



# **Social Media's impact on Mental Health**

**A behavioral science analysis**

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## Introduction

According to a 2019 article from Digital Information World, the average internet user spends just under two and a half hours on social networking and messaging platforms every day. The daily consumption is even higher among young users.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research has raised flags about the elevated utilization of social media, calling into question just how these networks impact the mental health and well-being of users. This paper explores the effects of social media on self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being, focusing on the heuristics that influence user behaviors and perceptions.

Using principles of behavioral science, we discuss key heuristics and biases that are potentially turbocharged by features and functionalities of social media apps and are leading to irrational behaviors by millions of users.

- 1** Humans love to exaggerate and social media turbo charges our ability to exaggerate about every aspect of our lives.  
**(Heuristics: Sensationalism Bias, Conversationalism Bias)**
- 2** Social Media encourages people to compare themselves to others and irrationally feel bad about their lives.  
**(Heuristic: Social Comparison Theory)**
- 3** Social media promotes the irrational Fear of Missing Out on what they don't have even when they are barely using what they do have in their lives already.  
**(Heuristic: FOMO)**
- 4** Social media creates an environment where people irrationally seek validation from others to feel valued in life.  
**(Heuristic: Looking Glass Self)**



## Step 1: Humans love to exaggerate and social media turbo charges our ability to exaggerate about every aspect of our lives.

Social media networks are riddled with millions of carefully curated profiles, with most users emphasizing idealized elements of their life. Whether it's perceived happiness, high social status, health, beauty, wealth or relationships, social media profiles are potentially filled with lies and gross exaggerations.

Users have full control over what they portray about themselves on social media and since there is no fact-checking, it's just too easy to everyone to exaggerate and rare for any profile to show the mundane, bad, or ugly aspects of people's lives.

Is social media creating a new irrational behavior in humans or have we always had the tendency to exaggerate and the technology is making us more irrational? Let's understand this phenomenon using two heuristics: **Sensationalism Bias and Conversational Bias**.

**Sensationalism Bias** posits that humans may choose to report more extraordinary events than everyday ones, making these events seem more common than they really are. Similarly, **Conversational Bias** suggests that humans tend to present themselves in the best possible light, exaggerating positive information about themselves while downplaying or omitting negative information.

Both Sensationalism Bias and Conversational Bias likely existed in humans long before social media was even created. Remember all those Thanksgiving Dinners where you tell Uncle Barry that everything is fine at work, the kids are doing great in school, the older is a piano prodigy, the younger one is a soccer star – you get the idea!

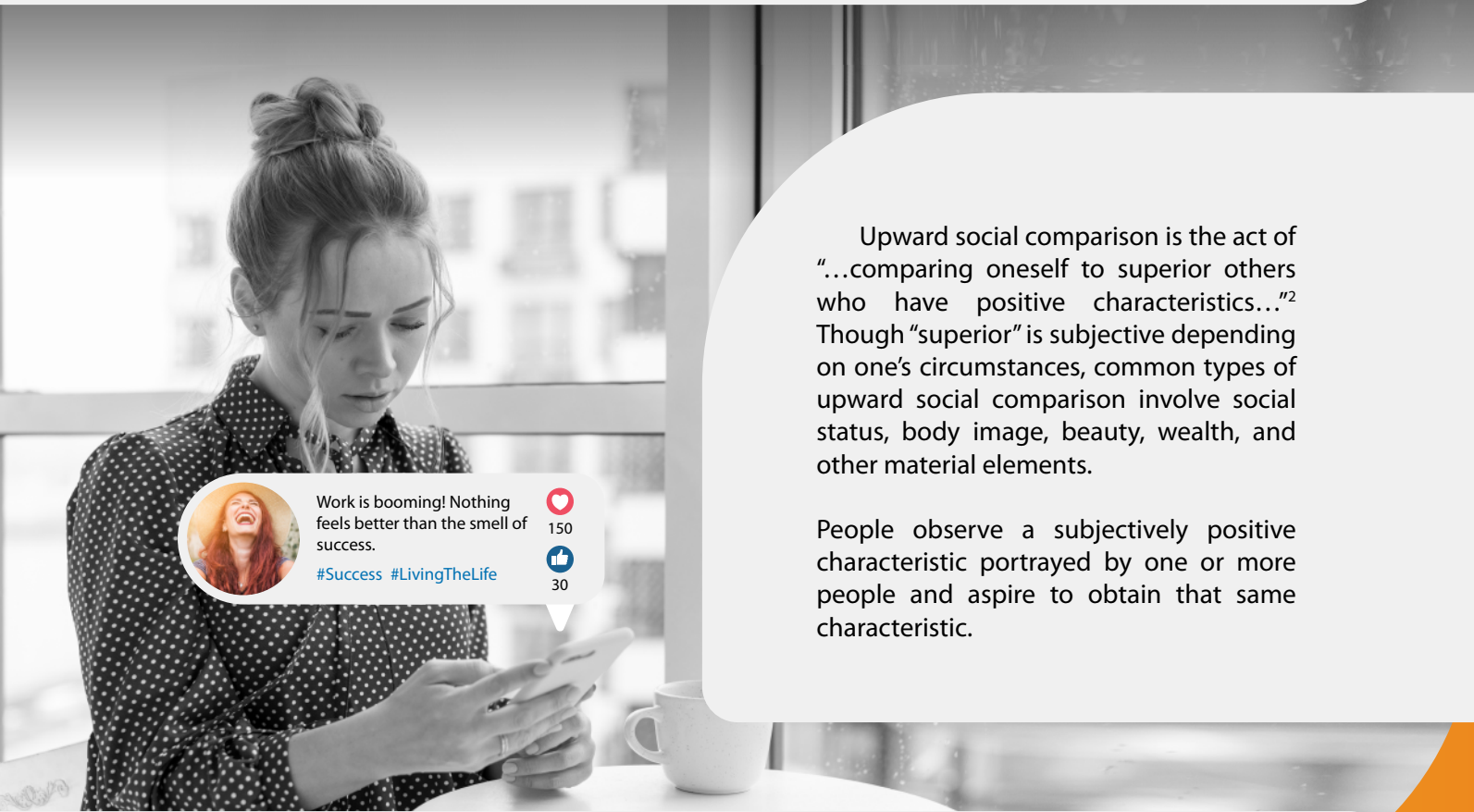
Social media technology is turbo charging the use of Sensationalism and Conversational Biases, albeit inadvertently. The medium itself increases the propensity to use both biases. While Thanksgiving Dinner gatherings were limited to only once a year, one can post something exaggerated about themselves on social media several times a day, every day. The technology allows people to post about themselves in many different formats like chat, pictures, videos, memes, etc., multiplying the biases with every post.



## Step 2: Social Media encourages people to compare themselves to others and irrationally feel bad about their lives.

According to Social Comparison Theory, humans are driven to evaluate all aspects of themselves and use others as comparisons when objective measures aren't available. As New York Behavioral Health explains, "This serves many different functions such as fulfilling affiliation needs, evaluating the self, making decisions, being inspired, and regulating emotions and well-being."<sup>2</sup>

How is Social Comparison Theory contributing to irrational behaviors on social medial networks? The answer is: Upward social comparison.



Upward social comparison is the act of "...comparing oneself to superior others who have positive characteristics..."<sup>2</sup> Though "superior" is subjective depending on one's circumstances, common types of upward social comparison involve social status, body image, beauty, wealth, and other material elements.

People observe a subjectively positive characteristic portrayed by one or more people and aspire to obtain that same characteristic.

According to New York Behavioral Health, "Although upward social comparison can be beneficial when it inspires people to become more like the person they look up to, it often causes people to feel inadequate, have poorer self-evaluations and negative affect."<sup>2</sup>

Recent research has found that many social media users "believe other users are happier and more successful than they are."<sup>4</sup> These curated perceptions on social media have created a critical hyperawareness of self-image due to 7/24 access to upward social comparisons. According to the Addiction Center, "Constantly comparing oneself to others can lead to feelings of self-consciousness or a need for perfectionism and order, which often manifests itself into social anxiety disorder."<sup>4</sup>





The combined effect of upward social comparison, Sensationalism Bias and Conversational Bias on social media is the setting of “entrenched unrealistic expectations” on what a person’s lifestyle, body, and bank account should look like.<sup>3</sup>

As the Addiction Center explains, “...people are comparing their realistic offline selves to the flawless filtered and edited online versions of others, which can be detrimental to mental well-being and perception of self.”<sup>4</sup>

Once again, upward social comparison is not new. It existed long before social media was even created. When used aspirationally and applied to objective criteria like income, assets, education, etc., it can serve as a great motivator for people to break out of poverty and achieve upward mobility in the society.

Social media is potentially contributing to irrational use of upward social comparison because the medium encourages comparisons on the basis of subjective criteria that shouldn’t ideally be used by humans to compare themselves to others.



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### Step 3: Social media promotes the irrational Fear of Missing Out on what they don't have even when they are barely using what they do have in their lives already

By now, we all know the phrase FOMO!

FOMO is defined as the "... pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent."<sup>3</sup> Driven in large part by Sensationalism Bias, millions of social media users post select events from their lives to their profiles, creating the perception of an elevated social life to the outside world.

Because humans are social beings who inherently want to be involved, seeing other peoples' experiences and not being included can trigger a feeling of intense exclusion and loneliness.

FOMO creates an urge for social media users to stay constantly up-to-date on what other users in their social circle are doing, perpetuating a negative cycle that "can have damaging psychological impacts."<sup>3</sup>

According to the Centre for Mental Health, studies have found, "a robust association between intense social media use, fear of missing out and both depression and anxiety."<sup>3</sup>

Social media apps and smartphones that run the apps jointly create an artificial environment that feeds the fear of missing out through a combination of notifications, alerts, reminders, etc. FOMO is definitely a concept accelerated by the use of social media and is potentially leading to irrational decisions in how millions of people choose to spend spare time.



## Step 4: Social media creates an environment where people irrationally seek validation from others to feel valued in life

Humans are highly motivated by the need for validation and respect from others. PsychCentral explains, "Once our physical needs are met, filling our core emotional needs becomes our number one priority in life. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, the desire for validation is one of the strongest motivating forces known to man."<sup>5</sup> Through the human journey to seek and attain validation, peoples' self-perceptions inevitably become heavily influenced by the ideas and opinions of others.

This concept can best be described by the Looking Glass Self heuristic, which suggests that humans see themselves through the eyes of other people, even to the extent of incorporating others' views of them into their own self-concept.

The Looking Glass Self is a natural occurrence during the human development of self-awareness and self-perception. Under the right circumstances, it can have positive effects such as helping people to feel validated, understanding their identity and forming their own set of morals, aspirations and opinions.

Social media networks amplify the human desire for validation and lead to irrational use of the Looking Glass Self heuristic. A key element of nearly all social media networks is the function of real-time "reactions" between users. In the early days of social media, users were able to comment on one another's photos or postings, offering their opinion, support, or dislike through words as they saw fit.

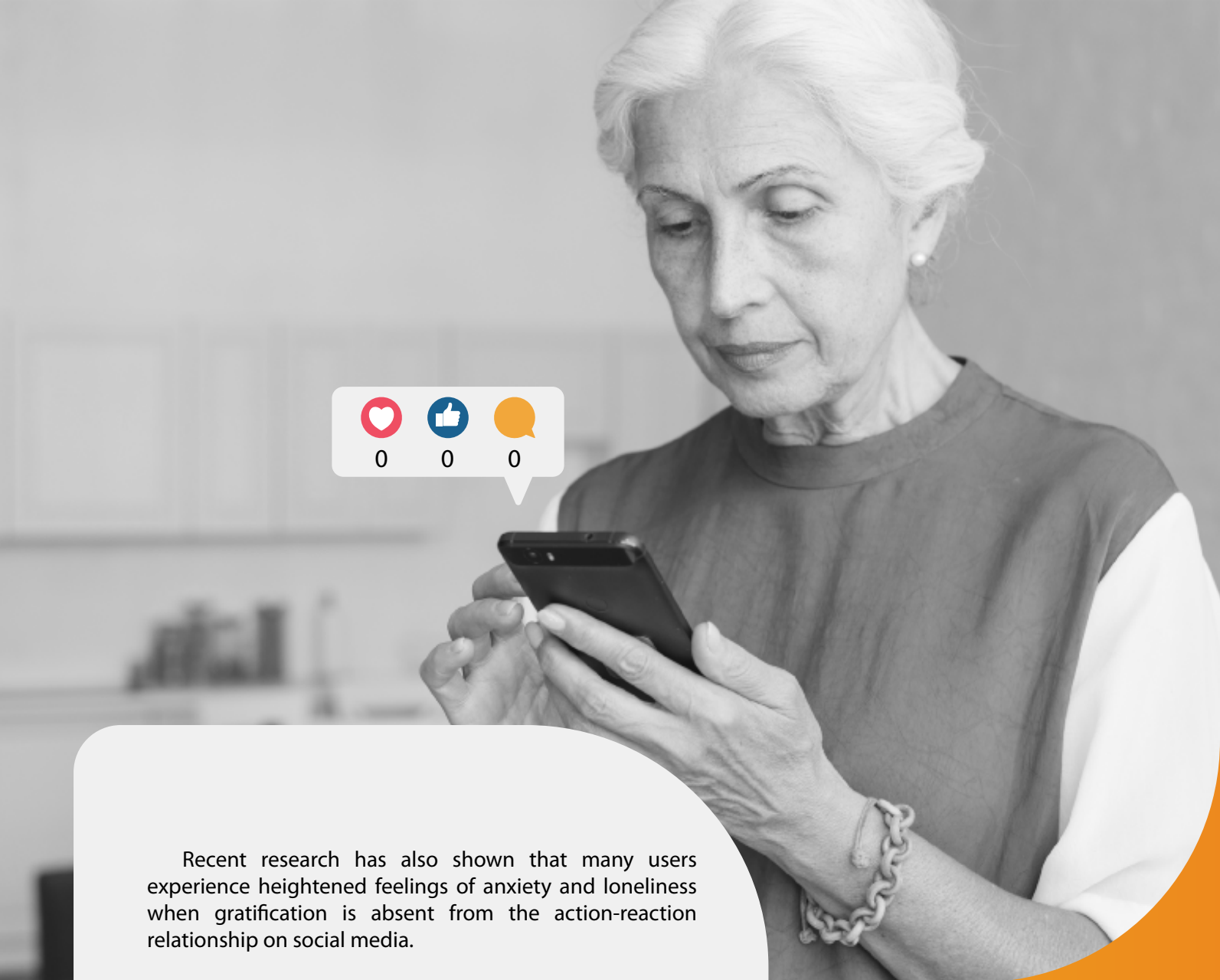




Over time, reactions have evolved to include “Like” buttons, retweets, mentions, and emojis to add quicker, yet still expressive, ways to react to other users’ content. Nowadays, as social media users share personal photos, opinions, or information, they inherently begin to expect their social media network to reciprocate almost immediately with some form of emotive reaction. Thus, an action-reaction relationship is established such that the sharing user posts something personal and feels instant self-validation and gratification when other users react.

Inevitably, the substance of the reactions from other users to shared personal content can begin to inform the sharing user’s self-concept due to the Looking Glass Self. Oftentimes, users can feel gratification and a sense of self-validation as a response to positive reactions from other users, thus improving the sharing user’s self-concept. However, when reactions to shared content are negative or if there is a complete lack of reaction from other users, the sharing user’s self-concept can be damaged.

As the Centre for Mental Health explains, “...if gratification is not experienced, users may internalize beliefs that this is due to being ‘unpopular’, ‘unfunny’, etc. A lack of ‘likes’ on a status update may cause negative self-reflection, prompting continual ‘refreshing’ of the page in the hope of seeing that another person has ‘enjoyed’ the post, thus helping to achieve personal validation.”<sup>3</sup>



Recent research has also shown that many users experience heightened feelings of anxiety and loneliness when gratification is absent from the action-reaction relationship on social media.

Because self-validation is such a motivating force within human nature, many social media users begin to crave the gratification that comes with the reactions from others. In fact, studies have shown that gratifying reactions, such as “Likes”, comments, or “retweets” trigger the reward center of the brain. According to the Addiction Center, “...when an individual gets a notification, such as a like or mention, the brain receives a rush of dopamine and sends it along reward pathways, causing him or her to feel pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>

To add some perspective, this is the same chemical reaction in the brain caused by drugs such as cocaine. As explained further by the Addiction Center, “Social media provides an endless amount of immediate rewards in the form of attention from others for relatively minimal effort.

Therefore, the brain rewires itself through this positive reinforcement, making people desire likes, retweets, and emoticon reactions.”<sup>4</sup> While the physiological impacts of social media feel gratifying and self-validating in the immediate, this can often lead people to use social media in excess or even become addicted.



## Conclusion

It is human nature to use social comparisons and seek self-validation to elevate self-perceptions. However, because social media manipulates the ability of users to make legitimate social comparisons and exploits the Looking Glass Self, it has become increasingly difficult for social media users to develop a clear identity and to maintain a healthy self-esteem.

With such an amplified existence of social media around the world, millions of people are being over-exposed to sensationalized content and addicting gratification experiences, dangerous to their mental well-being and the ability to develop a positive self-concept. By constantly comparing themselves to seemingly perfect images online, social media users are susceptible to becoming anxious or depressed over what others seem to have and they don't. That nagging feeling of not measuring up leads to diminished self-confidence and an erosion of self-worth.

While social media is a great communication channel, it shouldn't substitute for real-life interactions and relationships. At the end of the day, it is not your digital device or social network endorsements that offer the most comfort to you when you are dejected. And, while it's nice to have a lot of online people rooting for you, the onus is on us to decide where to draw the proverbial line.



## About the Author

Chelsea is an Associate Director at Newristics, where she leads research execution and provides expertise in field management within the Project Fulfillment division. She has an MBA with a focus in marketing and more than six years of experience devoted to pharmaceutical market research. More recently, Chelsea has spent a significant amount of time researching decision heuristics related to the overuse of Social Media. Chelsea is based in Austin, TX where she lives with her husband and a -4year-old Goldendoodle.

## About Newristics

Newristics is known for helping Pharmaceutical brands optimize their messaging using the unique, albeit powerful, combination of behavioral science and machine learning algorithms. Behavioral Science is the Nobel Prize winning field of research on how humans make decisions using mental shortcuts or decision heuristics. Having started with the simple idea of altering marketing messages to talk to customers' decision heuristics, Newristics has optimized messages for 100s of pharma brands including the top 10 names in the industry.

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