

**First-Generation, Low-Income College Students' Social Comparison Experiences on
Social Media During the Transition to College**

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Introduction

Humans are innately social creatures who rely on interactions with others not only to develop and maintain social relationships but also to make decisions that can have far-reaching implications on individual and societal levels. As an example, humans engage in *social comparisons*, defined by psychologist Leon Festinger as a phenomenon wherein humans evaluate their abilities and opinions using subjective means by comparing them to those of others (Festinger, 1954). These comparisons have historically been used to help us understand ourselves (i.e., self-evaluation), to see where we need to make improvements or adjustments (i.e., self-enhancements), and where we are excelling (i.e., self-verification) (Festinger, 1954; Santor & Yazbek, 2005; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Yet, they can also elicit undesired outcomes, especially with respect to one's self-esteem and well-being (e.g., Paterson et al., 2012).

While social comparisons have existed before computer-mediated interactions on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, these platforms' sociotechnical affordances (Gibson, 1977; Evans et al., 2017; Davis & Chouinard, 2010) may exacerbate the frequency with which we engage in them and widen the pool of individuals to whom we may compare ourselves. What is new about social comparisons that take place on social media, then, is not the *presence* of social comparison but the unforeseen scale on which they take place and the way that socio-technical affordances, in tandem with normative influences that encourage positive self-presentation, on social media can enable access to a seemingly limitless supply of stimuli that may prompt social comparisons.

While much scholarly attention to social media and social comparisons has focused on the context of adolescent girls and body image (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019), there are numerous other contexts in which online social comparisons are relevant for adolescents and emerging adults. One context in which social comparison can be salient is in education, as prior work has demonstrated the tendency for students to compare themselves to better-performing peers, eliciting both improved performance and negative affect/lower self-esteem (Dijkstra et al., 2008). Social comparison in the higher education context, in particular, thus also has the potential to shape both well-being and academic/career-related impacts.

Applying to college is a pivotal phase of life, accompanied by uncertainty, stress, and shifting social networks (Kroshus et al., 2021; Benson, 2007, Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). These stressors are exacerbated for first-generation students, whose parents did not complete a four-year degree in the United States, especially when first-generation students are also low-income (Kroshus et al., 2021). Often, these students lack the in-person support networks that can be particularly valuable when applying to and transitioning to college (e.g., Thayer, 2000). Moreover, the zero-sum nature of college admissions, wherein students effectively compete for limited spots at elite universities, can make social comparisons especially salient. Yet, while social comparisons about who gets into what colleges are important, they represent

just the beginning of how social comparisons can be involved in higher education. As students navigate the transition to college, they are increasingly inundated with information about their new peers that they can use as the basis of social comparisons during this tenuous time. Additionally, the continued access to ties with their home communities via social media may further increase the availability of social information that can be used to make social comparisons.

Successful college transitions are integral to persistence and success in higher education, especially for underrepresented students such as first-generation, low-income students and students of color (Carter et al., 2013). Often, students withdraw from college because they fail to integrate with an institution socially and academically (Tinto, 1993), face intense life stressors and declines in their subjective well-being (e.g., Khan, 2017), and have trouble keeping up with the rigor of college-level curriculum (Daley, 2010). Social comparison may be relevant to students' ability to integrate into an institution and their subjective well-being, as comparisons may lead students to feel they don't belong compared to students they deem as fitting in better into the institution.

Thus, the overall purpose of this prelim can be summarized by the following question(s):

How do first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students engage in social comparison on social media, and how do their social media use as well as social comparison processes and outcomes shift over the initial period of the college transition?

Several sub-questions guide this prelim exam, including

- *To whom do FGLI students compare themselves, and on what dimensions over the initial period of the college transition?*
- *What are the relationships between FGLI students' social media use, social comparisons, subjective well-being, and social and emotional adjustment to college over the initial period of the college transition?*
- *How do socio-technical affordances of social media, namely content visibility and persistence, and norms around social media self-presentation (i.e., positivity bias) relate to FGLI students' social media social comparison intensity as well as their subjective well-being and social and emotional adjustment-related outcomes over the initial period of the college transition?*

To further examine this question, I draw from scholarship in Human-Computer Interaction, Computer-Mediated Communication, Social Computing, Communication, Higher Education, Developmental Psychology, and Social Psychology to understand and bring together bodies of work on social comparison via social media and first-generation, low-income students' transitions to higher education. While increasingly large bodies of work examine first-generation students' experiences of the college transition (e.g., Ricks & Warren, 2021; Wang & Nuru, 2017; Gist-Mackey et al., 2018) and social comparisons on social media (e.g., Vogels et al., 2015; Meier & Johnson, 2022), little work to date has bridged these corpora of literature. Given the

ways social comparisons on social media have been linked to both negative well-being outcomes for adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Stapleton et al., 2017) and motivation/inspiration (e.g., Brown et al., 2022; Meier & Schäfer, 2018), it is important to examine what role, if any, social comparison processes play in the college transitions of first-generation, low-income students who face an excessive amount of stress and uncertainty during this life transition. Thus, I propose a two-part study involving a mobile ESM study and follow-up semi-structured, in-depth interviews to investigate these research questions further.

I expect to make the following theoretical contributions through the proposed studies:

- Extend social media social comparison research to higher education transition context
- Investigate identity and socio-economic marginalization vis-a-vis social media comparisons
- Illuminate how social comparison on social media takes place over time

I ultimately encourage social media researchers to broaden the contexts in which they investigate the impacts of social comparison on social media for adolescents and emerging adults. While contexts such as body image permeate the literature, it is equally important to consider other contexts, such as higher education contexts, where social comparison can be influential to emerging adults, as social comparisons in these contexts may have far-reaching implications on their collegiate and professional success. I also argue that educational researchers must consider the role of social comparison as a potential facilitator or inhibitor of the college transition process as mediated through students' sense of subjective well-being.

This paper is organized as follows:

In chapter one, "Social Comparison," I define the phenomenon of social comparison and situate it within its original field of social psychology, paying attention to both the processes and outcomes of social comparison that have been unearthed in social psychology scholarship. In chapter two, "Social Media Affordances, Self-Presentation, and Well-Being," I draw upon work on affordances theory, self-presentation theory, and subjective well-being to understand how social media affordances may facilitate self-presentational pressures which have implications for social comparison experiences and well-being outcomes. In chapter three, "Social Comparison on Social Media," I draw from a plethora of work from psychology as well as computer-mediated communication and social computing to identify what makes social comparison salient on social media and how the affordances of social media may influence both the process and outcome of social comparisons for different users. In chapter four, "First-Generation, Low-Income Students and the Transition to Higher Education," I primarily draw from educational and developmental psychology research as well as interdisciplinary theoretical work on life transitions to position transitions to higher education as a life transition and to uncover the transition-related challenges that face students broadly and first-generation, low-income students specifically. In chapter five, "Social Media & the Transition to Higher Education for First-Generation, Low-Income Students," I bridge these various bodies of work, highlighting specifically the research done at the intersection of social media and first-generation, low-income students. In chapter six, I propose a study combining the mobile Experience Sampling Method (mESM) and

follow-up semi-structured interviews with a subset of mESM participants to investigate the aforementioned research questions.

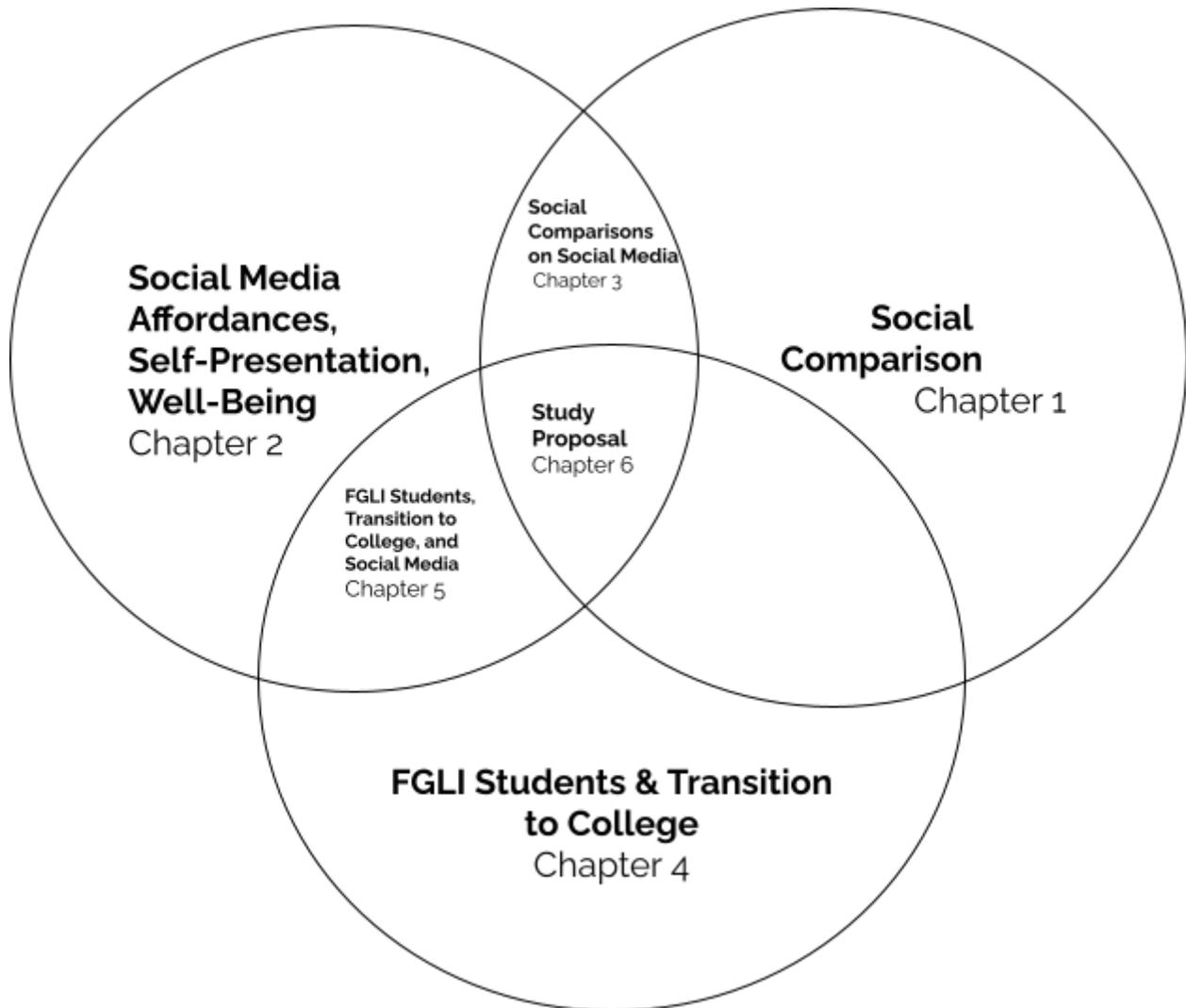


Figure 1. A visualization of the organization of the field prelim exam.

Chapter 1: Social Comparison

Defining Social Comparison

According to social psychologist Leon Festinger, social comparison is a subjective and social phenomenon by which humans gather the information they need to evaluate their abilities and opinions, particularly in the absence of objective, nonsocial information sources (Festinger, 1954). Since Festinger's original treatise, scholars across various disciplines (e.g., social psychology, communication, human-computer interaction) have leveraged social comparison theory, with some arguing that it has become so widespread as to constitute an entire field (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Along with the exponential growth in usage of the theory, there have

been notable advancements and theoretical refinements, particularly concerning understanding the social comparison process, including directions and motivations of comparisons, as well as these processes' manifold outcomes. As such, I turn to a discussion of social comparison directions next.

Directions of Social Comparison – To whom do we compare ourselves?

Canonical social comparison work examines social comparisons that take place in two directions – upward or downward (Suls et al., 2002). Sometimes an individual selects a target for comparison whom they evaluate as superior to them concerning a particular ability or opinion, which represents an upward comparison (Suls et al., 2002). Conversely, downward comparisons occur when an individual selects a comparison target and evaluates themselves as inferior in terms of a given ability, opinion, or sometimes, identity (Suls et al., 2002).

Most work in this domain discusses the implications of upward and downward social comparisons (e.g., Suls et al., 2002; Buunk et al., 1990). Still, it is also important to note the existence of a third direction of comparison – lateral comparisons. Lateral social comparisons occur with a comparison target that one perceives to be “equal” to themselves in terms of a chosen ability or opinion. Sometimes this occurs when an individual compares themselves to someone they deem to be similar to them on some dimension, usually a dimension of identity or experience. Lateral comparisons often occur in support groups wherein those with similar identities and/or experiences gather to share social information and exchange social support (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000).

Some work also suggests that humans not only socially compare themselves to individual targets of comparison but more abstract standards of comparison (Mussweiler et al., 2006). An abstract comparison standard can be “a hypothetical standard such as an ethical norm, or an imagined peer or exemplar” (Alicke, 2007). Other scholars suggest that an abstract comparison standard can be internal (Stets & Burke, 2000). With internal abstract comparison standards, an individual looks to others for feedback and compares this external feedback of how another individual perceives them with their internal identity standard, or “the meanings that define the identity” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 42). The directions of social comparisons reviewed thus far are informed by one’s motivation(s) for social comparisons, reviewed next.

Motivations for Social Comparison – Why do we compare ourselves to others?

As Festinger postulated, social comparison is an innately human phenomenon driven by the need for an individual to “evaluate his opinions and his abilities” (Festinger, 1954, p. 117). In the absence of *more objective and non-social means* to make such self-evaluations, humans process the social information around them and make comparisons. Yet, while Festinger proposes that “when an objective, non-social basis for the evaluation of one’s ability or opinion is readily available, persons will not evaluate their opinions or abilities by comparison with others” (Festinger, 1954, p. 120), more contemporary research complicates this proposition.

For one, even when so-called “objective” sources of information exist, the cognitive labor needed to parse through it all may lead one to instead turn to social comparisons, which exist as *cognitive shortcuts* or “*heuristics*” for information-seeking and decision-making (Mussweiler et al., 2006). Thus, social comparisons can be used to quickly assess a situation without invoking substantial cognitive resources.

Social comparisons can also be enacted strategically to fulfill other functions within the overarching umbrella phenomenon of “self-assessment,” including *self-verification*, *self-enhancement*, and *self-improvement*.

- *Self-verification* refers to the desire to be known by others in ways consonant with one’s self-views. Highly self-critical individuals, for instance, may engage in strategic social comparisons with those they deem “better” than them, thus eliciting feedback consistent with their highly critical self-view (Santor & Yazbek, 2005).
- *Self-enhancement* encompasses the desire to feel good about oneself and boost one’s self-esteem. Sociometer theory suggests that self-esteem is important because it serves as an early warning signal that alerts a person if they are violating group expectations and may be in danger (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Social comparisons, particularly those of a downward nature, can be used for self-enhancement by boosting one’s evaluation of their own abilities vis-a-vis someone whom an individual deems “worse off” along some dimension.
- *Self-improvement* refers to the desire to actively better one’s abilities. Comparing oneself to others deemed superior to oneself along some ability dimension can inspire and motivate behaviors that can help an individual improve along that dimension.

Thus, typically upward comparisons are associated with motivations to evaluate and/or improve oneself and one’s abilities (i.e., self-evaluation and self-improvement motivations) (Suls et al., 2002). Downward comparison, by contrast, is sometimes motivated by a desire to develop or verify a positive identity and sense of self through comparison with one deemed “worse off” (i.e., self-verification motivation) (Suls et al., 2002). Lateral comparisons can also be motivated by a desire to evaluate oneself and one’s ability. For instance, individuals in support groups may engage in social comparison to determine how well they are coping with a life challenge in contrast to other group members whom they deem to have it “worse off” or “better off” than themselves.

Moreover, social comparison can have identity-related motivations and implications. First, social comparison can facilitate or impede one’s process of developing and verifying their social and role identities (Stets & Burke, 2014). This is reminiscent of the self-verification motivation reviewed above. However, it is applied to the verification of one’s identity or self-concept (i.e., who they are) as opposed to the verification of their abilities and opinions (i.e., what they do or think). Second, social comparison can serve as a stigmatized identity management strategy, mainly when those with stigmatized identities engage in downward comparison to help them feel better about their identities (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Comparing oneself to someone who shares the same stigmatized identity can improve one’s self-esteem when that comparison is

downward (fulfilling a self-enhancement motivation), as it reaffirms an individual's beliefs in their abilities by pointing to the lack of abilities in another person who is "similar" along some stigmatized identity dimension. Thus, motivations for social comparisons can also influence their subsequent outcomes, which I discuss next.

Outcomes of Social Comparison – To what ends do we compare ourselves?

Scholarship often discusses the outcomes of social comparison in terms of a) *well-being benefits and harms* and b) *implications for one's identity*.

In terms of *well-being outcomes*, research typically investigates the influence of the social comparison process on constructs such as *self-concept*, *self-esteem*, and *subjective well-being*. Researchers have investigated the impact of social comparison on self-concept broadly and specific domains of *self-concept*, such as academic self-concept. In the academic context, Rogers et al. (1978) found that academic achievement influences academic self-concept via social comparison processes. Similarly, and drawing from a combination of larger data sets, Trautwein et al. (2009) discovered that students' self-concepts are most likely the result of "a complex social comparison process involving several sources of information" (p. 864). The relationship between social comparison and *self-esteem* is similarly complex, as social comparison has been negatively linked with self-esteem (Paterson et al., 2012) but positively linked with self-esteem when the target of comparison was "someone linked to the participant through shared membership in a meaningful social group" (Blanton et al., 2000). This implies the need to consider social identity more explicitly in future work on the impact of social comparison, which is elaborated on in the next section, 1.5. Connections between *subjective well-being* and social comparison are also, perhaps unsurprisingly, complex, as subjective well-being comprises three dimensions: life satisfaction, (the presence of) positive affect, and (the absence of) negative affect (Diener, 2009; Diener et al., 2018a; Diener et al., 2018b). Less directly integrated with well-being but relevant nonetheless is social comparison's relationship with qualities such as *motivation* and *inspiration*. While it is true that comparing oneself to someone deemed superior in terms of a given ability can be harmful to one's self-esteem and demoralizing, there is also evidence to suggest that such upward comparisons can elicit increased motivation and inspiration. For instance, upward social comparisons sometimes evoke emotions of envy and admiration, which can lead to a motivation to improve oneself (van de Ven, 2017). Additionally, upward social comparisons motivated by the desire for *self-enhancement* and/or *self-improvement* may elicit inspiration and motivation (Collins, 1996).

Concerning identity, social comparison can help individuals develop and verify their social and role identities, as discussed in section 1.2. At the group level, social comparison has been linked to group formation and intergroup behavior in many psychological studies (e.g., McDonald et al., 2013; Turner et al., 1979; Turner, 1975). These group-level implications can, in turn, inform one's social identity since social identity is rooted in group membership (Stets & Burke, 2014). Moreover, social comparison can even be a means by which individuals embodying stigmatized identities manage their experiences with stigma. Individuals who experience stigmatization cope with stigmatization through engaging in one or more stigma

management strategies, such as reframing the stigma, avoiding the stigma, engaging in humor to relieve tension around the stigma, and engaging in social distancing from other stigmatized individuals (Meisenbach, 2010). Social comparison, specifically downward social comparison with individuals who embody a similar stigmatized identity but are deemed “worse off,” can help individuals cope with their stigmatization via social distancing from downward comparison targets. However, it can also reproduce harmful forms of stigmatization (Meisenbach, 2010; Richard & Hennekam, 2021).

Gaps, Limitations, and Opportunities

While foundational to investigations of social comparison across contexts, much of the canonical work on social comparison neglects meaningful engagement with the role of social identity, power, and marginalization. Early work on social comparison from a psychological perspective often overlooked identity’s role in facilitating inter-individual differences in social comparison. Conceptual papers such as that of Festinger (1954), who is widely considered to have originated social comparison theory, do not contend with possibilities for individual differences in social comparison processes that hinge upon one’s social identity.

In addition to conceptual and theoretical papers, experimental lab studies that lend empirical evidence to the conceptual propositions advanced by Festinger similarly neglect emphases on social identity. For example, Lockwood & Kunda (1997) ran three experimental studies on undergraduate students to investigate how students compare themselves to “superstars” who excel in a relevant domain, ultimately finding that the success of such “superstars” can be inspiring and self-enhancing when their success is seen as attainable. Yet, social identity was largely neglected in this investigation. While one of the studies by Lockwood & Kunda (1997) examined only female students, they did not discuss the role that gender may play in social comparison in their investigation, nor did they consider participant demographics along the axis of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. The presumption was that their findings could apply to students broadly, though there is not enough evidence to suggest this based on their experiments alone.

The little work that explicitly considers identity vis-à-vis social comparison often does so without examining structural power relations or other implications of one’s social identity. Power refers to the ability to exercise influence over others (Cartwright, 1959) or one’s ability to control their own and/or others’ resources (Kipnis, 1976). Stets & Burke (2014) note how social comparison can be used to develop and maintain social and role identities but do not consider how social comparisons are laden with power dynamics. Specifically, Stets & Burke (2014) refer to identity as “the set of meanings that define who one is when one is a member of a particular group (social identity), when one is an occupant of a particular role in society (role identity), or when one claims particular characteristics that identify the person as a unique person (person identity)” (pp. 41-42). Rather than attending to power differences among those of different identities and how this influences social comparison, Stets & Burke (2014) focus on the meanings that individuals attribute to their identities and the relationship between these meanings and social comparison. While an important bridge between the concept of social

identity and social comparison, this theoretical perspective still lacks engagement with what differences in social identity create on a psychosocial or even a material level and how these differences can facilitate different types or outcomes of social comparison.

The little work that examines power vis-à-vis social comparison primarily relies on lab experiments rather than understanding the role power plays in social comparison “in situ”. For example, van Dijke & Poppe (2003) use experimental methods to investigate the effects of social comparison in equal and unequal power relations, concluding that when people engage in social comparisons wherein they compare their power to someone else’s, they base these comparisons on general rank in a hierarchy. Johnson & Lammers (2012) show that people who perceive themselves to be powerful may disregard social comparison information. Yet, this experimental work does not consider how this phenomenon occurs in everyday life when participants are not experimentally primed to feel more or less powerful but may experience power dynamics as a result of structural factors like socioeconomic status.

One notable empirical study of social identity, power, and social comparison explicitly considered the roles that in-group/out-group dynamics and stereotypes might play in this process. Blanton et al. (2000) reported on an experiment where 60 African American female students were given feedback on a bogus IQ test, then were exposed to either upward or downward comparison information about the performance of a white or African American female confederate, and finally responded to questionnaires regarding their affect and self-esteem. Whereas initial work on social comparison might suggest that exposure to upward comparison information would be unequivocally harmful, this study revealed contrasting findings by paying attention to social identity dynamics. Specifically, it found that being linked to a comparison target through a shared social identity could facilitate assimilation and thus positive outcomes of social comparison.

Despite some advancement in addressing the role social identity plays in social comparison processes and outcomes (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001), little work explicitly considers how social comparison figures into the lives of those facing class or socio-economic status-based marginalization, let alone in the context of major life transitions. This is important to understand because the class-driven social comparison experiences of first-generation, low-income students may differ subtly from race- or ability-driven social comparison experiences, although first-generation, low-income students often embody multiple marginalized identities and may *also* experience race- or ability-driven social comparisons. Moreover, life transitions can and often do coincide with renegotiations of one’s identity (Settersten & Thogmartin, 2018), which can carry implications for social comparison. Thus, future work can a) focus on populations that face class-based marginalization and/or stigma and b) emphasize the role of social context and social identity prominently in the research design. To the latter point, future work may use methods like semi-structured interviews that enable the collection of rich, contextualized data.

Taken together, the preceding chapter highlights the myriad directions, motivations, and outcomes of social comparison in face-to-face settings. While it is likely that FGLI students do compare themselves to others in face-to-face settings, many FGLI students are using social

media during their college transition (Yang et al., 2020; DeAndrea et al., 2012). As such, it is important to understand how social media uniquely shapes social comparison and well-being, in large part owing to its myriad affordances and opportunities for self-presentation. I discuss social media's affordances and their implications for self-presentation and well-being in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Social Media Affordances, Self-Presentation, and Well-Being

Social Media Affordances

As will be discussed in-depth in Chapter 3, social media uniquely shapes social comparison experiences. What makes social media a unique context for and influencer of social comparison processes and outcomes is largely its sociotechnical affordances. The concept of affordances has its roots in ecological psychology in the work of Gibson (1977), who argued that an affordance refers to what an environment “provides or furnishes [for an animal], either for good or ill... something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does” (p. 68). While speaking mainly about animals and ecological environments, Gibson's point of view laid the groundwork for more contemporary perspectives of digital technology affordances that operate from a sociotechnical lens, paying attention to both the materiality of the technology and the social context in which it is produced and embedded. Norman is largely credited with popularizing affordances in the human-computer interaction (HCI) field through his concept of “perceived affordances.” Moving slightly away from Gibson, Norman's (1999) concept of “perceived affordances” prioritizes the actions users *perceive* to be possible over the actions that are actually possible. This conceptualization is somewhat akin to Nagy & Neff's concept of “imagined affordances,” which similarly emphasizes user perception, albeit as it interfaces with the materiality of technologies and the intentions and perceptions of designers (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

As a concept, affordances have been critiqued for being too slippery, being leveraged in contexts in seemingly inconsistent and sometimes incompatible ways. Evans et al. (2017) analyzed 82 scholarly works on affordances to identify three inconsistencies in how the term is leveraged, finding that many articles using the term affordances do not meaningfully engage with affordances scholarship, identify lists of affordances without conceptually developing them, and identify lists of affordances that do not meet commonly accepted definitions. In response to these inconsistencies, Evans et al. (2017) identify three consistent criteria for affordances – that they are neither the object nor a feature of the object (e.g., “likes”), that they are not an outcome (e.g., privacy), and that they have variability.

Some affordances that meet these criteria include visibility, editability, persistence, and association, which have been identified as integral in the organizational context (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Visibility refers to the amount of effort people must expend to locate information and is often considered a “root affordance” (Treem & Leonardi, 2020) that helps give

rise to secondary affordances such as association, which refers to established connections between individuals and between individuals and content (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Editability allows individuals to craft and recraft messages before and after they are communicated (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Persistent content, as opposed to ephemeral content, remains accessible in the same form over time (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). While not initially proposed in the list of affordances asserted by Treem & Leonardi (2013), anonymity also constitutes an affordance and refers to the absence of a message source. Anonymity ranges in extent and comprises physical anonymity, discursive anonymity, self-anonymity, and other-anonymity (Anonymous, 1998). Recent work has complicated the notion of anonymity by pointing to the ways technical possibilities like “throwaway accounts” on Reddit, for instance, shape perceptions of anonymity (Leavitt, 2015), parsing out gradations of anonymity (Ellison et al., 2016), and noting that anonymity can encompass more than whether your identity is known by others (Rubya & Yarosh, 2017).

While other work identifies longer lists of affordances (e.g., Fox & McEwan, 2017), these will not figure centrally into the present inquiry as they primarily exist outside the boundary conditions that Evans et al. (2017) explicate. Specifically, many “affordances” listed in other work are outcomes of different affordances (e.g., accessibility and information control) (Fox & McEwan, 2017) as opposed to affordances themselves.

Other work in communication has enriched our understanding of the affordances concept, primarily through Davis and Chouinard’s (2016) and Davis’s (2020) *mechanisms and conditions framework*. This framework articulates several mechanisms of affordances – in other words, *how* affordances work. For instance, artifacts *request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage,* and *refuse* certain things from users. Moreover, this framework elucidates interrelated conditions under which affordances operate, including perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy. Perception refers to a subject’s awareness of the function of an artifact, while dexterity refers to their ability to execute the function (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Davis, 2020). Cultural and institutional legitimacy refers to the structural positioning of the subject and how much support they receive in executing the function of a given artifact based on this structural positioning. Davis & Chouinard (2016) offer the example of Facebook’s age policy, which demands that users be over the age of 13 to use the service, thus withholding support to those under the age threshold in executing the functions available on Facebook. The conditions component of this framework harkens back to the emphasis on user perceptions found in the work of Norman (1999) and Nagy & Neff (2015). Additionally, the conditions of dexterity and legitimacy highlight what past articulations of affordances have lacked – attention to individual differences grounded in social identity and power.

Affordances, therefore, shape the ways people engage with and on social media platforms, primarily the way they present themselves to others to cultivate and maintain impressions, which I discuss next.

Social Media Affordances & Self-Presentation

As social creatures, humans have a drive both to present themselves to other people and protect the impressions others have of them. The concept of “self-presentation” has been studied in-depth in offline and online contexts, mainly through the dramaturgical lens advanced by Erving Goffman (1959). This dramaturgical perspective likens social interaction to theatrical performances, arguing that there is a “front stage” and “backstage” of self-presentation. On the “front stage,” people present positive, desirable aspects of themselves to others, whereas their “backstage” performances are less carefully curated.

Much of the recent work on self-presentation is conducted in the social media context, mainly owing to the affordances of social media platforms that uniquely shape the self-presentation experience. Hogan’s (2010) foundational work bridges self-presentation scholarship in the dramaturgical perspective with social media research, noting that social media affords both synchronous “performances” and asynchronous “exhibitions” that can lead social media users to adopt a “lowest common denominator” approach wherein they only portray information about themselves that will be palatable to broad audiences.

DeVito and colleagues (2017) extend the work of Hogan (2010) by outlining how socio-technical affordances shape self-presentation on social media by influencing not only the self but also the audience. Relevant to the self, social media afford various degrees of presentation flexibility, content persistence, identity persistence, content association, and feedback directness, akin to Hogan’s (2010) concepts of performance and exhibition in synchronous and asynchronous online communication. DeVito et al. (2017) extend our understanding of affordances and self-presentation by noting how affordances influence the audience, enabling varying degrees of audience transparency and visibility control. This contribution stands alongside work on the imagined audience (Litt, 2012) or “a person’s mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating, which impacts how they portray themselves on social media” (p. 330). Specifically, greater audience transparency can align one’s imagined and actual audience, whereas less audience transparency can widen the gap between the imagined and actual audiences. Since actual audiences are typically much larger than imagined audiences (Bernstein et al., 2013), greater audience transparency may facilitate the kinds of “lowest common denominator” self-presentations discussed earlier and can inform decisions to disclose potentially stigmatizing identities and/or experiences.

Despite the prevalence of self-presentation in social media spaces, there remain tensions between portraying oneself “well” and presenting oneself “authentically.” Presenting oneself “well” involves a “front stage” presentation highlighting socially desirable traits and activities. This is commonly termed “positivity bias,” a phenomenon wherein social media communication “demands positive forms of authenticity” (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Presenting oneself “authentically” is complex because there is no set definition of authenticity. Social computing scholars tend to conceptualize authenticity as a socially constructed norm (Barta & Andalibi, 2021) and note that authentic online self-presentations can be driven by spontaneity and well-being, among other factors (Kreling et al., 2022; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). While too little

“authenticity” can be critiqued as disingenuous and fake, so too can being “too authentic” (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Being too authentic could carry an emotional burden and exposure to hate and harassment (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Duffy & Hund (2019) refer to this phenomenon as an “authenticity bind,” akin to Haimson et al.’s (2021) “authenticity paradox,” which refers to the phenomenon wherein people strive to achieve online authenticity, but that this is often unreachable or only possible at a high cost that is exacerbated by those who are marginalized. Specifically, people who are marginalized or who embody stigmatized identities find it challenging to present certain facets of themselves on social media in large part due to “positivity bias” (Andalibi, 2020; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). People who embody stigmatized or otherwise marginalized identities may not feel safe presenting themselves online to potentially unsupportive audiences (Andalibi & Forte, 2018), and may feel punished when doing so either in the form of negative or stigmatizing responses (Andalibi & Forte, 2018) or through platform and algorithm-driven actions like shadowbanning (Middlebrook, 2020; Gerrard, 2022).

In sum, authentic and positive self-presentation on social media may be, but are not always, mutually exclusive, as authentic self-presentation can carry a multitude of valences and can be challenging to achieve both because social media’s affordances can discourage it and due to one’s social positionality. Next, I unpack how affordances’ implications for self-presentation, in turn, shape well-being outcomes. Social media self-presentations’ relationship with well-being is significant for FGLI students during the college transition because this transition is already stressful and uncertain (Kroshus et al., 2012; Covarrubias et al., 2015), and well-being plays a role in whether students persist in postsecondary environments (e.g., Khan, 2017).

Social Media Affordances, Self-Presentation, & Well-Being

The relationship between social media and well-being is deeply complex and heavily debated among academics (e.g., Kross et al., 2021; Valkenburg, 2021) and in popular discourse (e.g., Twenge, 2017; Guernsey, 2017). The ubiquity of social media use, particularly in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults, necessarily calls into question its psychosocial impacts. Yet, it is not just social media’s pervasiveness that may carry implications for well-being, but also its affordances and what kinds of activities social media users engage in (Kraut & Burke, 2015). Combinations of visibility and permanence of not only content but also the connections we have with each other can facilitate a sense of being “always on” or “always available,” which carries possibilities for social support exchange, social capital development, and stress simultaneously (Vorderer et al., 2017; Trieu et al., 2019).

It is necessary to qualify what exactly is meant when researchers and laypersons reference “well-being.” Typically, scholars use this term as shorthand for “*subjective well-being*.” Diener (2009) notes that subjective well-being is, unsurprisingly, subjective, consists of positive measures rather than merely the absence of negative factors, and typically measures all aspects of a person’s life in a global manner. Most measures of subjective well-being consider three significant components: *life satisfaction*, *positive affect*, and *negative affect*. In more recent work on this construct, Diener and colleagues (2018) note that measurement of subjective well-being primarily occurs through self-report, sometimes through innovative techniques such

as ecological momentary assessment and the day reconstruction method. However, these methods make proving causality difficult. Jebb et al. (2020) contend with several predictors of subjective well-being, of which prosocial contact with others was a significant factor associated with positive affect.

Research on social media's connection with well-being is constantly evolving. A recent review article (Kross et al., 2021) notes that initial research in this space primarily relied on broad conceptualizations of social media, self-report data, and correlational research designs, leading to largely inconclusive results. Later, sweeping generalizations about social media use became more specific through frameworks such as the *passive vs. active* dichotomy of social media use (Verduyn et al., 2022), an *affordance* lens (Ellison et al., 2022), or even an *activity-audience framework* (e.g., Kraut & Burke, 2015; Yang, 2018; Lai, 2021) that delineates specific social media functionalities and their respective relationships with well-being outcomes. At the same time, scholars began to leverage experimental designs that could better speak to causation. For instance, lab experiments sometimes revealed small but statistically significant declines in well-being (Kross et al., 2021). Yet, lab experiments suffered from external validity threats, as they often relied on mockups of social media platforms rather than examining social media interactions in situ.

Over time, researchers increasingly leveraged experience sampling methods to address the need for more longitudinal data and evidence about in-situ social media use. For example, Wirtz et al. (2021) engaged in experience sampling to investigate the relationship between the use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on all three components of subjective well-being identified by Diener (2009), ultimately discovering that their participants experienced greater degrees of negative affect associated with their use of all three social media platforms.

Rather than focus on different platforms, Valkenburg et al. (2022) focused on *passive* (i.e., browsing) vs. *active* (i.e., posting or direct messaging) uses of social media in their experience sampling study. The passive-active hypothesis, which posits that “passive” social media use leads to adverse effects on well-being, whereas more “active” social media use can elicit neutral or positive well-being outcomes (Verduyn et al., 2017), has been critiqued on several fronts. Namely, it has been critiqued for failing to consider a) individual differences amongst users and b) the role that the *kinds* of content that users are exposed to play in well-being outcomes.

Responding to the former critique, Valkenburg et al.'s (2022) study design sophisticatedly examined what they termed “*person-specific susceptibilities*” to three specific potential effects of social media concerning well-being: envy, inspiration, and enjoyment. Ultimately, they found that the within-person effects deviated from the overall between-person associations, pointing to the need to consider individual differences in how people experience psychological phenomena like envy when considering the relationship between social media use and well-being. Increasingly, scholars have been paying attention to specific use cases of social media in addition to examining both between-person and within-person media effects, an approach sometimes referred to as a “*causal effect heterogeneity*” or “*idiographic*” approach (Valkenburg, 2022). Valkenburg's (2022) and Valkenburg et al.'s (2022) papers lend additional credence to the

notion of highly variable person-specific effects that also emerged from the experience sampling study of Beyens et al. (2020). Another way scholars have moved beyond binary characterizations of social media use as passive or active is by introducing a third category – interactive usage. Yang (2016) proposes that active usage involves content production, interactive use involves interaction with other users, and passive usage refers to browsing and consuming content. Still another way that social media research has evolved from the passive/active positive/negative binaries is by understanding social media’s implications for well-being as “both-and”; that is, rather than viewing social media as either positive or negative, Weinstein (2018) argues that it is both positive and negative across a host of functional dimensions such as self-expression, relational interactions, exploration and browsing that these positive and negative effects are imbricated in how individual social media users are able (or unable) to manage their online experiences. These findings highlight the complex and contested nature of the relationship between social media use and well-being, which is reflected by the weakly negative and null correlations found in meta-analyses and narrative reviews of studies on social media and well-being (Kross et al., 2021; Orben, 2020; Huang, 2017).

In sum, discussions of social media’s implications for well-being are contentious and complex, even among social media researchers. Over time, researchers have employed a diverse array of methodological approaches to investigate social media’s impact on well-being. Theoretically, research has evolved from focusing on social media use and well-being in a global sense to focusing on specific social media activities and well-being indicators, and how these vary from person to person. Despite these advancements, several limitations remain, which I cover next.

Gaps, Limitations, and Opportunities

Scholarship at the intersection of social media and well-being still faces limitations in the populations it involves and the components of individual differences it examines. First, many studies on social media and well-being draw from samples of WEIRD populations (i.e., from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic nations). Within these national contexts, sampling again skews toward privilege, with more white and middle and upper-middle-class individuals, often college students, pervading samples. There is little consideration of how minoritized college students, including students of color and first-generation, low-income students, may have different experiences with social media and well-being. It is likely that they do have different experiences as social media may provide them with resources they do not have access to in their offline networks (see Jeon et al., 2016 and Brown et al., 2022), and thus the picture of social media’s relationship to well-being may diverge from their more privileged counterparts. Second, while attention to individual differences is essential, much of these individual differences hinge on personality characteristics like those measured in the Big Five Inventory (i.e., openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John et al., 1991)). Equally important is the explicit examination of individual differences in social positionality, or the identities that may play at least some role in influencing them to use social media in particular ways. Prior work has demonstrated that marginalized and stigmatized social groups, for instance, may use social media to disclose their identities, seek support, and build affiliation with similar others (e.g.,

Andalibi et al., 2018; Pyle et al., 2021; DeVito et al., 2019), future work can more explicitly a) recruit more diverse samples of participants and b) build investigations of the role that social positionality plays in the actual research design itself.

The preceding chapter has discussed social media affordances and their myriad implications for self-presentation and, in turn, subjective well-being. As previously mentioned, well-being is an important component of the college transition for FGLI students because it is linked to students' decisions regarding whether to persist or drop out of higher education institutions (e.g., Khan, 2017). Yet, as noted, social media affordances typically encourage people to only post their "highlight reels" (Weinstein, 2017). If FGLI students are only exposed to the highlights of their peers' college transitions, they may compare themselves and their own college transitions to these peers' transitions. As such, it is imperative to delve deeper into social comparison experiences on social media, which the next chapter discusses.

Chapter 3: Social Comparison on Social Media

What Makes Social Comparison Salient on Social Media?

A vast body of research is dedicated to disambiguating potential relationships between social comparisons made on social media and various facets of well-being such as loneliness and self-esteem (e.g., Vogel et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2015; Yang, 2016; Gerson et al., 2016; Reer et al., 2019; Trieu et al., 2021). While the benefits and consequences of social comparisons have been studied in offline contexts for decades, the unique affordances (Gibson, 1977; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Evans et al., 2017) of social media platforms can carry important implications not only for how social comparisons are made on social media but also to what ends. Taken together, the *visibility* and *persistence* (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Treem, Leonardi, & van den Hooff, 2020) of content, profiles, and networks on social media platforms cultivate an environment rich with social information that can be used to make comparisons based on ability and opinion (Verduyn et al., 2020). For instance, the visibility of like counts may spur social media users to easily compare their popularity based on the number of likes received. Moreover, knowing one's content is persistently available to others may influence more constrained self-presentation. In contrast, self-presentation pressures may be somewhat lower in social media contexts that afford more ephemeral self-presentations. This is reflected in research on Snapchat, which notes that disappearing content reduces self-presentation pressures (McRoberts et al., 2017; Bayer et al., 2016). More recently, researchers have come to similar conclusions about Instagram Stories, or content posted to Instagram that can only be viewed for 24 hours (Kreling et al., 2022; Trieu & Baym, 2020).

Additionally, the norms around emotion-sharing on many social media platforms create what social scientists call a "positivity bias" (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), which refers to the ways that the social media environment "favors positive forms of authenticity over the presentation of negative aspects of the true self" (p. 95), as mentioned in the last chapter. Disproportionately positive content may be influenced by the ability of social media users to asynchronously craft their self-presentations and edit them once posted. An abundance of positively valenced social

media content can spur upward social comparisons for users (Verduyn et al., 2020). Regarding the affordance of anonymity, opportunities to present oneself anonymously may lower self-presentation concerns, suppressing the “positivity bias” that may spur harmful upward social comparisons. However, on the other hand, anonymous posters may not feel pressure to present themselves accurately, instead positively exaggerating their lives in ways that may encourage rather than impede upward social comparisons. Finally, while social media enables its users to maintain ties they have with individuals in their offline network to whom they may compare themselves in face-to-face contexts, it also allows the creation of new ties and the development of parasocial relationships with online influencers and celebrities. Thus, social media may increase the number of social comparison targets available to users.

Though affordances and positivity norms tend to shape social comparison experiences, it is important to note that individual differences also shape social media social comparisons in meaningful ways, which the next section addresses.

How do Individuals Experience Social Comparison on Social Media Differently?

Importantly, not everyone is equally predisposed to the tendency (and consequences of) social comparison in social media contexts in the same way. Prior work has uncovered the roles of social comparison orientation, or “a trait that reflects these individual differences [in social comparison]” (Vogel et al., 2015, p. 249) on tendencies to engage in such behaviors in an online context and its subsequent effects. This line of work argues that individuals high in social comparison orientation tend to experience more intense adverse effects of online social comparisons on their self-esteem and affective states (Vogel et al., 2015). Moreover, some work has unearthed goal-drive persistence as a personality trait that moderates the impact of online social comparisons (Gerson et al., 2016).

In addition to individual traits and states that may influence online social comparison, a stream of work has investigated how various kinds of social media use can relate to social comparison processes and outcomes. Central to this work is the notion of active versus passive social media use, described in Chapter 2. This work has argued that passive use may facilitate more frequent and harmful social comparisons than active use (Verduyn et al., 2020). By browsing the “highlight reels” of others, users may consume more social information that fuels upward comparisons. By contrast, by interacting with other individuals on social media, the positive facade facilitated by social media’s affordances and normative influences may reveal itself, curbing upward comparison.

Beyond personality and social media use factors, work in this domain has revealed how various types of envy mediate online social comparisons and their well-being effects. Envy can be conceptualized as *benign*, or the “desire to have the same advantage possessed by the comparison target” (Latif et al., 2021, p. 2), or *malicious*, a “feeling of inferiority and resentment that results in a wish for the comparison target to lose their advantage” (Latif et al., 2021, p. 2). Numerous studies give credence to the idea that when social comparisons spark *benign* envy, it can, in turn, facilitate positive well-being outcomes such as self-improvement intentions (Latif et

al., 2021), positive affect, and inspiration (Meier & Schafer, 2018; Meier et al., 2020). Conversely, when social comparisons spark malicious envy, this can facilitate adverse well-being outcomes such as negative gossiping (Latif et al., 2021). The type of envy one experiences triggered by a social comparison target is not static but person-specific and contextually dependent. For instance, some work suggests that being connected to those on social media whom one perceives as similar to themselves spurred more benign envy, which, as previously mentioned, can facilitate inspiration (Noon & Meier, 2019).

Social comparison on social media has primarily been investigated in the context of body image, particularly for adolescent and emerging adult women (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). Yet, some work exists in other domains, from lifestyle and travel (Siegel & Wang, 2019) to social identity (Yang et al., 2018), academic (Dijkstra et al., 2008), and career (Fukubayashi & Fuji, 2021).

Gaps, Limitations, and Opportunities

While the work discussed in this chapter begins to elucidate nuances behind the relationship between social comparison and social media use, there are several limitations to this work that can be ameliorated in future scholarship. For one, while social media research has advanced in acknowledging more granular aspects of “social media use” beyond time spent or broad conceptualizations of active vs. passive use, research at the intersection of social comparison and social media still often, though not always, relies on these overarching measures to make their claims. One notable exception is that of Burke et al. (2020) who focus on the number of friends, amount of content seen, and amount of feedback to friends’ posts seen as influential to social comparison experiences on Facebook. Future work should continue to acknowledge particular *activities* (e.g., direct messaging, posting to Stories, posting to News Feed, etc.) and content consumed to make more specific claims about the relationship between social media use, social comparison behaviors, and subjective well-being. Second, studies in this space often take a single-platform approach, typically focusing on Facebook or Instagram. Yet, we know that these individual platforms make up an individual’s more extensive social media ecology (Zhao et al., 2016) or the constellation of platforms that individuals pair together to gratify their needs. Given this fact, social media researchers are urged to employ cross-platform studies to better understand the uses and effects of social media in a more externally valid way (Hall et al., 2018) and to surface factors related to social media use that may not be visible in single-platform analyses (Tufekci, 2014). By doing so in the context of social comparison, scholars can better elicit how social comparisons on social media, and their well-being effects, may be shaped by platform affordances and norms. Third, social media and social comparison research often implicitly presume *adverse* effects on well-being, measuring aspects like depression, loneliness, and self-esteem (e.g., Vogel et al., 2014; Yang, 2016). However, some work suggests that social comparisons on social media can be positive in eliciting inspiration and motivation (e.g., Meier et al., 2020; Noon & Meier, 2019). Future work can simultaneously assess a combination of negative (e.g., loneliness, anxiety) and positive (e.g., inspiration, motivation, identity clarity) outcomes of social media social comparisons. Finally, as with many studies on social media, studies in this space tend to skew toward samples that lack diversity in terms of race, class, and

gender. Future work can engage in purposive sampling to ensure racial, class-based, and gender diversity and better understand how social positionality affects social comparison processes, social media use, and well-being effects.

The preceding chapter has described how affordances and positivity bias/norms influence social media social comparisons, and how individual differences can also shape these comparison experiences. While individual differences have typically referred to personality traits, social identities such as socioeconomic status may also differentiate one person and their social comparison experiences from another's. The first-generation, low-income identity, for instance, may uniquely shape social comparison experiences. To speculate on this phenomenon, it is necessary to first understand first-generation, low-income students and their experiences when transitioning from high school to college, which the next chapter accomplishes.

Chapter 4: First-Generation, Low-Income Students & the Transition to Higher Education

Life Transitions

While disparate conceptualizations and definitions of life transitions exist, an influential conceptualization by Nancy Schlossberg (1981; 2007) suggests that *transitions* can involve changes to one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions about oneself and the external world. Major life transitions influence all four aspects, while more minor life transitions may influence only one or two. In response to the changes that come with life transitions, individuals are expected to engage in some degree of adaptation, or "a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7). A given transition's ease (or lack thereof) can be influenced by various event-related, individual, social, and institutional factors (Schlossberg, 1981). Event-related factors include the source (i.e., external or internal), timing (i.e., on or off-time transitions), onset (i.e., gradual vs. sudden), and duration (i.e., temporary vs. permanent) of a major life event or transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Individual factors include psychosocial competence, sex, age, health status, socioeconomic status, and values. Social factors encompass one's interpersonal support systems, while institutional factors include the presence or lack of institutional support (Schlossberg, 1981).

While Schlossberg outlines the characteristics of and factors influencing transitions, other work proffers taxonomies and inventories that identify major life transitions and their impacts on those who experience them. For instance, major life events and transitions have been documented in Holmes & Rahe's (1967) "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" (SRRS), which reported 43 major life events that the authors deemed relevant based on their experiences as clinicians, paired with social readjustment scores gathered from survey data. This inventory, while significant, is somewhat dated and lacks engagement with life transitions relevant to contemporary living. Moreover, it was borne out of a top-down rather than bottom-up process used to solicit so-called *major* life events. In response to these limitations, Haimson et al. (2021) used two batches of

survey data to elicit relevant life events and measure the perceived social readjustment required in their wake. What resulted was the Major Life Events Taxonomy, “a list of 121 events that people considered to have a major impact on them, in 12 categories: Health, Financial, Relocation, Legal, Relationships, Family Relationships, Death, Career, Education, Lifestyle Change, Identity, and Societal” (Haimson et al., 2021, p. 933). Similarly to Holmes & Rahe (1967), this taxonomy not only lists major life events but also associates them with a social readjustment value.

In addition to considering the characteristics of, factors associated with, and examples of life transitions, canonical frameworks also advance understandings of the *transition process*. For instance, Van Gennep (1960) conceived of life transitions through the construct of “rites of passage,” wherein members of tribal societies worked through three related phases: 1) separation or withdrawal from one’s current environment, 2) liminality as one has withdrawn from their former environment yet has not integrated into their new environment, and 3) incorporation or integration into a new environment and accompanying social role. Taken together, these myriad ways of thinking about life transitions illuminate not only the temporal process associated with them but also the characteristics that precede them and influence how people adapt to them. Considering these understandings, it is necessary to conceive of how the transition to higher education may constitute a life transition, which I describe next.

The Transition to Higher Education as a Life Transition

The shift from secondary to tertiary education is pivotal for the lives of many late adolescents and emerging adults as they navigate new *roles*, *relationships*, and *routines* associated with life in postsecondary institutions. While broad theoretical frameworks exist to describe and explain major life transitions (e.g., Schlossberg’s transition model reviewed above), there are more specific models created in the student development context.

One such model is Tinto’s (1993) model of student attrition, which posits that students’ persistence or attrition can be explained mainly by their social and academic integration into the postsecondary institution. This model is characteristic of *socialization models* of transition, which suggest that socialization processes constitute a significant factor in the transition to college (Carter et al., 2013). Moreover, Tinto’s model borrows heavily from anthropological scholarship on life transitions by Van Gennep (1960), whose work is reviewed in the last section. Tinto conceives three related separation, transition, and incorporation processes that students must face when moving from late adolescence into emerging adulthood and the post-secondary environment. In the college transition context, separation can refer to students’ movement away from family and friends in their home communities, which, according to Tinto and Van Gennep, would benefit their transition process. The next phase, transition, describes the liminality involved in beginning to separate from one’s home community without being fully engrossed in the norms and behaviors of post-secondary environments. Finally, the incorporation phase involves successful acculturation or socialization to norms of higher education institutions.

Where Tinto takes a more sociological and anthropological approach to the college student transition, Schlossberg's transition theory (reviewed in the last section) takes a psychological approach that can meaningfully situate the transition to higher education as a formative life transition. Specifically, the changes in *roles*, *routines*, and *relationships* involved in the college transition align with Schlossberg's (1981) view of transition.

First, the transition to higher education involves fundamental *role shifts* between a high school and a college or university student and between an adolescent and an emerging adult (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood captures the developmental period between the late teens and mid-to-late twenties in industrialized societies (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2007). This phase of life constitutes five major features – identity explorations, instability, being self-focused, feeling in-between, and being aware of various possibilities for one's life (Arnett, 2007). Many of these features are germane to the college transition, as students are placed in a new environment to navigate instability and explore possibilities for their identity while also feeling the liminality of being “between” one's home community and campus community. Specific social roles may also become more or less salient as students move from their home community to a college or university campus. For instance, whereas one's college generational status (i.e., whether they are first-generation or not) may not be salient in relatively more homophilous home communities, this role may become more profound on campus, where students have the opportunity to encounter peers with a wide array of socio-economic backgrounds.

Second, the transition to higher education influences students' *relationships*. As many students attend residential schools that require them to move cities or states, they must navigate shifting networks as they typically have less face-to-face access to those from their home communities. Moreover, they often develop new peer networks on campus. Students who live on campus are more likely to form new friends within the college community than those who live off campus (Benson, 2007). However, contrary to some perspectives, they do not simply sever ties with their home communities. Instead, empirical evidence suggests that students transitioning to college express a need to preserve the connection to their old community while (re)inventing themselves for their new communities (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Social media platforms enable simultaneous connection between both groups (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Brown & Ellison, 2021).

Third, the transition to higher education is a canonical life transition because it intimately shapes students' *routines*. Students navigate increasing responsibility for balancing coursework, social obligations, and any external work commitments. For many students, this transition represents a shift from externally defined routines developed by parents and educators to internally defined routines created by students. Such obligations often dictate the schedule of college students. Some research has even examined how routine changes during the college transition influence sleep/wake patterns and are associated with relational conflict (Zimmermann, 2011).

Finally, for many students, the transition to higher education comes with changing assumptions and *perspectives* on themselves and the world around them. As one example, first-generation college students come to post-secondary institutions with particular worldviews about social

class, which may shift during the transition. Specifically, some students opt to adapt to the class-related beliefs of the more affluent around them or attempt to dress like more affluent students, while others more intensely emphasize the working-class values and worldviews they entered college with. Some students downplay the role of class in their lives altogether (Rice et al., 2017).

In sum, the college transition can be challenging for all students, but many challenges are exacerbated for students who are minoritized or underserved, such as FGLI students, whose transition experiences I review next.

The Transition to Higher Education for First-Generation, Low-Income Students

Transitioning to higher education can be stressful for all students, requiring them to develop and practice resilience skills to succeed as they navigate shifting networks, roles, routines, and worldviews (Dorrance Hall & Scharp, 2021). These skills can, in part, be cultivated through students' social interactions. In their longitudinal survey study, Dorrance Hall & Scharp (2021) identify family and friends as support resources that are influential for social network resilience skills. In addition to resilience skills, self-compassion has been identified as predictive of successful college transitions (Kroshus et al., 2021).

While all students can experience difficulties during the pivotal transition to college, first-generation, low-income students may experience exacerbated and/or unique challenges. First, first-generation, low-income students tend to be part of smaller networks that are less rich with informational support than those of more well-connected peers. Thus, they may not be able to access as much or as high-quality information about what to expect for the college transition as their peers (Thayer, 2000). Second, first-generation, low-income students face more and more chronic stressors, such as financial issues, discrimination, and family conflict (Kroshus et al., 2021). These kinds of chronic stressors cannot be as quickly rebuffed by techniques like self-compassion, which have been shown to help individuals cope with non-chronic stressors such as one-off interpersonal conflicts during the transition to college (Kroshus et al., 2021). Finally, first-generation, low-income students may face family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) or guilt "related to surpassing the educational achievements of family members" (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015, p. 421). Thus, while first-generation, low-income students often experience the need for connection both with their home and campus communities, remaining connected to their home community may engender forms of family achievement guilt that may shape the way they present themselves on social media, how they engage in social comparison, and potentially the effects their social media activities have on their well-being and integration into their college community.

While work on the college transition has advanced our understanding of this major life transition and experiences of stress and resilience therein, particularly for FGLI students, several gaps and limitations remain, which I turn to next.

Gaps, Limitations, & Opportunities

Education research has advanced our understanding of the components and associated challenges in the college transition, specifically for first-generation, low-income students. Yet, this work faces limitations concerning sampling and the theoretical frameworks used to motivate and contextualize findings. First, concerning sampling, many studies in this area rely on small, convenience samples skewed toward a particular demographic composition. Namely, many studies focus on one specific university context, and typically that university is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). As such, samples skew white and upper- or middle-class. Even when research samples first-generation, low-income students, these samples skew white. Because many, though not all, first-generation, low-income students are also students of color (Schuyler et al., 2021), it is imperative that future work samples across universities and, in doing so, purposively samples to ensure a diversity of experiences are informing our understanding of the college transition.

In sum, the transition to higher education involves changes to one's relationships, roles, routines, and worldviews as well as key stressors that may be exacerbated for FGLI students. While these transformative components of the college transition have been examined in face-to-face environments, it is also important to attend to how contemporary social media environments may figure into the college transition for FGLI students, which I discuss next.

Chapter 5: Social Media & the Transition to Higher Education for First-Generation, Low-Income Students

Social media has been linked to various positive outcomes such as social capital accrual (Utz & Muscanell, 2015; Chen & Li, 2017), social support exchange (Selkie et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2016), clarification of self through identity work and play (Lingel et al., 2014; Morioka et al., 2016), and more. For marginalized and stigmatized populations specifically, such as LGBTQ+ folks, people who have experienced sexual abuse, and those with stigmatized medical conditions like HIV, social media may represent an opportunity to network with similar others and to disclose and receive support around these identities and experiences (e.g., Andalibi et al., 2018; Ernala et al., 2017; Saha et al., 2019). First-generation students' exacerbated challenges before and during the college transition – smaller networks (Thayer, 2000), fewer informational resources (Thayer, 2000), stress, and family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) – may lead at least some of this population to utilize social media to reach a wider audience, accrue informational resources, and gain more emotional forms of support, which a growing body of literature on first-generation, low-income students' social media reflects. This literature typically focuses on how first-generation, low-income students use social media before transitioning to college (i.e., when they develop the desire to go to college and apply) and during their transition to campus life.

FGLI Social Media Use Before the College Transition

Prior work indicates that first-generation, low-income students use social media before the college transition to develop college-going aspirations, mobilize community cultural wealth, access information resources, and access more emotional forms of social support. For this student population, college is not necessarily often talked about by their families and immediate networks. Thus, they may not be exposed to college as an option or may not think that it is a realistic option for them. However, research suggests that social media helps students aspire toward a college education. For instance, a survey of U.S.-based high school students found that Facebook Friends could expose them to information about college, which was in turn associated with higher levels of self-efficacy regarding applying to college and more positive expectations about their ability to be successful once in college (Wohn et al., 2013). Interestingly, the study by Wohn et al. (2013) revealed important differences between the role social media played for first-generation students versus continuing-generation students. Specifically, social media played a significant role in helping first-generation students develop expectations about their ability to be successful in college, a pattern that was not mirrored for continuing-generation students (Wohn et al., 2013). Moreover, first-generation students uniquely benefited from instrumental and emotional support obtained from social media, specifically Facebook friends, as these forms of support translated to greater confidence in the application process (Wohn et al., 2013).

Beyond being able to access supportive networks on social media, high school students can use social media to engage in identity work and identity play. One study demonstrated that students could harness aspirational capital, using features of social media such as one's profile to portray themselves as a college student before actually being one to "rehearse" or practice being a college student (Brown et al., 2022). Such aspirational capital is part of a broader array of community-based resources or Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) that can be harnessed via social media participation. First-generation, low-income students can also challenge dominant narratives of themselves and their communities via social media self-presentation, which carries critical identity-related implications (Brown et al., 2022).

Social media can also meet first-generation, low-income students' functional needs, that is, the information they need to apply to college in the first place. For instance, social media can expand students' access to mentors (Ware & Ramos, 2013) and help them develop the kinds of social capital (Deng et al., 2022), broadly, that can help them meet future social support needs. Jeon et al. (2016) found that the ability to visualize one's connections on social media helped first-generation students identify higher-quality sources of information about college among their Facebook Friends. This pattern did not persist, however, for continuing-generation students who may have had a greater amount of high-quality information sources readily available in their networks (Jeon et al., 2016). Yet, norms around public question-asking have also been shown to constrain FGLI students' ability to make the kinds of resource requests on social media that may facilitate access to high-quality information about college (Brown & Ellison, 2021). Additionally, concerns around the anonymous nature of certain social media platforms and the lack of trust in anonymous information sources also constrained FGLI students' ability to obtain college-related information on social media (Brown & Ellison, 2021). Finally, college-related information,

especially about academics, accessed via social media is often surface-level, lacking the specificity that makes the information relevant and actionable (Brown & Ellison, 2021).

Finally, above and beyond informational support, first-generation, low-income students can use social media to disclose their identities and exchange more emotional forms of support with fellow first-generation, low-income students and broader audiences (Pyle et al., 2022, in revision).

In sum, social media serves a host of purposes during the pre-transition phase, especially for FGLI students. Yet, the roles social media play for FGLI students may shift during the transition, which I describe next.

FGLI Social Media Use During the College Transition

While there are myriad documented benefits of pre-transition stage social media use for first-generation, low-income students (Brown et al., 2022; Ware & Ramos, 2013; Wohn et al., 2013), research suggests that social media can facilitate social adjustment and identity clarification during the pivotal transition to college (Yang, 2020; DeAndrea et al., 2012). Social media enables opportunities to exchange social support with potentially broad audiences. Additionally, many campuses have integrated social media into their offerings for incoming students, creating their own social media platforms that have been shown to influence first-generation, low-income students' sense of adjustment to their campus community (DeAndrea et al., 2012). In addition, the use of pre-established platforms like Instagram and Facebook is also associated with adjustment to college. Yang (2020) used survey data to examine how various interactions with family, on-campus friends, and off-campus friends on popular social media platforms Facebook and Instagram related to college social adjustment for both first-generation and continuing-generation students, finding that while both student groups tended to use Facebook and Instagram similarly, first-generation students used Facebook less to interact directly with on-campus friends and more often to broadcast updates.

Drawing from interviews with first-year, first-generation, and low-income college students, Gist-Mackey et al. (2018) identified social media content, especially that produced by fellow students, as a major resource for informational support in the period before college. Moreover, the authors identified that these students were not only recipients of support during their transition but also support providers as they circulated information about college to their families.

Identity work, or the process of forming, maintaining, repairing, strengthening, and/or revising one's identity (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), can also be facilitated and encouraged by sociotechnical affordances and platform features. For instance, the ability to present oneself through an editable, constantly changing profile allowed first-generation, low-income students to experiment with the provisional identity of a college student during their transition (Morioka et al., 2016). Not only did editable profiles enable self-presentation of the provisional college student identity, but also students were able to receive feedback from a broad audience

affirming this provisional identity. Yang et al. (2017) found a negative relationship between deep online self-presentations, or self-presentations that reveal emotions and vulnerability, and identity clarity, conceptualized as “the degree to which a person integrates the different selves he/she has experimented with, makes sense of self-related values and goals and gains a clear and coherent sense of who he/she is” (p. 213). While important, these findings shed light on emerging adults at large without differentiating between first-generation and continuing-generation students. Thomas et al. (2017) also investigated identity-related phenomena concerning social media and the transition to higher education, focusing specifically on identity work. Interestingly, they combined semi-structured interviews with tasks requiring students to use Pinterest boards to aggregate their social media and digital data over six weeks. They ultimately found that social media played a significant role in affirming the home identity of students, meaning that social media enabled them to showcase their connections to their home communities and networks. When students did use social media with respect to their college-going identities, they mostly did so in instrumental ways (e.g., finding roommates) as opposed to engaging in social ways (e.g., developing deep relationships with peers).

Taken together, this chapter has highlighted the various roles social media play for FGLI students both before and during the college transition. Yet, there are notable limitations in this body of work, which I discuss next.

Gaps, Limitations, & Opportunities

Very little work investigates or even acknowledges social comparison as a granular social media activity that may help or hinder the college transition. A few studies mention the concept of social comparison in passing, such as Thomas et al. (2017). They note that their research produced “plenty of evidence that the students were using social media to make very early social comparisons” at the beginning stages of the college transition (p. 546). More specifically, they “found a very damaging cycle for any student who was struggling in the early weeks as they felt both the need to look happy in their own posts but were then inundated with similarly happy posts from others” (p. 549). Yet, few studies take social comparison as the central object of inquiry and, as such, neglect the full picture of how social comparison on social media may be at once helpful and harmful to the college transition.

Additionally, regarding sampling and study context, most studies in this space sample from a single campus environment which is shaped by the demographics of the campus and the type of institution (public or private, two-year or four-year, rural or urban, etc., need-aware vs. need-blind¹, etc.), among other factors. Future work could sample across universities to get a broader, potentially more representative sense of how social media use figures into the college transition for students across the United States.

¹ The term “need-blind” is used by higher education institutions to refer to their financial need policies and procedures. While I use this term in this prelim exam to maintain consistency with terminology used in higher education, I note that this term may be considered problematic and/or harmful in its metaphorization of disability.

Finally, much of the literature on first-generation, low-income students' use of social media in the higher education context focuses on a somewhat narrow range of outcomes. While it makes sense that much of this literature would focus on academic outcomes like grades or constructs relevant to higher education scholarship, such as social adjustment/institutional belonging and persistence, possibilities for social comparison on social media during the college transition make space for future work examining a broader set of outcomes, such as those related to subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect) or identity (e.g., self-concept, pride in one's identity, self-stigma, etc.).

Thus, while the reviewed work reveals that social media can enable identity work, social support-seeking, social capital accrual, and other benefits both before and during the college transition, future work in this space can focus on broader and more diverse samples, underexplored social media activities (e.g., social comparison) and a wider array of social media use outcomes. In the next chapter, I introduce a series of proposed studies that attempts to overcome these limitations.

Chapter 6: Study Proposal

In this chapter, I propose a two-part series of studies to address the research questions outlined below. To begin the chapter, I outline the objectives of the proposed studies and how my research questions are poised to meet these objectives. Next, I describe and justify the study setting and context as well as the methods I plan to use in the proposed studies. The chapter concludes with the proposed study's expected empirical, theoretical, and practitioner-oriented contributions and methodological limitations.

Research Objectives

In the preceding chapters, I have introduced the concept of *social comparison*, highlighting the need for future work that considers how marginalized identities, especially with respect to socio-economic marginalization, shape social comparison processes and outcomes. Additionally, I have introduced research on *social media affordances* and *well-being* to highlight how disparate uses of social media can have both positive and negative influences on one's well-being. I argued that future work can more explicitly attend to the ways identity may shape the activities people engage in on social media and how these activities bear on subjective well-being. I have also highlighted the call for social media researchers to take an idiographic approach to understand within-person effects in the relationship between social media use and well-being (Valkenburg, 2022). Moreover, I have described the extant work on *social media social comparisons*, highlighting the ways social media's affordances may uniquely shape comparison motivations, processes, and outcomes. Here I argued that future work can recruit more diverse samples (on dimensions of race and socio-economic status, particularly) and can consider the roles that social identity play in social comparisons made on social media. Finally, I discussed the transition to higher education as a life transition, chronicled how this transition is uniquely shaped by one's FGLI identity, and outlined the available literature on social media use for FGLI students. From there, I argued that future work can recruit diverse samples across

multiple university contexts and focus on a broader range of social comparison outcomes (e.g., well-being, academic, and identity-oriented outcomes). Taken together, I have asserted a need for future studies that examine the intersection of the college transition and social media for underserved student populations to a) diversify samples, b) attend to identity within the research design, c) consider a wider range of social comparison outcomes, d) examine within-person effects (i.e., take an idiographic approach) regarding the relationship between social media use and well-being and other outcomes, and d) consider social comparison processes *transtemporally*, or over time. To examine how FGLI students experience social comparisons made via social media platforms as they transition to college, I raise the following overarching research questions:

- **RQ1: How do first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students engage in social comparison on social media, and how do their social media use as well as social comparison processes and outcomes shift over the initial period of the college transition?**
 - **RQ1a:** To whom do FGLI students compare themselves, and on what dimensions over the initial period of the college transition?
 - **RQ1b:** What are the relationships between FGLI students' social media use, social comparisons, subjective well-being, and social and emotional adjustment to college over the initial period of the college transition?
 - **RQ1c:** How do socio-technical affordances of social media, namely content visibility, persistence, and norms around social media self-presentation (i.e., positivity bias) relate to FGLI students' social media social comparison intensity as well as their subjective well-being and social and emotional college adjustment-related outcomes over the initial period of the college transition?

By “the initial period of the college transition” I am referring to the transition to one’s college campus (i.e. “college entry” (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007)) and the first few weeks of the first semester of college. This conceptualization of the “college transition” is based on prior work on life transitions (e.g., Van Gennepe, 1960) which notes that transitions involve withdrawal, liminality, and reintegration. In the context of the transition to college, the “period of the college transition” I focus on encompasses withdrawal (i.e., moving away from one’s home community), liminality (moving into one’s campus community), and reintegration (forming peer groups during the first semester of college).

Study Context: Residential, Four-Year Universities in the U.S.

To explore the aforementioned research questions, I focus on the context of students’ entrance to residential four-year universities in the United States. This is an apt context in which I can investigate my research questions for several reasons. *First*, a growing number of FGLI students are entering four-year colleges and universities, yet many of them experience challenges to persistence (RTI International, 2019a; RTI International 2019b). *Second*, residential four-year colleges and universities often require students to move to the city where the campus is located, either to live on campus or in off-campus housing. Nevertheless,

residential colleges often require students to leave their home communities, which may spur increased use of social media to maintain ties with family and friends from one's home community and may also spark family achievement guilt. Unable to be physically co-located with family and hometown friends, students must venture out to their university community to develop new peer networks and may use social media to foster and deepen relationships with on-campus peers. Thus, given the fact that students in this context may uniquely rely on social media to maintain and foster old and new ties with members of both their home and campus communities, there is also the possibility that this context may facilitate more frequent social comparisons as students are able to compare themselves not only to members of their home communities but to newly formed peer communities on campus.

Procedures

I plan to use a combination of 1) a **mobile Experience Sampling Methods (mESM) study** and 2) **in-depth, semi-structured follow-up interviews** to investigate the research questions introduced above. In **Part 1** of the study, I will deploy a mobile Experience Sampling Method (mESM) study to investigate how FGLI students' social media use and experiences with the processes and (well-being and college adjustment-related) outcomes of social comparison on social media may shift and/or persist throughout the initial period of their transition to college. In **Part 2**, I will conduct in-depth semi-structured, retrospective recall interviews with a subset of approximately 20 mESM participants to unearth richer data around social comparisons on social media, and the unique affordances that may enable or constrain these comparisons, during the college transition. Interviews will also afford participants the opportunity to contextualize some of their mESM log data.

Part 1: Mobile Experience Sampling Method (mESM) Study

An Introduction to (m)ESM

To investigate my research questions, I will first develop and deploy an eight-week mobile Experience Sampling Method (mESM) study between mid-August and mid-October 2023. The ESM is a method that is apt for "studying what people do, feel, and think during their daily lives" (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), making it appropriate for my research questions, which focus on transtemporal changes in subjective experiences with the college transition. ESM involves notifying participants on multiple occasions during the waking hours of a normal week to provide self-reports about their objective situations and subjective states in that given moment (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), making it helpful for understanding students' subjective states (i.e., social comparison intensity, well-being, adjustment) within the context of their objective college transition situation. ESM is a popular method as it combines the ecological validity, or *in situ* nature, of the diary method with robust measurement techniques that attend both to a participant's objective and subjective behavior, thoughts, and feelings (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Mobile ESM (mESM) has become increasingly popular over the past decade, as the widespread adoption of mobile technologies renders ESM studies easier and cheaper to deploy (Van Berkel et al., 2017). Prior work has suggested that smartphone-based ESM studies, compared to traditional ESM studies that involve supplying participants with beepers, have several advantages (Van Berkel et al., 2017). For instance, mobile ESM studies can improve data quality, allow for the researchers to monitor and manage the study in real-time, and enable richer media collection as participants can submit photos, videos, and audio recordings as part of their self-reports (Van Berkel et al., 2017).

Prior work has noted that (m)ESM may be particularly useful for research with emerging adult populations (Thomas & Azmitia, 2016). In fact, many successful ESM studies have been deployed with emerging adult populations (Thomas & Azmitia, 2016) because the method's focus on both objective experiences and subjective feelings maps well to many research questions concerning emerging adults' life transitions, relationships, and identities (Thomas & Azmitia, 2016). Since the focus of the present study coalesces around central themes of the college transition as a major life transition and the FGLI identity, (m)ESM is a promising method to explore. Moreover, mESM may be promising as most students (95% as of 2022) own smartphones and use them to access social media platforms regularly (46% of teens report using social media 'almost constantly' as of 2022) (Vogels et al., 2022). Finally, mESM allows for examinations of overall trends among the entire sample as well as idiographic or within-person ($N = 1$) trends. As I discussed in Chapter 2, social media research has thus far mostly relied on global measures of social media use and understanding broader trends rather than person-specific susceptibilities, though the few studies that do attend to person-specific susceptibilities (e.g., Valkenburg, 2022) have brought additional rigor and theoretical depth to our understanding of the relationship between social media and well-being. mESMs enable understanding of both within-person and between-person relationships amongst key variables over time. This ability is valuable for the present study because this approach heeds the call of researchers like Valkenburg (2022) who advocate for increased use of idiographic or within-person effects approaches to understanding the relationships between social media and well-being.

Most importantly, mESM is an appropriate method to answer my overarching RQs. As a reminder, my RQs are:

- **RQ1: How do first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students engage in social comparison on social media, and how do their social media use as well as social comparison processes and outcomes shift over the initial period of the college transition?**
 - **RQ1a:** To whom do FGLI students compare themselves, and on what dimensions over the initial period of the college transition?
 - **RQ1b:** What are the relationships between FGLI students' social media use, social comparisons, subjective well-being, and social and emotional adjustment to college over the initial period of the college transition?

- **RQ1c:** How do socio-technical affordances of social media, namely content visibility, persistence, and norms around social media self-presentation (i.e., positivity bias) relate to FGLI students' social media social comparison intensity as well as their subjective well-being and social and emotional college adjustment-related outcomes over the initial period of the college transition?

The mobile experience sampling method (mESM) is poised to uncover group-level and individual trends over time regarding the variables of interest (in this case, social media use, social comparison intensity, well-being, and adjustment to college), making it appropriate for understanding trends *over the initial period of the college transition* (RQ1, 1a, 1b, 1c). mESMs represent a longitudinal approach, which can help uncover how the dynamics of social comparisons on social media may shift or persist across the transition period. As Van Gennep (1960) and others note, life transitions often involve multiple pivotal points of withdrawal, liminality, and integration, and the longitudinal component of ESMs can yield valuable insights about how social media social comparisons may be experienced by FGLI students at various phases of the transition as they move away from their home communities and develop peer communities on campus.

Additionally, mESM can elicit quantitative data that can be analyzed with statistical methods including descriptive statistics, exploratory data analysis (EDA), and nested or multi-level modeling to reveal group-level and within-person relationships among the variables of interest (in this case, social media use, social comparison intensity, well-being, and adjustment to college), which can help answer *RQ1b* and *RQ1c*. Finally, the nested or multi-level modeling approaches (including linear mixed modeling) used to analyze longitudinal mESM data can be helpful in isolating demographic groups and understanding differences in relationships among key variables between these groups. More specifically, I can model the relationship between social media use, social comparison, well-being, and college adjustment for students of color and white students separately to see if the relationship among variables is stronger or weaker for those who may experience intersecting marginalized identities (i.e., being a racial/ethnic minority and a FGLI student). Alternatively, race or ethnicity can be used as a dummy variable within one robust model to understand how it may figure into the relationship between the aforementioned key variables.

(m)ESM Recruitment, Procedures, Data Collection

In my study, I will use the software LifeData to deploy the (m)ESM for eight weeks between Monday, August 14th - Friday, October 13th, 2023, aligned with the start dates of many semester-system universities in the United States. The screening survey (below) asks about students' college move-in and start dates, so only students whose move-in and start dates align with the mESM period will be eligible to participate. The eight-week period was chosen to optimize data collection at key points of the initial period of the college transition (i.e., moving in, starting classes, and having their first exams) while minimizing participant burden or burnout. Prior work on life transitions broadly notes that transitions involve phases of withdrawal, liminality, and (re) integration (Van Gennep, 1960). In the college transition specifically, the move to campus represents a withdrawal from one's former social group, and their introduction

to classes prompts liminality and (ideally) (re)integration. Prior short-term longitudinal work (e.g., Swenson et al., 2008; Goguen et al., 2010; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016) has similarly investigated the start of the first semester of college, as important shifts happen during this time. LifeData enables anonymous data collection, remote onboarding of participants, random and fixed notification scheduling, notification reminders, and the ability to monitor and manage the study in real time. Moreover, LifeData enables participants to input a variety of data types to respond to prompts, such as text, multiple-choice, and photographic data.

I will set up LifeData to send one notification per day asking participants to fill out a short survey, ultimately eliciting seven notifications per week per participant over eight weeks, totaling 56 notifications per participant during the data collection period. The eight-week, one-time-per-day data collection procedure was chosen to a) map onto the two months of college for many students attending college on the semester system, b) ensure that I collect at least 50 assessments per participant to be able to meaningfully investigate person-specific effects (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009; Voelkle, Oud, von Oertzen, & Lindenberger, 2012) and c) avoid overburdening participants.

In July 2023, I will recruit approximately 100 participants via the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and Discord servers dedicated to conversations about applying to and transitioning to college that are linked in relevant college-going and college application-related subreddits. I aim to recruit 125 participants with the idea that a handful may drop out of the study or not complete all tasks. I arrived at 100 participants based on my desired analysis plan using generalized linear mixed modeling. Generalized linear mixed models do not have straightforward mechanisms or formulas for determining power and sample size (Muller & Stewart, 2006), but ESM studies generally average around 50 (Van Berkel et al., 2017) to 100 participants (Yearick, 2017) While I will use popular hashtags related to college-going and first-generation students on Instagram (e.g., #fgli), I will engage in more targeted recruitment in college-related Facebook Groups (e.g., Paying for College 101), college-related subreddits (r/applyingtocollege and its affiliates), and college-related Discord servers (e.g., College Admissions Hub).

IRB ID:

Are you a first-generation, low-income student heading to a four-year university?



Researchers from the University of Michigan School of Information are looking for participants for a study on how first-generation, low-income students use social media while transitioning to their first year of university

Are you eligible?

- 18 years or older
- Identify as a first-generation, low-income college student
- Applied to a four-year university in the 2022-2023 application cycle
- Transitioning to a four-year university in the fall of 2023

This study is completely remote/virtual.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Cassidy Pyle (cpyle@umich.edu)

See if you're eligible to participate by completing the following screening survey! [LINK] [QR CODE BOTTOM RIGHT]

Participants will be asked to:

- Download a mobile application called LifeData that will send you notifications 1 time a day each day for 8 weeks asking you to fill out a short, ~five-minute survey
- Participate in a 60-90 minute follow-up Interview via Zoom

Participants will receive:

- \$80 for completing the mobile application surveys (\$10 per week completed)
- \$20 for completing the follow-up Interview

Figure 2. mESM recruitment flier

Potential participants will indicate their interest in participating in the (m)ESM study by filling out a screening survey (linked with a URL and QR code in the recruitment flier) that asks about whether they applied to a four-year residential university in the most recent application cycle, whether they will move cities to attend a four-year residential university in the fall, whether they self-identify as being first-generation and/or low-income, which social media platforms they use and how they use them, their general social comparison tendencies, and other demographic information such as gender, race/ethnicity, and whether they are from a rural or urban area. The full screening survey is below:

mESM Screener Survey

- Did you apply to a four-year residential university in the 2022 - 2023 application cycle? [Y/N]

- Will you be moving cities to attend a four-year residential university in the fall? [Y/N/Maybe or not sure]
- When will you be moving cities to attend a four-year residential university this fall? [open response]
- On what date does your first year of college begin? [open response]
- Do you identify as a first-generation college student? We define first-generation students as students for whom no parent or guardian completed a four-year degree in the United States. [Y/N/Maybe or not sure]
- Do you identify as a low-income student? [Y/N/Maybe or not sure]
- What social media platforms do you currently use? [multiple choice with an 'other' option]
 - Instagram
 - TikTok
 - Twitter
 - Facebook
 - Reddit
 - Discord
 - Tumblr
 - Snapchat
 - BeReal
 - Other: _____
- Indicate how much you agree with the following statements [1 (completely disagree) - 7 (completely agree)] (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999):
 - I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.
 - If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.
 - I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people.
 - I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life.
 - I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.
 - If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it
- What gender(s) do you identify with? [Check all that apply]
 - Man
 - Woman
 - Non-Binary
 - Prefer Not to Say
 - None of the above options apply to me: Please describe _____
- What race(s) do you identify with? [Check all that apply]
 - African-American/Black
 - Latino/a/x
 - Asian
 - Middle Eastern

- Indigenous
- White
- Prefer Not to Say
- None of the above options apply to me: Please describe _____
- How old are you? [open response]
- How would you describe the town in which you currently reside?
 - Rural (below 50,000 residents)
 - Urban (above 50,000 residents)
 - Prefer Not to Say

I will engage in purposive sampling to ensure that a range of identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, rural/urban), social comparison tendencies, and social media experiences (e.g., very active users versus those who typically browse/ “lurk”) are represented in the (m)ESM study. Purposive sampling involves “selecting a sample of participants who are most likely to address the research question efficiently” (Blandford et al., 2016, p. 25). It is an appropriate sampling approach for our population and research questions because there are documented differences among first-generation, low-income students’ experiences based on factors like race/ethnicity (Cho et al., 2008; Sarcedo et al., 2015) and gender (Cho et al., 2008) and because various kinds of social media experiences lend themselves to different outcomes with respect to social comparison and well-being (Verduyn et al., 2022).

Selected participants will receive a link to a digital consent form that provides information about study benefits and risks and asks them to provide a digital signature confirming consent. Participants will earn \$10 for completing each week of the mESM portion of the study (up to \$80 total). This model encourages participants to continue contributing to the (m)ESM study across all eight weeks. However, it is likely that some participants will drop out over the course of the study, which is why I will recruit 125 participants with the idea that a handful will likely not complete the entire study. I will be able to use the data from those who did not complete the entire study, as the linear mixed modeling analysis method detailed below allows for analysis of “unbalanced data”, or data sets with missing observations.

When data collection begins, participants will be asked to download the LifeData application on their mobile devices. LifeData is Android and iPhone compatible. Participants will be onboarded via the LifeData application, where they will be informed that this application will notify them randomly one time per day each day for eight weeks. At this point, participants will be allowed to set their “waking hours” and hours that they are busy with class/work within the app to avoid being notified to complete a survey in the middle of the night or during busy periods, which could result in both participant annoyance and overburden and lower quality or missing data.

(m)ESM studies typically use interval, signal, or event-contingent sampling protocols (Christensen et al., 2003). Interval-contingent protocols notify participants at fixed times throughout the day. Signal-contingent protocols involve reporting on an experience in response to a signal, meaning it could be at different times each day. Event-contingent protocols ask participants to report on experiences immediately following an event of interest. In this study, I

will adopt a signal-contingent protocol wherein participants are randomly notified one time per day at different times (though times within participants' pre-determine "waking hours"). While using social media sensor data from participants' mobile phones to develop an event-based protocol could be technically feasible, I believe this introduces substantial data privacy concerns. Moreover, adolescents and emerging adults use social media often (Vogels et al., 2022), so it is likely that they will use social media during or near the times when they are pinged to respond to the one survey per day, making the privacy risks unjustifiable for this study.

I ultimately plan to test the following hypotheses and answer the following research questions using this mESM study (the full set of proposed models can be found in Appendix A):

H1a: *Passive SMU will be positively associated with upward social comparison, which will, in turn, be negatively associated with positive affect and positively associated with negative affect.*

H1b: *Passive SMU will be positively associated with downward social comparisons, which will, in turn, be positively associated with positive affect.*

RQ1a: *To what extent does passive SMU inform social and emotional adjustment to college via social comparison intensity?*

RQ1b: *To what extent do the relationships between passive SMU, social comparison intensity, and well-being and adjustment to college shift over the initial period of the transition to college?*

H2: *Active SMU will be negatively associated with social comparison intensity, which will, in turn, be positively associated with positive affect, and negatively associated with negative affect.*

RQ2a: *To what extent does active SMU inform social and emotional adjustment to college via social comparison intensity?*

RQ2b: *To what extent do the relationships between active SMU, social comparison intensity, and well-being and adjustment to college shift over the initial period of the transition to college?*

RQ3a: *To what extent does the use of visual-based social media inform positive and negative affect via social comparison intensity?*

RQ3b: *To what extent does the use of visual-based social media inform social and emotional adjustment to college via social comparison intensity?*

RQ3c: *To what extent do the relationships between visual-based SMU, social comparison intensity, and well-being and adjustment to college shift over the initial period of the transition to college?*

RQ4a: *To what extent does the use of ephemeral social media inform positive and negative affect via social comparison intensity?*

RQ4b: *To what extent does the use of ephemeral social media inform social and emotional adjustment to college via social comparison intensity?*

RQ4c: *To what extent do the relationships between ephemeral SMU, social comparison intensity, and well-being and adjustment to college shift over the initial period of the transition to college?*

The mESM questionnaire can be found below. It takes less than five minutes to complete. It begins by asking participants what social media platforms they used *in their last experience with social media* and how they used them (the social media activities question includes a list of possible activities derived from the Passive Active Use Measure (PAUM) (Gerson et al., 2017)). Then, participants are asked to self-report on their social comparison tendencies *during their last experience with social media*, with a subset of the highest factor loading items drawn from the INCOM (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) social comparison scale and adapted a) to reflect the social media context and b) to reference the last experience on social media rather than social comparison broadly. Next, participants are asked to complete a short Survey of Positive and Negative Affective Experiences (SPANE) (Diener et al., 2009). Finally, participants are asked to complete a subset of eight items from the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) (Baker & Syrik, 1989), four that correspond to social adjustment to college and four that correspond to emotional adjustment. These four items from each of the two subscales were chosen because they had the highest factor loadings in their respective subscales.

mESM Questionnaire

Block 1: Social Media Use

1. What social media platforms did you use *in your last experience on social media*? [check all that apply]
 - a. Instagram
 - b. Twitter
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Facebook Groups
 - e. TikTok
 - f. Snapchat
 - g. Tumblr
 - h. Reddit
 - i. YouTube
 - j. BeReal
 - k. Other (please specify all other platforms you use):
 - l. None
2. How did you use [platform(s) selected in Q1, one by one if multiple options were selected] *in your last experience on social media*? (derived from Passive Active Use Measure (Gerson et al., 2017))
 - a. Posting status updates
 - b. Commenting

- c. Private or direct messaging
- d. Checking to see what someone is up to
- e. Creating or RSVPing to events
- f. Posting photos
- g. Tagging photos
- h. Viewing photos
- i. Posting videos
- j. Tagging videos
- k. Browsing newsfeed passively
- l. Browsing newsfeed actively (i.e., searching)
- m. Looking at profiles
- n. Other (please describe):

Block 2: Social Comparison Experiences (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999)

3. Most people compare themselves from time to time with others. For example, they may compare the way they feel, their opinions, their abilities, and/or their situation with those of other people on social media. There is nothing particularly “good” or “bad” about this type of comparison, and some people do it more than others. We would like to find out how often you have compared yourself recently with other people you see on social media. To do that we would like you to think about *your last experience on social media* and indicate how much you agree with each statement below. [Select one response on a Likert scale of 1 (I disagree strongly) to 5 (I agree strongly)]
 - a. I compared how my loved ones (significant other(s), family member(s), etc.) are doing with how others on social media are doing.
 - b. I paid a lot of attention to how I do things with how others on social media do things.
 - c. If I wanted to find out how well I have done something, I would compare it with how others on social media have done it.
 - d. I compared how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people on social media.
4. [Display rule: If they answered 3 or above to one or more items a - d, display this question] In the previous question, you indicated that you had compared yourself on social media to someone else in your last experience with social media. What platform were you using to compare yourself to others? [Select all that apply]
 - a. Instagram
 - b. Twitter
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Facebook Groups
 - e. TikTok
 - f. Snapchat
 - g. Tumblr
 - h. Reddit
 - i. YouTube

- j. BeReal
 - k. Other (please specify all other platform(s) you used when comparing yourself to others):
5. [Display rule: If they answered 3 or above to one or more items a - d, display this question] In the previous section, you indicated that you had compared yourself on social media to someone else in your last experience with social media. To whom were you comparing yourself? [Select all that apply]
- a. Friends who I feel are doing better than me
 - b. Friends who I feel are doing worse than me
 - c. Peers who I feel are doing better than me
 - d. Peers who I feel are doing worse than me
 - e. Strangers (including influencers and celebrities) who I feel are doing better than me
 - f. Strangers (including influencers and celebrities) who I feel are doing worse than me
 - g. Family who I feel are doing better than me
 - h. Family who I feel are doing worse than me
 - i. Other: please specify

Block 3: Well-Being Experiences (Diener et al., 2009)

6. Please think about what you experienced the last time you used social media. Then report how much you experienced each of the following feelings, using the scale below. For each item, select a number: 1 (Never), 2 (Occasionally), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), 5 (Almost constantly).
- a. Positive
 - b. Negative
 - c. Good
 - d. Bad
 - e. Pleasant
 - f. Unpleasant
 - g. Happy
 - h. Sad
 - i. Afraid
 - j. Joyful
 - k. Angry
 - l. Contented

Block 4: College Transition Experience (Baker & Siryk, 1986)

7. The following statements describe college experiences. Read each one and decide how well it applies to you at the present time. For each statement, select the point on the continuum that best represents how closely the statement applies to you. Select only one option per statement. [Responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 - Doesn't apply to me at all, to 9 - Applies very closely to me] [*Note: I used the four items from each

subscale (emotional and social) that had the highest factor loadings, to maximize validity while minimizing length and participant burden]

- a. I haven't been able to control my emotions very well lately.
- b. Lately, I have been feeling blue and moody a lot.
- c. I am experiencing a lot of difficulty coping with the stresses imposed upon me in college.
- d. I have been feeling tense or nervous lately.
- e. I am quite satisfied with my social life at college.
- f. I am meeting as many people, and making as many friends as I would like at college.
- g. I have several close social ties at college.
- h. I feel that I fit in well as part of the college environment.

(m)ESM Data Analysis

Following other social media studies that have utilized mESM (e.g., Bayer et al. 2016), I plan to use linear mixed models to analyze the mESM data. Linear mixed models are appropriate for the proposed study because they account for a) the nested nature of the data set (i.e., multiple notifications nested within days and/or weeks nested within participants), b) the non-independence of observations (as data gathered from multiple times from the same participants are inherently dependent), c) continuous dependent or outcome measures (in my case, social comparison, well-being, and college adjustment outcomes), d) categorical predictor variables (in my case, social media platforms and activities, but also potentially demographic variables like gender and race/ethnicity), and e) the ability of LMMs to work with missing data and non-constant time intervals between observations (Verbeke, 1997). While it is possible to analyze continuous data from longitudinal *experiments* with "traditional" multivariate regression techniques, the assumptions inherent to these models are not met in observational longitudinal studies (i.e., studies, like the one I propose, that do not intervene in some way but simply observe changes over time) (Verbeke, 1997). Moreover, as previously mentioned, linear mixed modeling can isolate demographic groups to model the relationships among key variables for that group, in particular. In this context, I can use linear mixed modeling to model relationships between social media use, social comparison, well-being, and college adjustment for students of color versus white students to understand the potential role embodying a marginalized racial or ethnic identity plays in shaping these phenomena.

Before I fit the data to an LMM in SPSS, I will need to first code and clean the data. I will use the following coding/scoring guide:

- Social media platforms (categorical) - e.g., Twitter, Facebook
- Social media activities (categorical) - e.g., posting a video, checking to see what someone is up to
- Social Comparison (SC) score - Items 1-8 scored normally, #9 reverse scored, average the sum of the 9 items
- Positive Affect (PA) score - sum scores for terms "positive", "good", "pleasant", "happy", "joyful", "contented"

- Negative Affect (NA) score - sum scores for terms “negative”, “bad”, “unpleasant”, “sad”, “afraid”, “angry”
- Balanced Affect (BA) score - take positive affect score minus negative affect score
- Social Adjustment to College (SAC) score - Take items 5, 6, 7, 8 (all normally scored) and average the sum
- Emotional Adjustment to College (EAC) score — Take items 1 (reverse scored), 2 (reverse scored), 3 (reverse scored), 4 (reverse scored), and average the sum

Scoring/coding the data results in the following data for each participant after any given “ping” or notification within the mESM study period:

- List of SM platforms and activities performed for each platform
- Social Comparison (SC) Score
- Positive Affect (PA) score
- Negative Affect (NA) score
- Balanced Affect (BA) score
- Social Adjustment to College (SAC) score
- Emotional Adjustment to College (EAC) score

Because participants will be notified one time a day for eight weeks (56 days), this results in a set of 56 observations per participant x 100 participants = 5,600 sets of scores total

At this point, the data will be cleaned and converted to a vertical data structure to be able to fit an LMM in SPSS, as per the recommendations of West (2009). Fitting the models to LMMs in SPSS will yield outputs that, when interpreted properly, can answer the aforementioned hypotheses.

Intended Contributions

Theoretical/Empirical Contributions

I intend for the proposed study to make several empirical and theoretical contributions relevant to social media researchers and education and psychology researchers who work on college access topics and with first-generation, low-income student populations.

Concerning social media research, this study will extend social media social comparison research to the context of higher education transitions. Moreover, this work will bring identity and marginalization to the center of empirical investigations on social media social comparisons. Additionally, I intend to sample purposively to obtain diversity on the axes of race/ethnicity, gender, and rurality/urbanity, potentially overcoming some of the barriers to more widely applicable findings that stem from social media researchers’ reliance on primarily white and middle- or upper-class samples. On a more theoretical level, this study has the potential to illuminate how social comparison on social media takes place *transtemporally* – in other words, over time. While social comparison is a well-researched topic both in face-to-face and technologically mediated settings, investigations into social comparison, even vis-a-vis the

college transition, typically examine this phenomenon at a given point in time. Yet, people's lives are complex and ever-changing, and the transition to higher education represents one of many contexts in which transtemporal social comparison can be investigated.

Additionally, I intend to contribute to education and psychological research on the transition to college by highlighting the integral role of social media use in potentially impeding or facilitating this transition. It is imperative, I argue, for education and psychology scholars in this space to take a more granular approach to understand the role that social media plays in the transition to college, moving beyond global notions of "social media use" and toward examinations of more specific use types and use phenomena including, but not limited to, social comparison. I also hope that the distributed, diverse sampling I intend to conduct will help move the field away from skewed samples that overrepresent white and affluent college students.

Practitioner Contributions – Social Media Platforms & Designers

I intend to uncover how the affordances and features of social media platforms may facilitate helpful and harmful social comparisons in this context for FGLI students. Based on these insights, I hope to elucidate design recommendations that may be geared toward reducing positivity bias or developing nudges or interventions around social comparison that are context- and population-specific.

Practitioner Contributions – Higher Education Administrators & Staff

Finally, I intend to provide takeaways for higher education administrators and staff members who work with students during their college transition. These higher education stakeholders must proactively contend with the outsized role that social media use plays in the contemporary transition to college. In doing so, they may be able to use the insights of the proposed study to orient students to college life, not prescribing abstinence from social media use but readily acknowledging that positivity bias on social media exists and that students should be mindful of this fact when engaging in potentially harmful upward contrastive social comparisons to their peers based on content gleaned from social media.

Limitations

While having the potential to make multiple theoretical and empirical contributions, the proposed (m)ESM study also faces limitations. First, there may be a selection bias at play given the method of recruitment via social media. Recruiting via social media may oversample those who use social media frequently, which may call into question the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of FGLI students who may not use social media as frequently and who thus may not experience social media social comparisons. Secondly, while this method can elicit correlational evidence of the relationship between certain uses of social media and social comparison, well-being, and adjustment to college, it does not capture the full breadth of factors at play in shaping both the predictors (i.e., social media use) and outcomes (i.e., well-being, adjustment to college). In the same vein, this method cannot guarantee directionality between variables. While it is possible that a strong positive correlation between passive Instagram use, for instance, and social comparison could exist, it could also be the case that students who are

more inclined to compare themselves opt to browse on Instagram, not that browsing on Instagram induces social comparison experiences.

Part 2: Semi-Structured, In-Depth Follow-Up Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are often used to follow up (m)ESM studies, namely to probe deeper into within-person trends ascertained through the (m)ESM data collection effort in a process of retrospective recall (e.g., Khan et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2022). Specifically, in human-computer interaction (HCI) and social media studies, this interview-based approach to eliciting richer, more contextualized data following an (m)ESM is common (e.g., Shi et al., 2022; Geeng & Roesner, 2019). In this study, semi-structured interviews can attend to components of my research questions that the mESM cannot. For instance, it is difficult to understand via mESM how the features and affordances of social media platforms shape participants' social comparison experiences. This is, in part, because there are few available scales of perceived affordances that would be appropriate for mESM in terms of their length and what they measure. Interview data can help contextualize the claims made based on mESM data and situate the variables of interest within the broader context of students' lives. Additionally, interviews could help me probe within-person trends to understand more of the context around their experiences with social media, social comparison, well-being, and college adjustment, potentially corroborating or perhaps complicating the straightforward correlational evidence obtained via the mESM. For instance, interview probes could help understand in more detail the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and experiences with social media social comparison during the college transition, or could help in understanding how the type of school one attends (i.e., public vs. private, Ivy League vs. state school, primarily white institution vs. minority serving institution) might shape their social media social comparisons during their college transition.

Interview Recruitment, Procedures, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Following the mESM study, I will send an email to all mESM participants notifying them of the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview for additional compensation (\$20 USD) and inviting them to fill out a short form a) asking whether they're willing to participate (with logistical details), and b) asking them to list their availability in the next three weeks. Upon receiving responses to this form, I will invite approximately 20 of the mESM participants to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview via Zoom or Google Hangouts lasting 60-90 minutes. I will use a similar purposive sampling strategy described in the initial recruitment section, referring back to their initial screening survey responses and trying to maximize diversity with respect to social identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, etc.), social comparison tendencies, and social media use.

Broadly, the interview will ask about participants' experiences at various phases during the college transition (e.g., before moving, during the move, the first weeks of school, etc.), and their social media use at various points of the transition. I will also probe on how facets of their identity (i.e., "what makes you you") may influence their transition, social media use, and social

comparison experiences. I will also show them their individual mESM log data and ask them to reflect upon it. The practice of using participants' log data as memory aids and to stimulate reflection is common in HCI domains (e.g., Haimson & Marathe, 2022). The full interview protocol is below:

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Retrospective, asking those who just finished the transition to participate that way they can give me a full timeline

The Transition to College

- Could you walk me through the summer before you began college?
 - What were you doing to prepare for college?
 - How did you feel during this time?
 - What obstacles did you face during this time, if any? (logistical & emotional)
 - How do you think being FGLI shaped this time for you, if at all? (did it shape any obstacles or how you overcame them?)
- Could you walk me through your move to college?
 - How did you feel during this time?
 - What obstacles did you face during this time, if any? (logistical & emotional)
 - How do you think being FGLI shaped this time for you, if at all? (did it shape any obstacles or how you overcame them?)
- Could you walk me through your first few weeks on campus?
 - How did you feel during this time?
 - What obstacles did you face during this time, if any? (logistical & emotional)
 - How do you think being FGLI shaped this time for you, if at all? (did it shape any obstacles or how you overcame them?)

Social Media Use During Transition

- Could you tell me broadly how you used social media while transitioning to college? This includes the summer before, during your move, and during your first few weeks on campus.
 - What platforms did you use?
 - Who did you interact with on SM? (peers in university, family and friends from home, etc.)
 - Why did you interact with these people?
 - Probe for if/how being FGLI (or any other identities) had any impact on who they interacted with on SM
 - e.g., I am curious to learn how you make sense of your experiences..are there things about what makes you *you* that you think shape who you interacted with on social media?
 - What would you say you used social media for during this time? (entertainment, information, emotional support, etc.)
 - Why did you use social media in this/these way(s)?

- Probe for if/how being FGLI (or any other identities) had any impact on what they used SM for during this time
 - e.g., I am curious to learn how you make sense of your experiences..are there things about what makes you you that you think shape how you used social media?
 - How did you interact on social media? Would you say you mostly posted/browsed/or direct messaged? Why?
 - Why did you interact in this/these way(s)?
 - Probe for if/how being FGLI (or any other identities) had any impact on the way they interacted on SM
 - e.g., I am curious to learn how you make sense of your experiences..are there things about what makes you you that you think shape how you interacted on social media?
 - How did you portray yourself on social media during this time?
 - Why did you portray yourself this way?
 - Probe for if/how being FGLI (or any other identities) had any impact on the way they portrayed themselves – or chose NOT to portray themselves - on SM during this time
 - e.g., I am curious to learn how you make sense of your experiences..are there things about what makes you you that you think shape how you portrayed yourself (or chose NOT to portray yourself) on social media at this time?
 - How did your peers present themselves on social media during this time?
- Would you say that your use of social media during this time helped with your transition, impeded your transition, or did you feel neutral about it?
 - Why is that? Can you elaborate?
- Would you say you ever compared yourself to other people on social media during the transition to college? This could be comparing your life, comparing your achievements, appearance, your ability to handle college life, or really any other kind of comparison.
 - If so, to whom did you compare yourself?
 - To family back home?
 - What were you comparing, and why?
 - Probe for if/how these comparisons were influenced by their FGLI identity or other identities
 - To friends back home?
 - What were you comparing, and why?
 - Probe for if/how these comparisons were influenced by their FGLI identity or other identities
 - To new peers in college?
 - What were you comparing, and why?
 - Probe for if/how these comparisons were influenced by their FGLI identity or other identities
 - To strangers?
 - What were you comparing, and why?

- Probe for if/how these comparisons were influenced by their FGLI identity or other identities
 - If they did compare themselves, then:
 - Why do you think you compared yourself to that person/those people?
 - I am curious to learn how you make sense of your experiences..are there things about what makes you you that you think shaped your social comparisons at this time?
 - What were you comparing?
 - Do you think you would've compared yourself to this person in this way face-to-face or not? Why?
 - If not: What do you think it is about social media that facilitates these kinds of comparisons for you?
 - What did you feel as a result of comparing yourself to this person?
 - Were there any benefits?
 - These could include social, emotional, academic, or other kinds of benefits like inspiration or motivation
 - Probe for if/how these benefits had anything to do with their FGLI identity or other identities
 - Were there any negative consequences?
 - These could include social, emotional, academic, or other kinds of negative consequences
 - Probe for if/how these consequences had anything to do with their FGLI identity or other identities

Probing on mESM Data

- [Participants will be provided with a report with descriptive statistics for their logged surveys]
 - What do you notice about this report? What, if anything, stands out or is interesting to you? Why?
 - What doesn't stand out or surprise you, and why?
 - Do you think this accurately portrays your social media social comparison experiences during your college transition? Why or why not?
 - If no, what is this report missing?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about the role social comparisons on social media played in your college transition, that you did not log or mention previously?

To analyze the interview data, I will engage in first-cycle coding to organize and label the corpus of data using open coding and provisional coding procedures (Saldaña, 2014). Open coding involves coding based on emergent themes in the data, whereas provisional coding involves using prior knowledge of the literature to inform codes (Saldaña, 2014). Upon completion of the first-cycle coding of all 20 transcripts, I will engage in thematic analysis during the second-cycle coding process, condensing and collapsing codes and interrogating the relationship among codes to generate higher-order themes (Saldaña, 2014).

Intended Contributions

I intend to use this empirical data to add context to the correlational data I gathered in the mESM study. This helps to ensure I don't overclaim conclusions based on potentially spurious correlations or make causal claims where they are unwarranted. While the interview data also does not enable causal claims, it could potentially a) corroborates the tentative claims made from the mESM, or b) challenge or complicate mESM findings in ways that are theoretically generative. Finally, the interview can help me more deeply engage with the role that features and affordances of social media play in social media social comparisons and their subsequent outcomes in a way that ESM is not particularly well-suited for.

Limitations

This interview study will have several limitations such as a lack of generalizability given the small sample size and the fact that participants will be recruited via purposive sampling on social media. Moreover, interviews in and of themselves may be susceptible to self-report biases such as the social desirability bias or inaccuracies due to the retrospective nature of these interviews, as participants may forget or misremember their college transition experience. However, I am to avoid recall bias by using individual participants' mESM log data as memory aids. Lack of generalizability is also acceptable in this instance because I aim to use interviews to add theoretical depth to the relationships uncovered in the mESM, and I do not aim to make generalizable claims.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there exists a vast corpus of literature on social comparison motivations, processes, and outcomes, and a growing body of literature on how social comparisons are (re)shaped in social media contexts. Yet, this scholarship rarely attends to social comparisons in educational contexts and also rarely considers how identity, particularly marginalized socioeconomic identity, may shape social comparisons offline and/or online. At the same time, research in the education domain has elucidated the challenges and changes involved in the transition to college, including how these challenges are exacerbated for first-generation, low-income students. Importantly, little work has bridged these two bodies of work (work on social comparisons on social media, on the one hand, and the transition to college, on the other). Bridging these bodies of work, especially where FGLI student experiences are concerned, is important because social media social comparisons may carry important implications for students' well-being and adjustment to college during their transition to college, potentially influencing their decisions to persist in and complete college. College persistence and completion is integral to one's earning potential, and there are longstanding documented gaps in rates of persistence and completion between first-generation, low-income students and their continuing-generation and middle and high-income counterparts.

To bridge these bodies of work, I propose a two-part series of studies involving a mobile experience sampling study and follow-up semi-structured interviews. Over the initial period of

the college transition, participants will be asked to self-report daily for eight weeks on their social media use, social comparisons on social media, affective experiences, and socioemotional adjustment to college. Follow-up interviews will probe on participants' mESM data to uncover contextual factors that may underlie the correlational relationships revealed among key variables in the analysis of mESM data. This mixed methods study has the potential to reveal social media social comparisons as an important mechanism underlying FGLI student well-being and adjustment to college, which can be instrumental for students' persistence in college.

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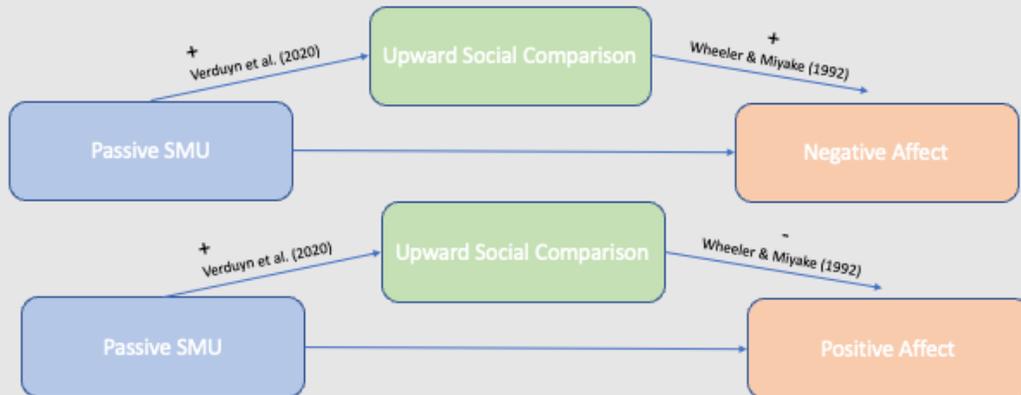
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Appendix A - Theoretical Models

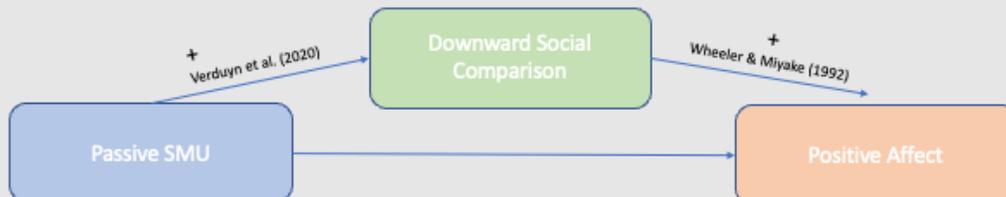
Model 1: Passive SMU, Upward Social Comparison, and Positive and Negative Affect



Hypotheses/RQs:

H1a: **Passive SMU** will be positively associated with **upward social comparisons**, which will in turn be negatively associated with **positive affect** and positively associated with **negative affect**.

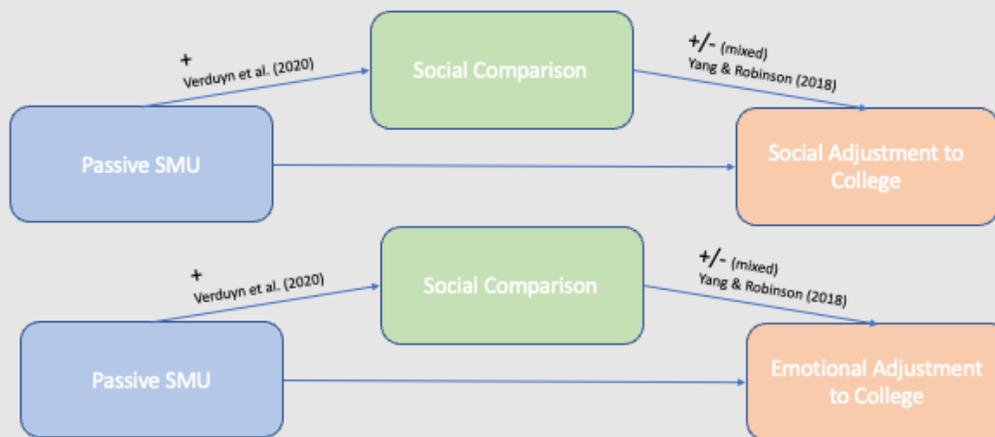
Model 2: Passive SMU, Downward Social Comparison, and Positive Affect



Hypotheses/RQs:

H1b: **Passive SMU** will be positively associated with **downward social comparisons**, which will in turn be positively associated with **positive affect**.

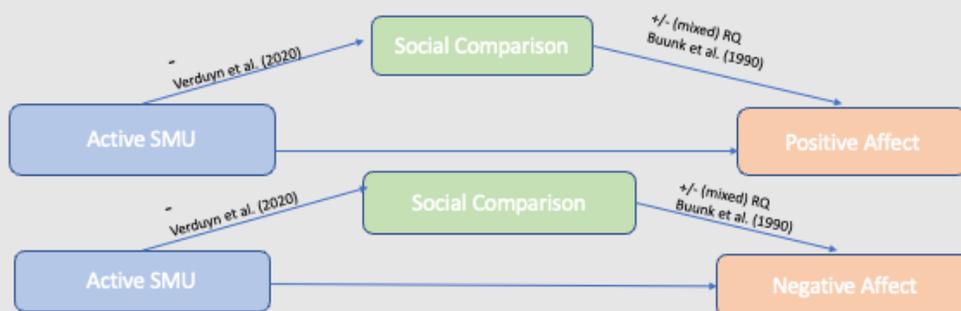
Model 3: Passive SMU, Social Comparison, and Social and Emotional Adjustment to College



Hypotheses/RQs:

RQ1a: To what extent does **passive SMU** inform **social and emotional adjustment to college** via **social comparison intensity**?

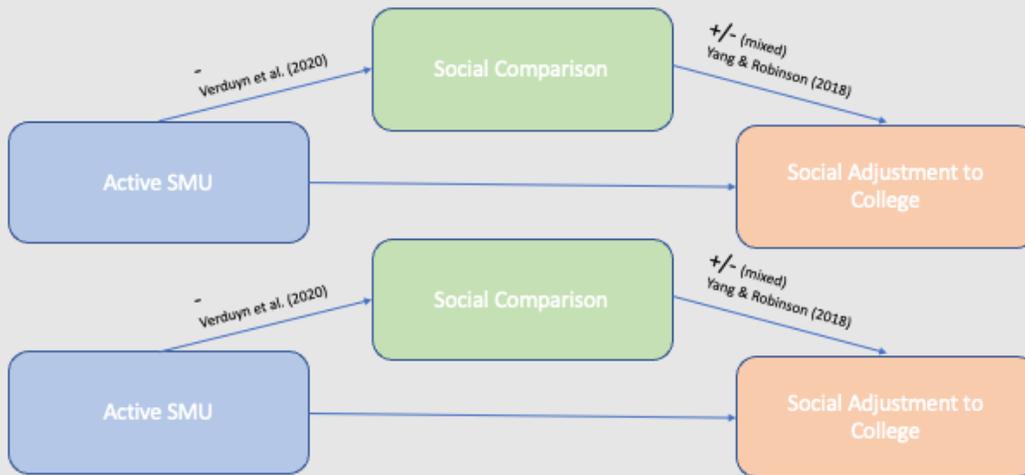
Model 4: Active SMU, Social Comparison, Life Satisfaction, and Positive and Negative Affect



Hypotheses/RQs:

H2: **Active SMU** will be negatively associated with **social comparison intensity**, which will in turn be positively associated with **life satisfaction and positive affect** and negatively associated with **negative affect**.

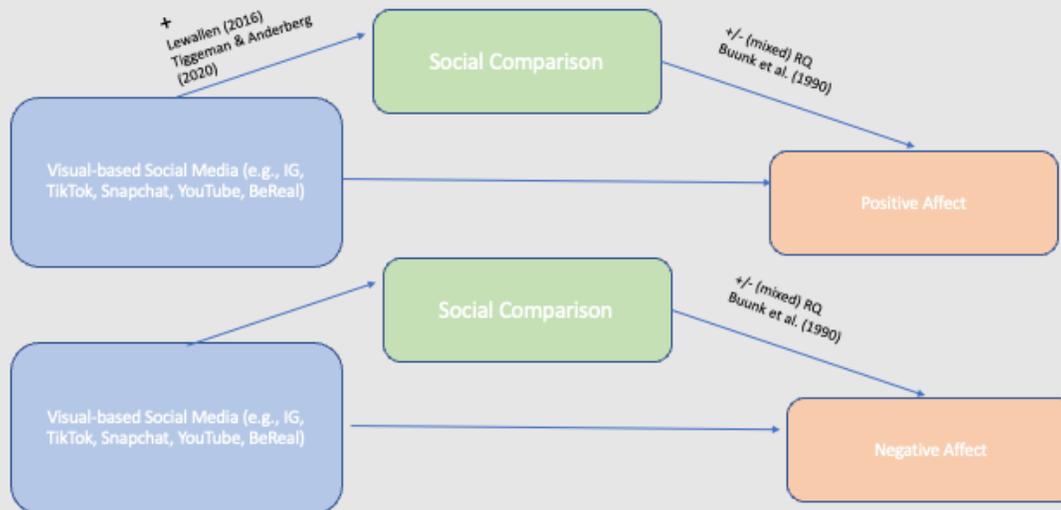
Model 5: Active SMU, Social Comparison, and Social and Emotional Adjustment to College



Hypotheses/RQs:

RQ2a: To what extent does **active SMU** inform **social and emotional adjustment to college** via **social comparison intensity**?

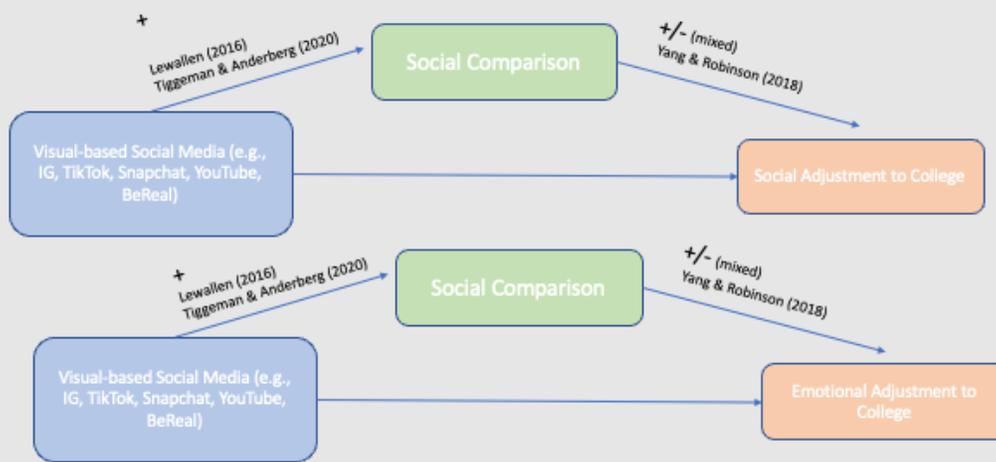
Model 6: Visual-based SM, Social Comparison, and Positive and Negative Affect



Hypotheses/RQs:

RQ3a: How does **use of visual-based social media** inform **positive and negative affect** via **social comparison intensity**?

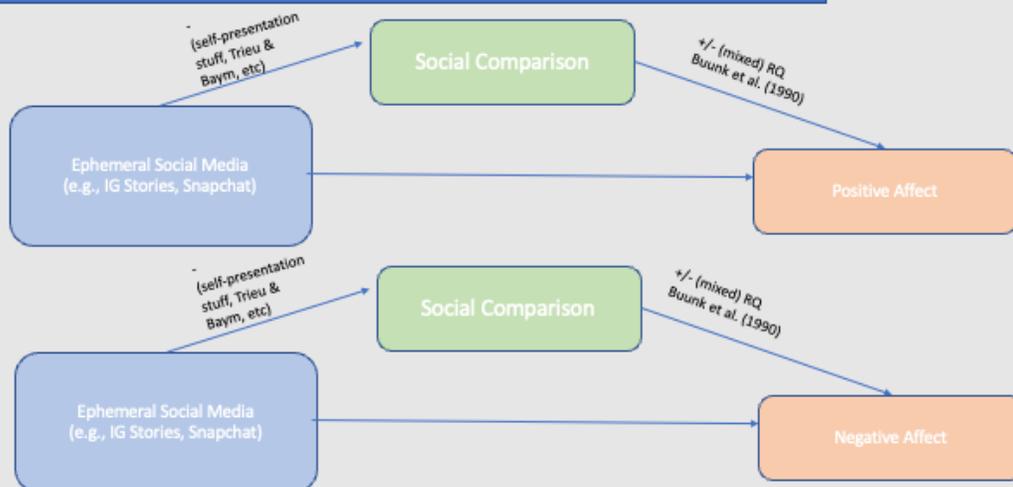
Model 7: Visual-based SM, Social Comparison, and Social and Emotional Adjustment to College



Hypotheses/RQs:

RQ3b: To what extent does the use of visual-based social media inform social and emotional adjustment to college via social comparison intensity?

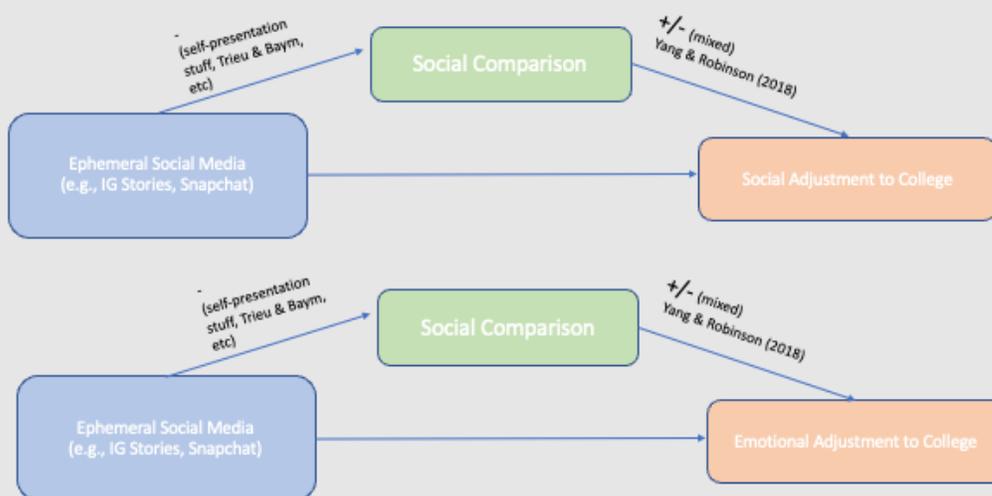
Model 8: Ephemeral SM, Social Comparison, and Positive and Negative Affect



Hypotheses/RQs:

RQ4a: To what extent does the use of ephemeral social media inform positive and negative affect via social comparison intensity?

Model 9: Ephemeral SM, Social Comparison, and Social and Emotional Adjustment to College



Hypotheses/RQs:

RQ4b: To what extent does the use of ephemeral social media inform social and emotional adjustment to college via social comparison intensity?