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A Study on Social Media Content Exposure, Self-Perception, and Motivation among Students

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Abstract: ***Existing literature on social media and students tends to conceptualize the effect of social media on students as either demotivating/motivating or negative/positive. These dualistic methods fail to capture the intricate emotional experiences of students while using social media on a day-to-day basis. This paper investigates the effect of achievement-oriented social media content on students' self-perception and motivation. Through survey research among undergraduate students, this paper reveals an interesting and yet unexplored phenomenon: students who feel a greater sense of inadequacy while watching others' achievements tend to feel a greater sense of inspiration and motivation to better themselves. Instead of discouraging students, discomforting emotions seem to coexist with and even complement achievement-oriented motivation. This paradoxical effect of social media on students has been labeled as the Inadequacy-Inspiration Paradox and indicates that social media creates a type of motivation that is psychologically engaging but emotionally taxing.***
Keywords: Social media exposure, self-perception, motivation, social comparison, students, behavioral research

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a living space where students can witness success, progress, and achievement on a daily basis. Social media platforms are increasingly filled with academic achievements, productivity, career success, and personal growth. For students, these platforms are never neutral spaces. They are always spaces for comparison and self-evaluation.

Most academic literature tackles this issue by asking whether social media has a positive or negative impact on self-esteem and motivation. Although helpful, this perspective assumes that the emotional experience and the motivational outcome are correlated. If students feel worse about themselves, they should feel less motivated; if they feel inspired, they should feel emotionally uplifted.

But in informal conversations with students, there may be a more contradictory dynamic at work: students may feel emotionally disturbed after viewing social media, but also feel compelled to work harder.

This particular study recognizes the contradiction. It does not attempt to categorize social media as positive or negative but instead examines the dynamic between self-perception and motivation in the presence of constant achievement-oriented content. The question that this study aims to answer is:

Can inadequacy and motivation coexist and if so, what does this tell us about the nature of student motivation in today's world?

II. WHY DOES THIS QUESTION MATTER?

The belief that motivation is necessarily emotionally positive is very deeply rooted in educational thought. Motivation is frequently seen as an indicator of happiness, ambition, and engagement. In contrast, feelings of inadequacy are seen as negative states that should decrease effort or participation.

If these assumptions are false, then institutions may be misunderstanding student activity. High effort and apparent motivation may be concealing distress, and discomfort may be mistakenly perceived as failure.

Determining whether discomfort can coexist alongside motivation is thus not only of theoretical interest- it also has implications for the understanding of student success.

III. METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS USED

A. Research Design

The design of the study is an exploratory, cross-sectional survey, which is appropriate for discovering latent psychological patterns rather than testing hypotheses.

B. Sample

Participants were 30 undergraduate students, mostly aged 16 to 19 years.

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C. Data Collection Tool

1) Online structured questionnaire
2) Likert items assessing:
a) Exposure to achievement-oriented social media content
b) Emotional responses (mood changes, feelings of inadequacy)
c) Motivational responses (inspiration, encouragement, pressure to succeed)

D. Analytical Tools

1) Microsoft Excel / Google Sheets – Data Cleaning and Initial Inspection
2) Jamovi (SPSS equivalent logic) – Correlation Analysis
3) Exploratory relational analysis – finding co-occurring emotional and motivational responses

E. Analytical Approach

Unlike traditional methods that start with means and percentages, this research:
1) Analyzed links between emotional discomfort and motivation
2) Concerned with internal contradictions among respondents
3) Patterns that would not be apparent in aggregated averages:
This enabled the analysis to reveal psychological tension instead of just outcomes.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Motivation Does Not Disappear When Self-Perception Declines

One would expect that if students feel inadequate after seeing the accomplishments of others on social media, their motivation levels should decrease. However, from the survey results, it appears that this is not the case. Students who feel less confident or inadequate also feel more motivated to improve themselves.

This means that feeling uncomfortable emotionally is not necessarily equivalent to disengagement. Rather, for some students, the experience of being inadequate seems to serve as a signal to work, rather than a signal to disengage.

That is, students do not cease to try when they feel they are behind, but rather they begin to try harder.

B. Inspiration and Pressure Are Not Separate Experiences

Another significant finding is that inspiration and pressure are interwoven. Students who reported being inspired by achievement-oriented posts also reported being pressured to achieve similar results.

This implies that inspiration in the context of social media is never calm or reassuring. It always comes with an implicit message: "Others are moving ahead- you should be too."

Consequently, inspiration does not serve as a form of encouragement. It serves as a motivational force that has emotional significance, making students feel responsible for meeting the visible standards of success.

C. Awareness Does Not Reduce Emotional Impact

Students have also shown that they know that the content on social media is algorithmically generated and does not reflect reality. However, the emotional responses of inadequacy and pressure were still prevalent.

This contradicts the belief that awareness results in emotional distance. The realization that content is curated does not shield students from comparison. Emotions seem to be automatically engaged, regardless of the students' realization of the constructed nature of success online. This implies that the emotional comparison on social media is not driven by ignorance but by repeated exposure.

D. Repeated Exposure Sustains Effort but Increases Emotional Cost

The data indicates that exposure to achievement-oriented content does not lower motivation. Rather, it seems to maintain the level of motivation while increasing emotional stress.

The students continue to feel encouraged to work harder, but they also feel greater pressure and self-doubt. This suggests that social media may be creating a high-effort environment with increasing psychological costs.

Motivation, in this instance, is sustained but at the cost of emotional comfort.

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E. A Silent Group: Highly Motivated but Emotionally Unsettled Students

One of the most obvious, yet overlooked, trends within the data is the existence of a subset of students who seem to be highly motivated on the surface yet emotionally unstable.

These students:

1) Feel inspired by achievement content
2) Feel pressure to succeed
3) Feel inadequate when comparing themselves

However, they do not mention disengagement or lack of effort.

This group is likely to be considered "high performers" in an academic environment, even though their motivation is maintained through internal pressure rather than emotional confidence.

V. INTERPRETATION

A. Motivation Can Be Driven by Discomfort

What this study appears to suggest is that sometimes motivation is not the result of feeling good about oneself. Sometimes, it is the result of feeling uncomfortable about where one stands.

When students see others reaching milestones, it draws their attention to the gap between where they are and where they think they should be. This gap causes discomfort, but it also gives them direction.

The discomfort says to the students, "This is important. You cannot ignore it."

In this way, inadequacy becomes a trigger, rather than a barrier.

B. Social Media Transforms Comparison into a Daily Routine

Social media platforms have transformed

In previous generations, comparison was done from time to time, for instance, during exams, results, or competitions. However, social media has made comparison an everyday, sometimes hourly, task.

Because of this, the comparison that once was optional is no longer. Students are constantly reminded of what success looks like and how early it has arrived for others.

With time, this makes striving a matter of choice rather than a necessity in a bid to remain relevant.

C. Why Inspiration Feels Heavy

Inspiration on social media is commonly framed as a positive and uplifting experience. Nevertheless, the results indicate that inspiration can often be a costly experience.

Not only are students inspired by what others have achieved, but they also feel a sense of responsibility for not having achieved the same thing yet. This is a type of motivation that is very active but emotionally taxing.

The issue is not with the inspiration itself, but with the inspiration that lacks emotional safety.

D. Motivation Without Satisfaction Is Unstable

The motivation that is seen in this study seems to be strong but fragile. When the effort is driven by comparison and pressure, the students may continue to work hard but may not feel satisfied with the progress they have made.

This motivation may result in:

1) Constant self-monitoring
2) Fear of slowing down
3) Feeling like "enough

This leads to an important question: Is motivation still healthy if it never allows relief?

E. Why This Pattern Is Rarely Studied

This paradox has yet to be fully explored because most research has focused on measuring:

1) Emotional well-being on one side
2) Motivation on another

When these are averaged among respondents, the contradictory experiences will cancel each other out. What is left is a misleading impression where motivation and well-being are weakly related.

Through the analysis of the coexistence of discomfort and motivation in individuals, this research uncovers a concealed psychological conflict that is not taken into account by the conventional approach.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

A. For Educational Institutions

1) Treat motivation and well-being as separate indicators
2) Introduce reflection-based support mechanisms
3) Avoid equating high effort with psychological health

B. For Faculty and Mentors

1) Normalize delayed and non-linear success
2) Encourage goal-setting based on personal growth, not peer comparison

C. For Students

1) Learn to distinguish inspiration from pressure
2) Engage with content that emphasizes process rather than outcomes

VII. LIMITATIONS

A. Limitations

1) Small sample size
2) Cross-sectional design
3) Self-reported emotional measures

B. Future Research

1) Longitudinal studies on sustainability of pressure-driven motivation
2) Qualitative interviews exploring student interpretations of “inspiration”
3) Comparative studies across disciplines and age groups

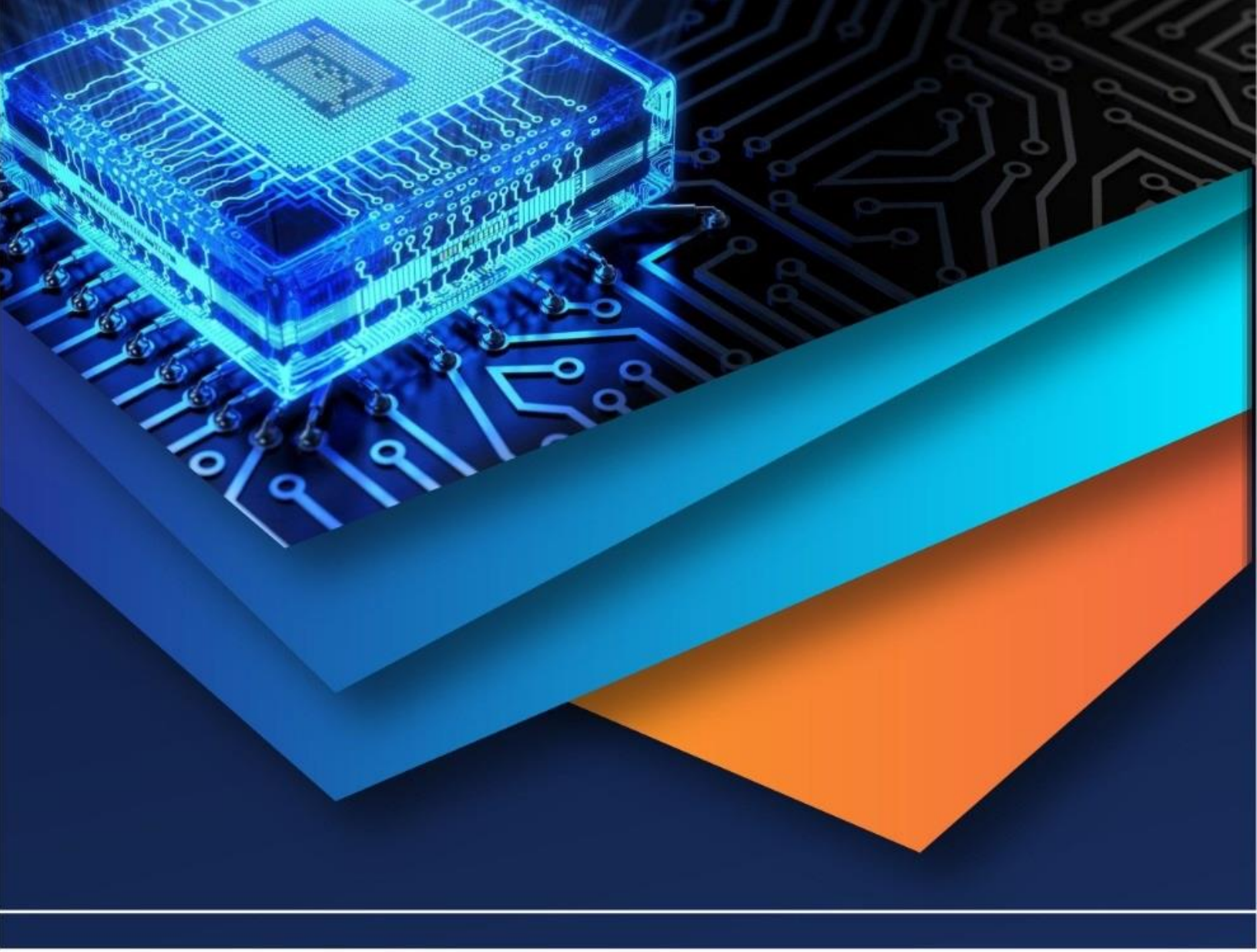
VIII. CONCLUSION

This study matters because it explains an experience many students feel but struggle to articulate: being emotionally unsettled yet driven. Recognizing this paradox helps shift focus from surface motivation to sustainable growth.

This study demonstrates that social media’s impact on students cannot be reduced to positive or negative effects. By identifying the Inadequacy–Inspiration Paradox, it reveals how emotional discomfort and motivation can coexist, producing driven yet psychologically strained engagement.

Recognizing this paradox is essential for educators and institutions seeking to promote meaningful, sustainable motivation rather than silent exhaustion.

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