



Comparison by Default as the Unseen Cost of Passive Social Media

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v9i6.3368>

Abstract

Social media has rapidly become a ubiquitous feature of daily life, yet research examining its psychological consequences has yielded conflicting findings. This paper argues that the active–passive dichotomy, contrasting interactive engagement with passive consumption, offers the most robust framework for understanding when and why social media use harms or benefits well-being. Drawing on Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory as an explanatory mechanism, we synthesise meta-analytic, longitudinal and experimental evidence to demonstrate that passive social media use (e.g., scrolling, browsing without interacting) is consistently associated with lower self-esteem, increased resentment, heightened depressive symptoms and reduced life satisfaction, mediated by upward social comparison and resentment. Conversely, active use (e.g., posting, commenting, direct messaging) is generally linked to greater social connectedness and positive affect, though not without risks. We examine key contextual moderators, age, platform characteristics, content type and individual differences, that shape these associations. The paper concludes by integrating findings into a transactional model of passive social media use, discussing clinical and public health implications, and outlining future research directions. It is argued that passive use constitutes a default mode of engagement on most platforms, creating a pervasive yet underrecognised cost to mental health that demands both individual and structural interventions.

Keywords: *Passive Social Media Use; Social Comparison; Well-Being; Depression; Resentment; Self-Esteem; Active Use; Scrolling*

1. Introduction

With over four billion people actively using at least one social media platform worldwide and average daily usage exceeding two hours per user, the question of whether social media is “good” or “bad” for mental health has moved from academic debate to urgent public concern. Yet after nearly two decades of research, definitive answers remain elusive. Meta-analyses have yielded small, inconsistent effect sizes, and high-profile longitudinal studies have reached contradictory conclusions about whether social media use predicts subsequent psychological distress, vice versa, or neither (Coyne et al., 2020).

This heterogeneity has led some researchers to argue that the field is asking the wrong question. Rather than investigating a monolithic “social media use,” scholars have increasingly focused on *how* people use these platforms, distinguishing between active and passive forms of engagement.

The active–passive dichotomy, first operationalised by Verduyn et al. (2015), distinguishes between active use (directly interacting with others via posting, commenting, liking or messaging) and passive use (consuming content without interacting, such as browsing or scrolling). This distinction has proven theoretically generative because it identifies a plausible mechanism: when users engage passively, they are exposed to curated, often idealised content without the compensatory benefits of direct social exchange. The result, this paper argues, is that passive use activates default social comparison processes that systematically undermine well-being.

The present paper has four aims. First, to synthesise meta-analytic, longitudinal and experimental evidence on the relationship between passive social media use and well-being outcomes. Second, to articulate the mediating role of social comparison and resentment as the core psychological mechanisms linking passive consumption to reduced mental health. Third, to examine key moderators, age, platform, content type and individual differences, that shape these associations. Fourth, to integrate findings into a conceptual model that distinguishes default passive engagement from intentional active use, with implications for both individual behaviour and platform design.

We argue that passive social media use represents a pervasive, often unrecognised cost to well-being because it activates comparison processes without requiring any deliberate effort from the user, comparison by default, in the most literal sense. While active use carries its own risks, passive use is structurally embedded in platform design, algorithmically optimised to maximise consumption, and therefore constitutes the modal form of engagement for most users. Understanding this hidden cost is essential for developing effective interventions at both the individual and systemic levels.

2. Theoretical Framework: Social Comparison in the Digital Age

2.1 Social Comparison Theory

Leon Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory holds that individuals possess an innate drive to evaluate their own abilities, opinions and social standing by comparing themselves with others (Festinger, 1954). In the absence of objective standards, people naturally engage in two forms of comparison: upward comparison, directed toward those perceived as superior; and downward comparison, directed toward those perceived as inferior (Wood, 1989). While both forms serve self-evaluative functions, upward comparison carries well-documented risks for self-esteem and mood (Mussweiler, 2003; Collins, 1996).

Social media radically transforms the context of social comparison. In offline settings, comparisons are typically limited to one’s immediate social circle, occur sporadically, and are embedded in reciprocal social interactions that provide corrective feedback. In contrast, online platforms provide continuous, algorithmically curated exposure to idealised self-presentations from a vast network of acquaintances, strangers, and aspirational influencers. As Festinger himself might not have anticipated, the digital environment intensifies comparison frequency, breadth and magnitude in ways that fundamentally alter its psychological consequences.

2.2 The Active–Passive Dichotomy

The distinction between active and passive social media use emerged from early studies of Facebook, which observed that direct communication (e.g., commenting, messaging) was associated with

enhanced social connectedness, whereas passive browsing predicted declines in affective well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015; Park et al., 2015). Active use typically includes behaviours such as posting original content, commenting on others' posts, sending direct messages, and engaging in group discussions. Passive use encompasses scrolling through news feeds, viewing others' profiles, watching videos, and consuming content without any form of reciprocal interaction.

The theoretical importance of this distinction rests on two principles. First, active use generates social feedback loops that satisfy basic needs for belongingness and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When users actively engage, they receive likes, comments and messages that provide social validation and reinforce relationships. Passive use bypasses these feedback loops entirely, users observe without being observed, compare without being compared to, and take in social information without contributing any of their own.

Second, passive use increases exposure to social comparison information while eliminating the protective function of reciprocal self-disclosure. In face-to-face settings, people engage in strategic self-presentation that is generally positive but remains calibrated by mutual knowledge and shared context. On social media, self-presentation is curated, selectively edited and often falsified to create an aspirational rather than accurate portrait (for reviews, see Verduyn et al., 2020; Meier & Reinecke, 2020). Passive consumers see this idealised content without access to the mundane reality that lies behind it, producing a systematically biased comparison set.

2.3 From Comparison to Resentment and Depression

Social comparison on social media does not occur in an emotional vacuum. Viewing superior others typically elicits resentment, a painful emotion characterised by feelings of inferiority, resentful longing, and perceived unfairness (Smith & Kim, 2007). On social media, resentment is pervasive. One large-scale study of German Facebook users found that one in three reported experiencing resentment after browsing the platform, with passive consumption as the primary trigger (Krasnova et al., 2013). This "Facebook resentment" has been linked to reduced life satisfaction and increased depressive symptoms, particularly among users with high social comparison orientation (Krasnova et al., 2015; Tandoc et al., 2015).

Resentment serves as a critical mediator in the pathway from passive use to poor mental health. When users passively consume idealised content, they engage in upward social comparisons that produce resentment. Resentment, in turn, erodes self-esteem and generates negative affect, which over time contributes to depressive symptoms. Importantly, this cascade unfolds automatically. Unlike active use, which requires deliberate effort and can be strategically managed, passive use bypasses conscious control, comparison is triggered effortlessly, resentment arises spontaneously, and well-being erodes incrementally with each scrolling session.

3. Review of Empirical Evidence

3.1 Meta-Analyses and Large-Scale Syntheses

The most comprehensive evidence on passive social media use comes from a meta-analysis by Godard and Holtzman (2024), which synthesised 141 studies with approximately 145,000 participants.

The authors found that most associations between passive use and well-being were small in magnitude, but passive use was associated with worse emotional outcomes in general social media contexts, though not within specialised social media groups. Notably, adolescents showed more negative

associations between passive use and well-being than adults, suggesting heightened vulnerability during developmental periods when social comparison concerns are most acute (Godard & Holtzman, 2024).

A separate meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2019) examined 33 studies and concluded that passive social media use was negatively associated with indicators of well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect), whereas active use was positively associated with well-being, albeit with small effect sizes. These small effects should not be dismissed as trivial: even modest daily decrements in well-being accumulate over months and years into clinically meaningful differences in mental health outcomes.

However, the meta-analytic picture is not uniform. Some studies have found negligible associations between passive use and well-being once contextual factors are accounted for, while others report that both active and passive use predict increased loneliness over time (Roberts et al., 2024). This heterogeneity underscores the importance of examining moderators and mechanisms rather than seeking a single effect size.

3.2 Longitudinal Studies

Longitudinal evidence provides stronger support for the claim that passive use precedes declines in well-being. A nine-year longitudinal study of nearly 7,000 Dutch adults found that both passive and active social media use were associated with increased feelings of loneliness over time, suggesting a bidirectional “feedback loop” in which lonely individuals turn to social media but find that their use exacerbates rather than alleviates isolation (Roberts et al., 2024). Critically, this study used repeated measures across nearly a decade, strengthening causal inference relative to cross-sectional designs.

In contrast, a within-person longitudinal investigation by Coyne et al. (2020) found no significant associations between passive social media use and internalising difficulties over time, suggesting that average effects may obscure substantial individual differences. Similarly, Orben and Przybylski (2019) reported that the association between digital technology use and adolescent well-being was “small and dwarfed by other influences,” though their measure of technology use did not distinguish active from passive engagement, a limitation that may have diluted true effects.

Taken together, longitudinal evidence supports a modest prospective association between passive use and reduced well-being, with considerable heterogeneity across individuals, contexts and measurement approaches.

3.3 Experimental and Experience-Sampling Studies

Experimental studies offer the strongest causal evidence because they manipulate social media use under controlled conditions. Park et al. (2015) conducted both experimental and longitudinal studies demonstrating that passive Facebook browsing undermines affective well-being by eliciting upward social comparisons. Participants who passively browsed idealised profiles reported lower mood and life satisfaction compared to those who actively engaged or used a control website.

Experience sampling methodology (ESM) provides a complementary approach, capturing naturalistic social media use in real time. A three-week ESM study of 387 adolescents with nearly 35,000 assessments found that active use was reciprocally related to feelings of social connection, whereas passive use was associated with lower feelings of connection both concurrently and across time. Passive use was also linked to reduced online connection, which in turn predicted more negative mood. These within-person effects varied substantially between individuals, confirming that the consequences of passive use are not uniform.

Experimental research has further disentangled the effects of different content types. Le Blanc-Brillon et al. (2025) found that exposure to extreme upward comparisons, viewing others perceived as dramatically superior, was particularly harmful to self-esteem and depressive symptoms, though frequent users paradoxically engaged in less extreme upward comparisons, partially buffering the negative impact. The authors concluded that both exposure to and extremity of upward comparisons contribute significantly, though modestly, to the effects of social media on mental health.

4. The Mediating Role of Social Comparison and Resentment

4.1 Upward Social Comparison as the Core Mechanism

If passive consumption is harmful, why does it harm? The evidence converges on upward social comparison as the central explanatory mechanism. When users passively scroll through curated feeds, they are repeatedly exposed to idealised portrayals of others' lives, exotic vacations, career successes, perfect relationships, fit bodies, that imply superiority along dimensions that matter to self-worth (Verduyn et al., 2020).

This mechanism has been tested directly. A study of 1,078 college students found that upward social comparison on social networking sites was negatively associated with subjective well-being, with resentment playing a significant mediating role (Wang et al., 2025). Similarly, Le Blanc-Brillon et al. (2025) reported that upward comparisons mediated the relationship between Instagram use and lower global self-esteem, and between social networking site use and increased depressive symptoms.

Critically, passive use is uniquely suited to trigger upward comparisons. Active users who post content of their own are simultaneously recipients of social feedback, likes, comments, shares, that provides countervailing validation. Passive users receive no such feedback; they only take in information about others while giving out none about themselves. This asymmetry creates a systematic bias in the comparison environment: users see the best of others without displaying any of their own best, self-selected version.

4.2 Resentment as an Emotional Consequence

Social comparison does not remain a dispassionate cognitive process. It generates emotional responses, of which resentment is both the most common and most consequential. A systematic review by Vranken et al. (2023) found consistent correlations between social comparison on social networking sites, resentment and depression. Three cross-sectional studies successfully tested models in which resentment mediated the relationship between social networking site use and depression.

However, the same review noted an important complexity: depression itself predicted subsequent social comparison and resentment, meaning that the causal arrow may run in both directions. Depressed individuals may be more likely to engage in maladaptive comparisons, producing a self-reinforcing cycle in which depression increases comparison, which in turn worsens depression.

This reciprocal dynamic is consistent with the broader literature on digital mental health, which increasingly recognises that social media effects are not unidirectional but transactional (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Rather than asking a simple “does social media cause depression?” question, researchers should examine dynamic feedback loops in which pre-existing vulnerabilities shape usage patterns that then exacerbate those same vulnerabilities.

4.3 Self-Esteem as a Pathway

Self-esteem represents another critical pathway linking passive use to depression. Passive social network usage has been found to be positively linked to depression through both resentment and self-esteem, with self-esteem serving as an independent mediator apart from resentment (Hussain & Griffiths, 2024). This suggests that upward comparisons damage well-being through multiple, partially independent mechanisms: the direct emotional pain of resentment and the more global erosion of self-worth.

Longitudinal research supports this interpretation. Wang et al. (2019) found that passive social media use predicted subsequent declines in self-esteem over time, which in turn predicted increased depressive symptoms. In contrast, active use predicted improvements in self-esteem, though through different pathways. These findings suggest that the active–passive distinction maps onto fundamentally different psychological processes: passive use operates through negative affective mechanisms (resentment, low self-worth), while active use operates through positive social mechanisms (belongingness, social validation).

5. Moderators and Boundary Conditions

5.1 Age and Developmental Stage

Age is one of the most consistent moderators of passive social media effects. Godard and Holtzman's (2024) meta-analysis found that adolescents showed more positive associations between active use and well-being, but also more negative associations between passive use and well-being, compared to adults. This developmental pattern is theoretically expected: adolescence is a period of heightened social comparison sensitivity, identity exploration and vulnerability to peer evaluation (Sebastian et al., 2008). Because social media provides an unprecedented platform for peer comparison, adolescents may be uniquely susceptible to its harmful effects.

Emerging adults (ages 18–25) also show elevated vulnerability, though potentially for different reasons. This developmental stage involves major life transitions (college, first jobs, romantic relationships) that lack objective benchmarks, creating strong motivation for social comparison. Moreover, emerging adults are the heaviest users of visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which are particularly comparison-prone.

5.2 Platform Characteristics

Well-being effects differ substantially across platforms, and these differences map onto the prevalence of passive consumption. Jaidka (2022) reported that frequent social media visits were associated with positive well-being for Facebook but negative well-being for Instagram, likely because Instagram is more visual, more aspirational and more conducive to passive consumption of idealised imagery.

Song (2023) directly compared Facebook and Instagram among 641 Korean college students, finding that upward comparisons were more frequent and more detrimental to psychological well-being on Instagram than on Facebook. The author attributed these differences to platform functionality: Instagram's image-centric design, algorithmic promotion of visually appealing content, and metric display (likes, followers) create a more comparison-saturated environment than Facebook's more text-driven, friendship-based network.

These platform differences have practical implications. Interventions targeting passive consumption may be more urgently needed for image-based platforms than for text-based platforms, and users who are vulnerable to social comparison may benefit from restricting their use of Instagram and TikTok specifically.

5.3 Content Type: Ability Versus Opinion Comparisons

Not all upward comparisons are equally harmful. Le Blanc-Brillon et al. (2023) experimentally distinguished between ability-based comparisons (e.g., career achievements, athletic performance) and opinion-based comparisons (e.g., political views, taste preferences) on Instagram. Exposure to ability-related comparisons elicited lower well-being than exposure to opinion-related comparisons. This finding aligns with social comparison theory, which predicts that comparisons on dimensions central to self-concept and perceived as controllable cause greater distress than comparisons on peripheral or uncontrollable dimensions.

The practical implication is that users can partially protect their well-being by curating their feeds to minimise exposure to ability-relevant content. Following accounts that share opinions, interests and mundane daily updates, rather than curated highlights of achievement, may reduce the comparison intensity of passive consumption.

5.4 Individual Differences: Social Comparison Orientation, Trait Resentment and Neuroticism

Individual differences powerfully moderate the effects of passive social media use. People high in social comparison orientation, the tendency to compare oneself with others across diverse domains, are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of passive browsing (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Similarly, individuals high in trait resentment experience greater emotional distress when encountering superior others online, and those high in neuroticism show stronger associations between passive use and depressive symptoms.

These findings suggest that passive use is not uniformly harmful; rather, it is harmful for individuals who are already predisposed to social comparison and negative affect. For users low in social comparison orientation, passive browsing may generate minimal distress because comparisons are not automatically triggered or are not emotionally elaborated.

This interaction has important implications for intervention. Universal “reduce screen time” recommendations may be inefficient because they target all users regardless of vulnerability. A precision approach that identifies high-risk individuals, those high in social comparison orientation, trait resentment or neuroticism, and provides tailored interventions may be more effective.

6. Active Social Media Use: Benefits and Risks

6.1 The Protective Function of Active Engagement

If passive use is harmful, does active use provide a protective alternative? The evidence suggests that it often does, though not without qualification. Active use, posting original content, commenting on others’ posts, sending direct messages, has been consistently associated with greater social connectedness, higher perceived social support and more positive affect (Verduyn et al., 2017; Godard & Holtzman, 2024).

The mechanism appears to be belongingness. When users actively engage, they receive social feedback in the form of likes, comments and messages, which satisfies basic needs for social validation and connection. Experimental studies have found that active participation on social media gives users a greater sense of connectedness, reduces feelings of social rejection, and increases feelings of belonging (Tobin et al., 2015). Longitudinal research confirms that active use is reciprocally linked to feelings of online connection over time, whereas passive use is not.

Importantly, the benefits of active use appear to accrue even in the absence of visible feedback. People who shared more about their lives online consistently felt more socially connected, regardless of whether their posts received likes or comments (Karasavva & Mikami, 2024). This suggests that the act of self-disclosure itself, expressing oneself to an audience, may provide intrinsic social benefits independent of external validation.

6.2 When Active Use Harms

However, active use is not uniformly beneficial. Godard and Holtzman's (2024) meta-analysis found that active use was associated with greater symptoms of anxiety, in addition to its benefits for well-being and positive affect. This paradoxical finding suggests that active use produces mixed emotional outcomes: while it enhances social connection and positive mood, it also exposes users to the risks of negative social feedback, performance pressure and social evaluation.

Users who post content are vulnerable to negative reactions, criticism, trolling, or simply the absence of expected likes, that can damage self-esteem and increase anxiety. Moreover, the effort required to maintain a curated online presence can itself be a source of stress, particularly for individuals who feel pressure to present an idealised version of themselves (Vogel et al., 2014).

Thus, the active–passive dichotomy should not be reduced to a simple “active good, passive bad” heuristic. Both forms of engagement carry costs, though the costs differ in nature and magnitude. Passive use primarily harms through social comparison and resentment; active use primarily harms through social evaluation anxiety and feedback dependence.

6.3 The Quality of Online Interactions

The distinction between passive and active use may be refined by considering interaction quality. Not all active engagement is equal: superficial “liking” may provide minimal social benefit compared with substantive commenting or private messaging. Similarly, posting content that invites comparison, such as achievement announcements or appearance-focused photos, may generate different outcomes than posting mundane updates or opinion content.

Recent work suggests that intentional, connected use, what might be called *meaningful* active use, is associated with improved well-being, often equivalent to the benefits of a complete social media break (Karasavva & Mikami, 2024). This finding is encouraging because it suggests that healthy social media use is not synonymous with abstinence. Users can maintain engagement while protecting their well-being by shifting their behaviour from passive consumption to intentional, reciprocal interaction.

7. A Transactional Model of Passive Social Media Use

Integrating the evidence reviewed above, we propose a transactional model of passive social media use and well-being (Figure 1). The model has four core components.

First, structural factors. Social media platforms are designed to maximise passive consumption. Infinite scroll, algorithmic content recommendation and the removal of timestamp cues all discourage active engagement and encourage passive browsing. These features are not incidental, they are profit-maximising strategies because passive consumption generates more ad inventory than active engagement (Zuboff, 2019).

Second, individual vulnerability. Users enter the online environment with pre-existing dispositions that moderate passive use effects. High social comparison orientation, trait resentment, neuroticism and pre-existing depressive symptoms amplify the negative consequences of passive consumption. Conversely, low vulnerability users may browse passively with minimal distress.

Third, psychological processes. Passive use triggers upward social comparison automatically and effortlessly. Comparisons generate resentment, which reduces self-esteem and increases negative affect. Over time, this cascade produces depressive symptoms, reduced life satisfaction, and, in a feedback loop, increased passive use, as depressed individuals seek information about others while lacking the motivation for active engagement.

Fourth, outcomes and feedback loops. The model predicts bidirectional causality: passive use predicts poorer mental health, which in turn predicts increased passive use and reduced active use. This reciprocal dynamic creates self-reinforcing cycles that can escalate over time, particularly among vulnerable users.

This transactional model has several implications for research and intervention. First, it suggests that cross-sectional studies will systematically underestimate passive use effects because they cannot capture feedback loops. Longitudinal designs with short intervals are needed to detect reciprocal causality. Second, it implies that interventions may need to break feedback loops rather than simply reduce overall usage, addressing the psychological mechanisms (comparison, resentment) that sustain passive consumption may be more effective than blanket time restrictions.

8. Broader Implications and Future Directions

8.1 Clinical Implications

For clinicians working with young adults who present with depression, anxiety or low self-esteem, passive social media use should be assessed as a potential maintaining factor. Structured assessment could include questions about the proportion of total social media time spent browsing versus interacting, and about the emotional responses elicited by passive consumption (e.g., “When you scroll through Instagram, how often do you feel **resentful** of others?”).

Cognitive-behavioural interventions can be adapted to address problematic passive use. Specific strategies include: (a) increasing awareness of automatic comparison processes through mindfulness techniques applied prior to social media opening; (b) behavioural experiments comparing mood after passive versus active use sessions; (c) curating feeds to remove comparison-triggering accounts; and (d) setting implementation intentions to shift from passive to active engagement (e.g., “If I open Instagram, then I will comment on one friend’s post before scrolling”).

Preliminary evidence suggests that brief social media detoxes, even one week of reduced use, can produce improvements in depression, anxiety and sleep quality, though durability remains uncertain. Importantly, the active–passive framework suggests that reducing passive use specifically, rather than total screen time, may be a more targeted and sustainable intervention.

8.2 Public Health and Policy Implications

The evidence reviewed here has implications beyond individual behaviour change. If passive consumption is structurally embedded in platform design, then expecting users to simply “use social media better” may be unrealistic. Algorithmic feeds optimised for engagement are, by design, optimised for passive consumption, because passive consumption drives the metrics (time on site, ad views) that generate revenue.

Public health interventions could include: (a) requiring platforms to provide users with usage metrics disaggregated by activity type (active vs passive hours); (b) mandating “interaction defaults” that default to active modes of engagement (e.g., requiring a comment before viewing content); (c) providing algorithmic options for content curation that minimise comparison triggers (e.g., removing metrics display, suppressing achievement-focused content); (d) age-gating features that amplify comparison (e.g., like counts, follower counts) for adolescent users.

Some platforms have already implemented features that reduce comparison opportunities. Instagram’s trial of hidden like counts, though limited, represented recognition that public metrics amplify social comparison. Future regulatory approaches could build on these precedents to require more systematic comparison-reducing design features.

8.3 Limitations of Current Research

The existing literature has several important limitations. First, most studies rely on self-reported measures of active and passive use, which are subject to recall bias and may not accurately capture actual behaviour. Passive consumption is particularly difficult to self-report because it is often automatic, habitual and interleaved with other activities (e.g., scrolling while watching television). Objective behavioural logging using smartphone sensors offers a promising alternative but has been used in relatively few studies.

Second, the active–passive dichotomy, while useful, may be overly simplistic. Some behaviours are difficult to classify: watching a friend’s livestream without commenting is passive, but watching a friend’s story and then sending a message is active. Moreover, users frequently switch between active and passive modes within a single session, and the psychological effects of each mode may depend on the sequence and context of switching.

Third, most studies are conducted in Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (WEIRD) samples. The psychological effects of passive social media use may differ substantially across cultures with different norms regarding self-presentation, social comparison and emotional expression. Cross-cultural replication is urgently needed.

Fourth, publication bias remains a concern. Small, non-significant effects of passive use are less likely to be published, meaning that meta-analyses may overestimate true effect sizes. Registered reports and preprint archives are beginning to address this issue, but systematic bias cannot be ruled out.

8.4 Future Research Directions

Several priorities emerge for future research. First, researchers should move beyond cross-sectional designs to intensive longitudinal methods that can capture the transactional dynamics of passive use. Experience sampling with objective logging can provide fine-grained data on the temporal ordering of passive consumption, comparison, emotion and subsequent behaviour.

Second, the field needs experimental manipulations that test causality more rigorously. Laboratory studies can manipulate comparison content and measure subsequent well-being, while field experiments can encourage shifts from passive to active use through tailored interventions.

Third, researchers should investigate protective factors that buffer against the negative effects of passive use. Preliminary evidence suggests that dispositional gratitude, nature connectedness and mindfulness practice may reduce resentment and comparison distress. Identifying modifiable protective factors could inform interventions.

Fourth, the comparative effectiveness of different intervention approaches should be tested head-to-head. Does reducing passive use produce larger well-being improvements than reducing total use? Is active-use promotion more effective than passive-use reduction? These questions have direct clinical implications.

Fifth, researchers should examine passive use effects across the lifespan. Most research focuses on adolescents and emerging adults, but passive use is increasing among middle-aged and older adults. The psychological consequences may differ substantially later in life, when social comparison processes are less central to identity formation.

9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the hidden cost of passive social media use is not merely a reduction in well-being, but a systematic undermining of well-being through default social comparison, comparison by default, in the most literal sense. Passive consumption activates upward social comparison automatically and effortlessly, producing resentment, eroding self-esteem, and contributing over time to depressive symptoms and reduced life satisfaction.

The empirical evidence for this claim is substantial, though not uniform. Meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, experiments and experience-sampling studies converge on a consistent pattern: passive use is associated with worse emotional outcomes, particularly among adolescents and on image-based platforms. Active use, in contrast, generally benefits well-being by satisfying needs for social connection and belongingness, though it carries risks of its own.

Importantly, the default nature of passive consumption is not an accident of user behaviour but a structural feature of platform design. Social media companies profit from passive consumption, because passive users generate more ad inventory than active users. Consequently, efforts to change individual behavior, while worthwhile, must be complemented by policy interventions that alter the incentive structures driving platform design.

Social media is unlikely to disappear, nor should it. These platforms provide genuine social benefits: connection across distance, access to communities of shared interest, and opportunities for self-expression. But those benefits are systematically undermined when passive consumption becomes the default mode of engagement. Recognising the hidden cost of the scroll is the first step toward building a digital environment where comparison is a choice, not a compulsion, and where well-being is supported rather than silently eroded.

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