.3878	-.2925	.7498
BFNE_Scale	.1538	.1266	1.2144	.2262	-.0961	.4036

********** **TOTAL EFFECT MODEL**
****

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

Posting_Intention

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.0773	.0060	3.0605	1.0573	1.0000	176.0000	.3052

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2.8090	.4147	6.7743	.0000	1.9907	3.6273
Condition	.2697	.2623	1.0283	.3052	-.2479	.7872

********** **TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y**********

Total effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.2697	.2623	1.0283	.3052	-.2479	.7872

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.2286	.2641	.8658	.3878	-.2925	.7498

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
BFNE_Scale	.0410	.0492	-.0339	.1602

To test the RQ2, the mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013), which tests a simple mediation framework with Condition (idealized vs. not-idealized) as the independent variable (X), BFNE_Scale as the mediator (M), where BFNE_Scale is the average of score of 12 items as required to be respond by the respondent for BFNE and Posting Intention as the dependent variable (Y) (*Table 4.3.14*). The analysis was based on a sample of $N = 178$. In the first stage of the model (path *a*), Condition was entered as a predictor of BFNE_Scale. Results indicated a small, positive but non-significant effect ($b = .2669, SE = .1559, t = 1.711, p = .0888, 95\%\ CI\ [-.0409, .5746]$). The overall model fit was modest, ($R = .1279, R^2 = .0164, F(1,176) = 2.9289, p = .0888$), signifying that only 1.6% of the variance in BFNE_Scale was explained by Condition. Although participants in the not-idealized condition scored marginally higher on BFNE, the lack of statistical significance implies that Condition does not reliably influence fear of negative evaluation.

The second stage of the analysis (paths *b* and *c*) examined the joint effects of Condition and BFNE_Scale on Posting Intention. The model was not statistically significant, ($R = .1195, R^2 = .0143, F(2,175) = 1.2675, p = .2841$), with predictors accounting for only 1.4% of the variance in Posting Intention. The direct effect of Condition was not significant, ($b = .2286, SE = .2641, t = .866, p = .3878, 95\%\ CI\ [-.2925, .7498]$), and the effect

of BFNE_Scale was also non-significant, ($b = .1538, SE = .1266, t = 1.214, p = .2262, 95\%\ CI\ [-.0961, .4036]$). These results indicate that neither Condition nor BFNE_Scale exerts a reliable influence on Posting Intention when included in the same model.

The total effect of Condition on Posting Intention (path *c*), without the mediator, was likewise non-significant,($b = .2697, SE = .2623, t = 1.028, p\ .3052, 95\%\ CI\ [-.2479, .7872]$), with the model explaining only 0.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .0060, F(1,176) = 1.0573, p = .3052$). The indirect effect of Condition on Posting_Intention through BFNE_Scale was estimated using 5,000 bootstrap samples, yielding $b = .0410, BootSE = .0492, Boot95\%\ CI\ [-.0339, .1602]$. Since the confidence interval includes zero, the mediation pathway is not supported. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Condition does not significantly predict posting intention, either directly or indirectly through BFNE_Scale, providing no evidence for the hypothesized mediating effect.

4.3.3 RQ3: To what extent does fear of negative evaluation explain the relationship, when controlling individual differences such as self-esteem and Comparison Orientation Measure?

(a) RSES as Moderator and SCO INCOM as covariate

Table 4.3.7 PROCESS Model 14 Outcome for Moderating role of Self Esteem

Model: 14						
Y : Posting_Intention						
X : Condition						
M : BFNE_Scale						
W : RSES _Scale						
Covariates:						
SCO_Scale						
Sample						
Size: 178						
OUTCOME VARIABLE:						
BFNE_Scale						
Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6258	.3916	.6731	56.3142	2.0000	175.0000	.0000
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	.6206	.2714	2.2867	.0234	.0850	1.1561
Condition	.0069	.1255	.0546	.9565	-.2408	.2545

SCO_Scale	.5669	.0546	10.3885	.0000	.4592	.6746
OUTCOME VARIABLE:						
Posting_Intention						
Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.2452	.0601	2.9611	2.1999	5.0000	172.0000	.0565
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2.1831	2.1612	1.0102	.3138	-2.0827	6.4490
Condition	.1079	.2638	.4091	.6830	-.4128	.6287
BFNE_Scale	-.3773	.5444	-.6931	.4892	-1.4519	.6973
RSES_Scale	-.1139	.3650	-.3120	.7554	-.8343	.6065
Int_1	.1046	.0993	1.0525	.2941	-.0915	.3007
SCO_Scale	.2723	.1469	1.8536	.0655	-.0177	.5624
Product terms key:						
Int_1 :	BFNE_Scale x	Esteem_Scale				
Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):						
	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p	
M*W	.0061	1.1077	1.0000	172.0000	.2941	
********** **DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y** **********						
Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
.1079	.2638	.4091	.6830	-.4128	.6287	
Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:						
INDIRECT EFFECT:						
Condition	->	BFNE_Scale	->	Posting Intention		
RSES_Scale	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
3.7000	.0001	.0317	-.0798	.0554		
4.9000	.0009	.0316	-.0757	.0585		
6.0360	.0017	.0421	-.0962	.0858		
Index of moderated mediation:						
	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
RSES_Scale	.0007	.0172	-.0341	.0404		

The moderated mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 14 (Hayes, 2013) to examine whether the indirect effect of Condition (idealized vs. not-idealized; X) on Posting_Intention (Y) through BFNE_Scale (M) is moderated by RSES_Scale (W: self-esteem), while controlling for SCO_Scale (covariate) as present in *Table 4.3.15*.

In the first stage of the model, Condition and SCO_Scale were entered as predictors of BFNE_Scale. The overall model was significant, ($R = .6258, R^2 = .3916, F(2,175) = 56.31, p < .001$), indicating that about 39.2% of the variance in BFNE_Scale was explained by the predictors. While SCO_Scale was a strong, positive predictor of BFNE_Scale ($b = .5669, SE = .0546, t = 10.389, p < .001, 95\%\ CI\ [.4592, .6746]$), Condition had no effect ($b = .0069, SE = .1255, t = .055, p = .957, 95\%\ CI\ [-.2408, .2545]$). This

shows that social comparison orientation significantly predicts fear of negative evaluation, whereas the manipulation of Condition does not.

In the second stage, Posting_Intention was regressed on Condition, BFNE_Scale, RSES_Scale, their interaction, and SCO_Scale. The overall model was marginally non-significant, ($R = .2452, R^2 = .0601, F(5,172) = 2.20, p = .0565$), explaining 6% of variance in posting intention. None of the direct predictors reached statistical significance: Condition ($b = .1079, SE = .2638, t = .409, p = .683$), BFNE_Scale ($b = -.3773, SE = .5444, t = -.693, p = .489$), RSES_Scale ($b = -.1139, SE = .3650, t = -.312, p = .755$), and the interaction between BFNE_Scale and RSES_Scale ($b = .1046, SE = .0993, t = 1.053, p = .294$). SCO_Scale showed a positive trend toward significance ($b = .2723, SE = .1469, t = 1.854, p = .066$), suggesting that higher social comparison orientation may be weakly associated with greater posting intention, although the effect was not statistically reliable. Importantly, the test of the highest-order interaction ($M \times W$) was not significant ($R^2 = .0061, F(1,172) = 1.108, p = .294$), indicating that self-esteem does not significantly moderate the effect of BFNE on posting intention.

Regarding the indirect effects, the conditional indirect effect of Condition on Posting_Intention through BFNE_Scale was estimated at different levels of self-esteem ($RSES\_Scale = 3.70, 4.90, 6.04$). In all cases, the effects were extremely small and non-significant (e.g., at $RSES = 4.90, effect = .0009, BootSE = .0316, 95\%\ CI\ [-.0757, .0585]$), with confidence intervals including zero. The index of moderated mediation was also non-significant ($index = .0007, BootSE = .0172, 95\%\ CI\ [-.0341, .0404]$), providing no evidence that the indirect effect depends on self-esteem.

Overall, these findings indicate that Condition does not influence posting intention directly, indirectly through fear of negative evaluation, or conditionally depending on self-esteem. The mediation via BFNE_Scale was not supported, and the hypothesized moderated mediation with RSES_Scale as a moderator was also not confirmed. Instead, the results highlight the importance of SCO_Scale, which emerged as a strong determinant of BFNE and showed a marginally positive trend toward posting intention. This suggests that individual differences in social comparison orientation, rather than experimental condition or self-esteem, may play a more critical role in shaping fear of negative evaluation and subsequent posting behavior.

(b) SCO INCOM as Moderator and RSES as covariate

Table 4.3.8 PROCESS Model 14 Outcome for Moderating role of Comparison Orientation Measure

Model : 14

Y : Posting_Intention

X : Condition

M : BFNE_Scale

W : SCO_Scale

Covariates:

RSES_Scale

Sample

Size: 178

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

BFNE_Scale

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6861	.4707	.5855	77.8162	2.0000	175.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	5.4282	.2943	18.4427	.0000	4.8474	6.0091
Condition	.2208	.1148	1.9241	.0560	-.0057	.4473
RSES_Scale	-.5769	.0471	-12.2564	.0000	-.6698	-.4840

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

Posting_Intention

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p

.2326	.0541	2.9801	1.9674	5.0000	172.0000	.0858

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	.3512	1.5801	.2222	.8244	-2.7678	3.4701
Condition	.1168	.2647	.4411	.6597	-.4057	.6392
BFNE_Scale	.1176	.4525	.2598	.7953	-.7755	1.0106
SCO_Scale	.2579	.3179	.8113	.4183	-.3696	.8854
Int_1	.0090	.0994	.0903	.9281	-.1873	.2052
RSES_Scale	.2384	.1458	1.6355	.1038	-.0493	.5262

Product terms key:

Int_1 : BFNE_Scale x SCO_Scale

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
M*W	.0000	.0082	1.0000	172.0000	.9281

********** **DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y** **********

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.1168	.2647	.4411	.6597	-.4057	.6392

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

Condition -> BFNE_Scale -> Posting_Intention

SCO_Scale	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
2.9673	.0318	.0612	-.0788	.1757
4.1818	.0343	.0538	-.0617	.1523
5.2727	.0364	.0636	-.0813	.1763

Index of moderated mediation:

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
SCO_Scale	.0020	.0276	-.0570	.0602

Results of *Table 4.3.16* show that the moderated mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 14 (Hayes, 2013) to test whether the indirect effect of Condition (idealized vs. not idealized) on Posting_Intention through BFNE_Scale (fear of negative evaluation) is moderated by SCO_Scale, while controlling for RSES_Scale.

The first regression (predicting BFNE_Scale from Condition and RSES_Scale) was statistically significant, $(R = .6861, R^2 = .4707, F(2,175) = 77.82, p < .001)$, explaining 47.1% of the variance in BFNE. Condition showed a marginally positive effect on BFNE $(b = .2208, SE = .1148, t = 1.924, p = .056, 95\%\ CI\ [-.0057, .4473])$, suggesting that participants in the not-idealized condition tended to report slightly higher fear of negative evaluation compared to those in the idealized condition, though this effect only approached significance. By contrast, RSES_Scale had a strong, negative, and statistically significant effect on BFNE $(b = -.5769, SE = .0471, t = -12.26, p < .001, 95\%\ CI\ [-.6698, -.4840])$, indicating that higher self-esteem was associated with substantially lower fear of negative evaluation.

The second regression (predicting Posting_Intention from Condition, BFNE_Scale, SCO_Scale, their interaction, and RSES_Scale) was not statistically significant overall, R = .2326, R^2 = .0541, F(5,172) = 1.97, p = .0858, explaining about 5.4% of the variance in posting intention. None of the predictors were statistically significant: Condition $(b = .1168, SE = .2647, t = .441, p = .660)$, BFNE_Scale $(b = .1176, SE = .4525, t = .260, p = .795)$, SCO_Scale $(b = .2579, SE = .3179, t = .811, p = .418)$, the BFNE_Scale × SCO_Scale interaction $(b = .0090, SE = .0994, t = .090, p = .928)$, or RSES_Scale $(b = .2384, SE = .1458, t = 1.636, p = .104)$. The test of the highest-order unconditional interaction was non-significant $(R^2 = .0000, F(1,172) = .008, p = .928)$, indicating that SCO_Scale does not moderate the relationship between BFNE and posting intention.

Examination of conditional indirect effects further confirmed the absence of moderate mediation. At low (2.97), medium (4.18), and high (5.27) levels of SCO_Scale, the indirect effects of Condition on Posting_Intention through BFNE_Scale were very small and non-

significant(e.g., at medium $SCO, effect = .0343, BootSE = .0538, BootCI\ [-.0617, .1523]$). Since all bootstrap confidence intervals included zero, the indirect effect was not supported. The index of moderated mediation was also not significant ($index = .0020, BootSE = .0276, 95\%\ CI\ [-.0570, .0602]$), reinforcing the conclusion that SCO_Scale does not condition the indirect pathway.

In sum, the analysis provides no evidence that Condition influences posting intention either directly or indirectly via fear of negative evaluation, nor that this indirect pathway is moderated by social comparison orientation. The only strong predictor identified in the model was self-esteem, which consistently reduced BFNE but did not translate into differences in posting intention. These results suggest that posting behavior is not significantly shaped by condition, fear of negative evaluation, or social comparison tendencies in this dataset.

4.4 Summary of findings & managerial contribution

The Discussion chapter started highlighting demographics and doing and explorative analysis. Participants in the study were predominantly young adults between 24 and 27 years old (56.74% of the sample), mostly female (64.61%), and largely Italian nationals (63.48%). This sample also exhibited intensive social media usage: the largest segment of participants reported spending approximately 4–5 hours per day on social media (41.01%), and Instagram was the most preferred platform (identified by 61.24% of respondents as their primary social network). One striking descriptive finding was the generally low level of posting intent across all groups. Regardless of condition, participants on the whole expressed little desire to share content. Moreover, 58.99% of respondents described themselves primarily as “passive scrollers” who seldom post (Figure 4). This indicates that a majority of the sample already had a passive usage style, which may have set a low baseline for posting intention. Consistently, more than half of participants (58.43%) acknowledged recently considering taking a break from or deleting some of their social media accounts, pointing to a palpable sense of *digital fatigue* in the sample (Figure 5). Notably, Instagram was the platform most frequently cited in these disconnection considerations – about 74% of those who contemplated leaving social media identified Instagram as the account they would drop first. These self-reported tendencies suggest that, for many in this group, social media is not viewed as an open arena for spontaneous expression but rather approached with ambivalence and caution. In other words, participants exhibited a broad reluctance to post content, consistent with a trend of passive engagement and

fatigue on social platforms observed among young users from recent trends discussed previously in the Literature Review chapter.

Importantly, the exploratory analyses showed no significant baseline differences between the experimental groups in any measured variables, including demographics, self-esteem, or social comparison orientation (SCO), indicating that random assignment successfully created equivalent groups at the outset. Furthermore, all psychological scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency, as evidenced by Cronbach's α values exceeding .87, underscoring the high reliability of the measures used in the study.

An additional exploratory analysis examined whether posting intentions varied according to participants' preferred social media platform, specifically Instagram or TikTok. The descriptive results suggested a modest difference: individuals favoring TikTok reported a higher mean posting intention ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.68$) than those who preferred Instagram ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.73$). Yet, this apparent gap did not reach statistical significance. An independent-samples t test indicated that the observed difference was not reliable, $t(155) = –1.31$, $p = .193$, with the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference [–0.98, 0.20] crossing zero. Levene's test of homogeneity supported the use of the equal variances assumption, $F = .106$, $p = .745$. Overall, while TikTok users showed slightly higher scores on average, the evidence does not support a meaningful distinction in posting behavior based on platform preference within this sample.

Also, before testing the hypotheses, exploratory process measures of perceived comparison and self-evaluation after the exposure to the feeds were examined. Independent-samples t tests revealed no significant differences between the idealized and neutral image conditions on either of the after exposure questions, with participants in the idealized-image group not differing from those in the neutral-image group in perceived social comparison ($p = .964$) or self-evaluation ($p = .287$). Overall, these did not differ significantly across conditions, suggesting that the manipulation may not have been sufficiently strong to alter participants' perceptions in the intended way, which may partly account for the null results observed in the hypothesis tests.

Having established the descriptive profile of participants, verified the reliability of the measures, done some exploratory analyses, the analyses then turned to testing the hypotheses.

Although Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and prior studies (e.g., Leary, 1983; Vogel et al., 2014) suggest that exposure to idealized social media content can provoke upward comparisons and heighten fear of negative evaluation, the present results did not support these expectations.

For the First Hypotesis (H1), an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare posting intention between the idealized and neutral content conditions. The analysis showed no significant difference between groups, $t(176) = -1.03$, $p = .305$, 95% CI [–0.79, 0.25]. Participants in the idealized condition reported a slightly lower posting intention ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.75$) than those in the neutral condition ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.75$), but the effect was small and not statistically reliable.

The next step was to test Research Question 2 (RQ2) and its associated hypothesis regarding the mediating role of fear of negative evaluation (FNE). A mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 to examine whether FNE carries the effect of content type (idealized vs. non-idealized feeds) on posting intention. The results showed that FNE did not vary significantly across experimental conditions and did not significantly predict posting intention. In statistical terms, the indirect effect of content type on posting intention through FNE was very small and non-significant (effect = 0.04, 95% CI [–0.03, 0.16]), and the direct effect of content type on posting intention also remained non-significant. Thus, neither a direct influence of content type on posting intention nor an indirect influence via FNE was supported by the data. The hypothesized mediation pathway (idealized content → higher FNE → lower posting intention) was not substantiated in this experiment.

For RQ3, two moderated mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 14) tested whether the indirect effect of the experimental condition on posting intention via fear of negative evaluation (FNE) varied by individual differences in self-esteem or social comparison orientation (SCO). Neither analysis yielded evidence of a moderated mediation. In the model with self-esteem as the moderator (controlling for SCO), the FNE × self-esteem interaction was not significant ($b = 0.10$, $p = .294$). Accordingly, the indirect effect of condition on posting intentions through FNE remained nonsignificant across low, medium, and high self-esteem, and the index of moderated mediation did not differ from zero. Similarly, in the model with SCO as the moderator (controlling for self-esteem), no significant FNE × SCO interaction was observed ($b = 0.01$, $p = .928$), and there was no conditional indirect effect via FNE at any level of SCO.

Although we found no moderated effects, these analyses revealed robust associations between the individual difference variables and FNE. Participants with a stronger tendency for social comparison exhibited significantly higher FNE ($b = 0.57$, $p < .001$), whereas those with higher self-esteem showed significantly lower FNE ($b = –0.58$, $p < .001$).

Neither self-esteem nor SCO, however, had a direct influence on posting intention in these models. In other words, a pronounced orientation toward social comparison is linked to greater fear of negative evaluation, yet this heightened evaluative concern did not translate into a reduced willingness to post.

In light of the findings of the present study, and given that the after exposure questions were not effective, the absence of significant results may plausibly be attributed to a weak manipulation itself. In other words, it remains uncertain whether the lack of effects reflects a methodological limitation or whether the underlying conceptual mechanisms operate differently than hypothesized. On a theoretical level, these results might suggest that the relationship between idealized content, FNE, and posting inhibition is less linear than expected. It is possible that FNE is only one element within a more complex process, potentially influenced by many other factors such as authenticity, content value, or broader cultural dynamics.

What does this mean for brands? The data collected here point to a context in which many young users already approach social media with caution. A majority of participants described themselves as passive scrollers, and more than half had recently thought about limiting or abandoning their accounts, often singling out Instagram. This pattern suggests that the issue may not lie only in exposure to idealized content, but in a more general sense of fatigue and ambivalence toward participation.

Individual differences also appeared relevant. Stronger social comparison orientation was linked to higher fear of negative evaluation ($b = 0.57$, $p < .001$), while higher self-esteem was associated with lower fear ($b = –0.58$, $p < .001$). Yet, these tendencies did not translate directly into posting behavior. This raises the possibility that lowering the visibility of social judgments, or creating safer and more private sharing options – like close friends, could help reduce pressure, even if the exact mechanisms remain unclear.

For brands and content creators, the results may be read as a signal that polished campaigns alone are unlikely to foster engagement in such an environment. Approaches that

emphasize authenticity, smaller circles of interaction, or temporary formats might resonate better, though further evidence is needed to confirm this.

4.5 Limitations & future research

It is important to acknowledge several limitations of this study. For one, the manipulation intended to distinguish "idealized" from "non-idealized" social media feeds turned out to not being strong enough. The experimental feeds did not provoke markedly different perceptions, implying that the stimuli might not have been potent enough to truly evoke the upward social comparison effect hoped to be created. Another limitation was relying on a self-reported measure of posting intention as the main outcome. What participants *say* they would do does not always align with what they actually do; someone might indicate willingness to post but then hesitate or refrain in a real situation. This gap between intention and behavior means our findings on posting likelihood should be interpreted with caution.

Another noteworthy limitation involves the makeup of the sample, which affects how broadly we can generalize the results. The participants were overwhelmingly female (about two-thirds of the sample) and almost all were from Italy. Thus, more diverse, internationally representative sample would be needed to strengthen confidence in extending these conclusions to other populations.

In addition, the lack of significant differences between experimental conditions raises some further considerations. Contrary to expectations, participants exposed to idealized feeds did not report significantly different posting intentions than those who saw non-idealized content. Our descriptive data indicated a predominantly passive social media use in this sample.

Taken this into consideration, future studies could build more effective manipulations with a more immersive experience (longer feeds, more images, more triggering captions) and let the participants actually 'do', rather than just report what they would do. Also, they might create a cross-platform study, for example examing the differences in the posting intentions between Instagram and Tiktok.

A useful extension of the field of investigation would also comprehend the use of social media, together with the strategies that individuals adopt to manage its effects. Emerging practices such as voluntary breaks from digital platforms, sometimes referred to as "disconnection periods," or the choice to share content only with a small circle of trusted

contacts, are ways in which users seek to mitigate the pressures of social comparison (Ramadhan et al., 2024; Fioravanti et al., 2019). Analyzing these forms of regulation could offer a more nuanced view of the ways in which people balance the need to stay in touch with others and the need to safeguard their psychological well-being.

Another promising avenue of research is that which examines the differences between different subgroups of users. It is reasonable to assume, for example, that the patterns found may vary according to gender, specific cultural contexts, or the intensity with which platforms are used, distinguishing between those who use them regularly and those who use them more sporadically. Comparative analysis of these profiles can highlight whether certain segments of the public are more vulnerable than others to the pressures of sharing and social comparison. Considering these nuances, which range from individual traits to socio-cultural dynamics, future studies would have more tools to clarify the reasons that sometimes lead to a reduction or interruption in the production of online content.

5. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this dissertation was to investigate whether exposure to idealized social media content affects Generation Z's willingness to post and whether this effect is mediated by fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Starting from Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the literature on social anxiety (Leary, 1983), three research questions were designed: (RQ1) does idealized content reduce posting intention? (RQ2) does FNE mediate this relationship? and (RQ3) do individual traits such as self-esteem and social comparison orientation alter these dynamics? From these, the hypotheses proposed that idealized exposure would lower posting intention, that FNE would account for this reduction, and that personal dispositions would moderate the pathway.

The findings did not confirm these expectations. After exposure process measures of perceived comparison and self-evaluation indicated that the experimental stimuli may have not been sufficiently strong to generate a clear upward comparison, and as a result, no significant differences were observed between the groups. Posting intention remained uniformly low across conditions, and neither mediation nor moderated mediation effects were supported. What did emerge clearly was the link between dispositional traits and FNE: individuals with higher comparison orientation reported greater fear of negative evaluation, whereas those with stronger self-esteem reported less. This aligns with earlier findings that link evaluative concerns to

dispositional traits (Leary, 1983; Shabahang et al., 2021). Yet, these associations did not translate into differences in posting behavior.

However, the absence of significant experimental effects does not mean the study lacks findings. The descriptive data tell a clear story: participants were overwhelmingly passive in their social media use, with nearly 60% describing themselves as scrollers rather than posters, and more than half reporting that they had recently considered taking a break or deleting an account—most often Instagram. These numbers provide evidence of a generational fatigue toward social media posting, confirming prior surveys highlighting a growing selectivity in posting among young adults (Morning Consult, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2022).

Future research should therefore design more immersive manipulations, combine behavioral measures with self-reports, and diversify samples across gender and cultural backgrounds. Exploring the interplay between social comparison, authenticity, and platform-specific cultures may help clarify why Gen Z increasingly retreats from active posting.

6. APPENDIX

TABLES

Table a. Cross tabulation between Gender and Condition

		Condition		Total
		Idealized	NotIdealized	
Gender	Female	59	56	115
	I prefer not to say	0	2	2
	Male	30	31	61
Total		89	89	178

Table b. Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.095[a]	2	.351
Likelihood Ratio	2.867	2	.238
N of Valid Cases	178		

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.00.

Table c. Cross tabulation between Age Group and Condition

		Condition		Total
		Idealized	NotIdealized	
Age Group	19-23	35	42	77
	24-27	54	47	101
Total		89	89	178

Table d. Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.122[a]	1	.290		
Continuity Correction[b]	.824	1	.364		
Likelihood Ratio	1.123	1	.289		
Fisher's Exact Test				.364	.182
N of Valid Cases	178				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 38.50.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

FULL SURVEY

Q1.1 – Age
How old are you? (Please write your age in digits)

Section 2 – Pre-exposure Psychological Traits

Q2.1 – Self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, RSES)
Please indicate your response for each of the following statements by selecting a number from 1 to 7, where 1 = Disagree and 7 = Strongly agree.

1. I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. I certainly feel useless at times.
10. At times I think I am no good at all.

Q2.3 – Social Comparison Orientation (INCOM Scale)
Please indicate your response for each of the following statements by selecting a number from 1 to 7, where 1 = Disagree and 7 = Strongly agree.

1. I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.
2. I often compare how I am doing socially with other people.
3. I am not the type of person who compares often with others.
4. I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished.
5. I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.
6. I always pay attention to how I do things compared to others.
7. If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare with how others have done.
8. I often compare my professional accomplishments with others.
9. I often compare myself with others in terms of physical appearance.
10. I often compare myself with others in social situations.
11. I often compare my ideas with the ideas of others.

Section 3 – Feed Exposure (Idealized Condition)

Q3.1 After watching this video, how likely are you to post something on social media?
Scale: 1 = Not likely, 7 = Extremely likely.

Q3.2 To what extent did the content make you compare yourself to others?
Scale: 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much.

Q3.3 After viewing the posts, to what extent did you feel better or worse about yourself compared to the people shown?
Scale: 1 = Much worse, 7 = Much better.

Section 4 – Feed Exposure (Neutral Condition)

Q4.1 After watching this video, how likely are you to post something on social media?
Scale: 1 = Not likely, 7 = Extremely likely.

Q4.2 To what extent did the content make you compare yourself to others?
Scale: 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much.

Q4.3 After viewing the posts, to what extent did you feel better or worse about yourself compared to the people shown?
Scale: 1 = Much worse, 7 = Much better.

Section 5 – Mediator (BFNE Scale)

Please indicate how true each of the following statements is for you by choosing a number from 1 (Not at all true for me) to 5 (Extremely true for me).

1. I worry about what others think of me.
2. I am afraid that people will find fault with me.
3. I am concerned about how others evaluate me.
4. I am afraid others will not approve of me.
5. I am afraid that people will find me unattractive.
6. I am afraid that others will think I am not smart.
7. I often worry that I say the wrong thing.
8. I worry that people will laugh at me.
9. I am concerned about not being liked.
10. I am afraid others think badly of me.
11. I worry about not meeting others' expectations.
12. I am concerned that people do not respect me.

Section 6 – Profiling

Q6.1 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- I prefer not to say

Q6.2 Where do you live?
(List of countries: Austria … Switzerland)

Q6.3 What is your education level?

- High school diploma or less
- Undergraduate degree
- Graduate degree

Q6.4 On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1–2 hours
- 2–3 hours
- 4–5 hours
- 5–6 hours
- More than 6 hours

Q6.5 Which social media platform do you use most frequently?

- Instagram
- TikTok
- Others

Q6.6 How would you describe your typical social media behavior?

- Mostly passive scrolling
- Occasionally posting
- Actively posting and engaging

Q6.7 Have you thought about deleting or pausing some of your social media accounts recently?

- Yes / No

Q6.8 (If Yes) Which one?

- Instagram
- TikTok
- Other

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