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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Social Media, Materialistic Values, Social Comparison, University Students, Mediation, Multan, Pakistan	The present study examined the role of excessive social media use in fostering social comparison and materialistic values among educated youth. Young people are the largest users of social media platforms for information sharing, communication, and entertainment. Accelerating digitalization aggravates social comparison among youngsters by idealizing social media influencers and their associated social circles. Theoretical underpinnings from cultivation theory, social comparison theory, and materialism theory indicate that social media aggravates materialistic values through social comparison. An explanatory research design was used to collect data from N=382 university students. Data were analyzed using two statistical software programs, i.e., SPSS and SmartPLS 4. Findings revealed that university students who extensively use social media developed materialistic values (H1: $\beta = 0.591$, $p < .001$). Additionally, students who use social media platforms were inclined toward social comparisons (H2: $\beta = 0.699$, $p < .001$). These social comparisons contributed to the development of materialistic values among university students (H3: $\beta = 0.366$, $p < .001$). Partial mediation results indicated that students who used social media extensively developed materialistic values through social comparisons with influential people ($\beta = 0.256$, $p < .001$). University training sessions, seminars, and conferences can raise students' awareness of how to use social media for educational purposes and personal growth, rather than developing unrealistic materialism.
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Introduction

In the present era of digitalization, people's ways of interacting and communicating have changed over the past few decades due to technological advancements. One powerful tool of this digital

world is social media, which has changed people's consumption patterns, communication, social values, and interactions (Kiracaburun et al., 2020; Sevignani, 2024). Teenagers and young adults (also known as the digital generation) are the biggest users of social media apps, sites, and associated platforms (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Research evidence indicates that Facebook and Instagram are the most frequently used social media platforms. Despite this, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitter are also used to manipulate societal normative patterns (Pellegrino & Shannon, 2021). Frequent social media use shapes the perceptions, attitudes, social identities, and personal lives of young adults and compels them to follow and draw inspiration from the people who possess more material possessions than they do (Qureshi & Malik, 2025).

In the visual world, social comparison plays a pivotal role in changing people's lifestyles and traditional value systems. This comparison stems from rising materialism, in which people began comparing themselves with others (Vogel et al., 2014) in terms of happiness, success, wealth, and associated material possessions. The present research indicated that social media, along with social comparison, intensifies materialism (Dittmar et al., 2014). Previous empirical evidence by Cleveland & Chang (2009) indicated that materialism is considered a Western agenda. However, developing countries are now blindly replicating materialistic values in their daily lives.

According to Belk (1985), materialism refers to the importance people attach to worldly possessions, including acquiring wealth, luxury goods, happiness, success, and social recognition. Studies also show that materialism is a negative social value that leads people to attach themselves to worldly things and judge others who do not possess these material possessions (Veer & Shankar, 2011). To reinforce material values, social media plays a pivotal role by targeting educated youth through various apps and showcasing material values (Butler, 2024). Empirical evidence shows that social media platforms are saturated with images, videos, and accounts depicting unrealistic materialism among individuals (Frunzaru & Boţan, 2015; Skulsuthavong & Wang, 2025).

Educated youth became the primary target of this scenario, as they began following trendy products, materials, and behavioral aspirations shown by their favorite media influencers. They began prioritizing material values over traditional cultural patterns (Shi, 2024). They use social media not only for communication, but also for academic purposes, career development, entertainment, and social networking. However, frequent exposure to social media can create unrealistic expectations among youth about luxury lifestyles. Consequently, educated youth may become more vulnerable to developing materialistic orientations as they seek to emulate the lifestyles portrayed on digital platforms (Ho et al., 2019).

The existing research gap is evident, as the relationship between social media and the development of material values among youth through social comparison is missing across different cultural contexts (Missaoui, 2024; Pelser et al., 2023). Pakistan in general, and South Punjab in particular, also lacks research on these variables (Saleem & Tariq, 2025). The study context also needs research on how frequent exposure to social media increases materialistic values through social comparison among youth in the given structural context (Sohail et al., 2024).

Pakistan has witnessed remarkable growth in communication through smartphone use among youth. Excessive smartphone use leads to a substantial increase in social media engagement among youth (Zeb et al., 2019). The present study depicted that educated youth are the most efficient social media users in the country. While these platforms provide educational opportunities, professional networking, and social connectivity, they also provide consumer-oriented content through which youth develop materialistic values. To address these research gaps, the present study examined young students at the largest university in Multan (Pakistan). Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the role of social media in shaping materialistic values among youth through social comparison in the given study vicinity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings below provide a systematic explanation of how social media is used to develop materialism among university students within the given structural context.

Cultivation Theory

George & Gross (1976) introduced Cultivation Theory to explain the long-term effects of social media use in shaping individuals' beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. The theory also posits that excessive social media content changes people's perceptions and aspirations towards materialistic values. Individuals who spend most of their time (usually hours) on media content tend to be more absorbed in it. These individuals are impressed by the unrealistic media content, aspire to similar lifestyles, and adapt to the social acceptance of materialism (Gerbner et al., 1986).

This theory posits that youth are continuously exposed to social media in pursuit of happiness, recognition, and social status. Therefore, this theory is the best-suited approach for understanding how social media exposure is developing materialistic values among university students in the given structural vicinity.

Social comparison theory

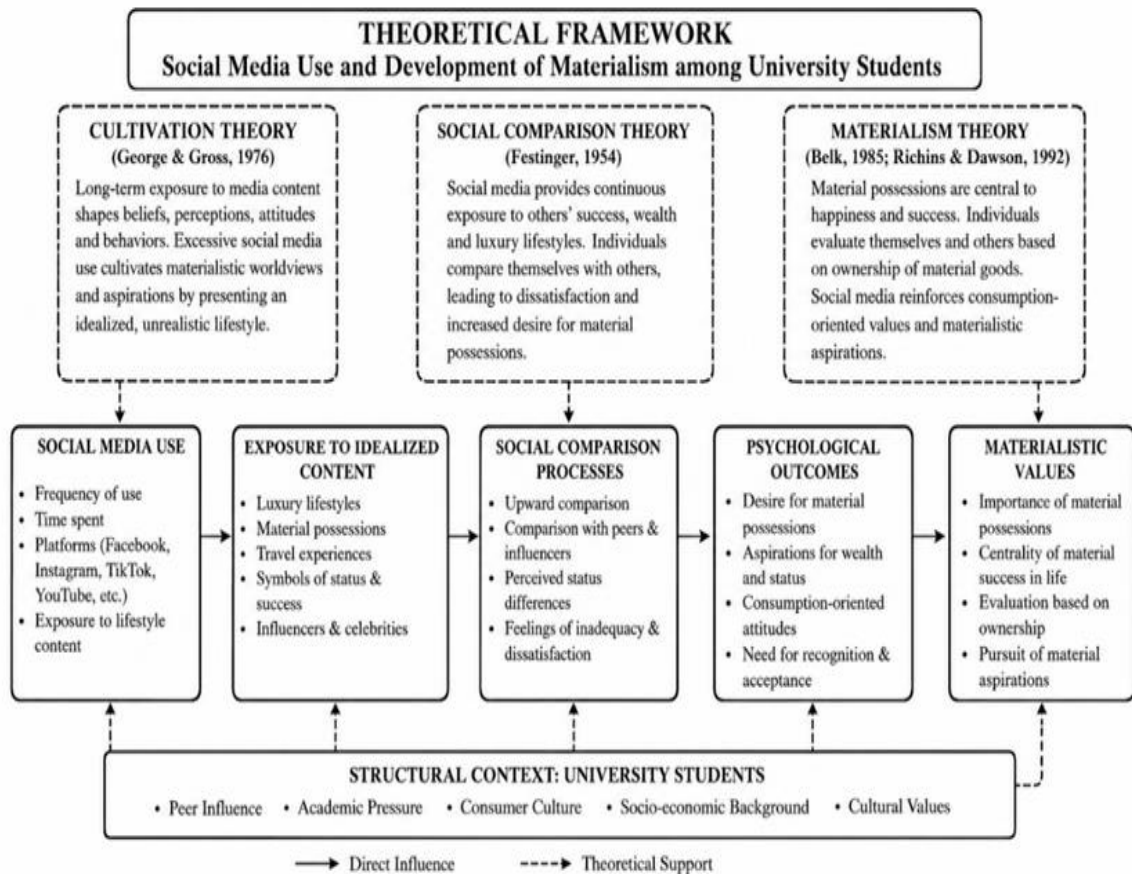
Festinger (1954) proposed that social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram give young people continuous exposure to and comparison with others' success, wealth, and luxury lifestyles. This comparison is driven by interactions with unrealistic, idealized portrayals of material possessions and achievements on social media. The theory posits that social media serves as the environmental stimulus that facilitates frequent exposure to comparison targets. The more individuals use social media, the greater will be their exposure to others' lifestyles, luxury products, travel experiences, and symbols of social status (Festinger, 1957).

Aligning this theory with the present study showed that the students develop materialistic values and compare themselves with those who are materially influential and successful. Such comparisons generate dissatisfaction among youth with their own circumstances and increase their desire for material possessions.

Materialism theory

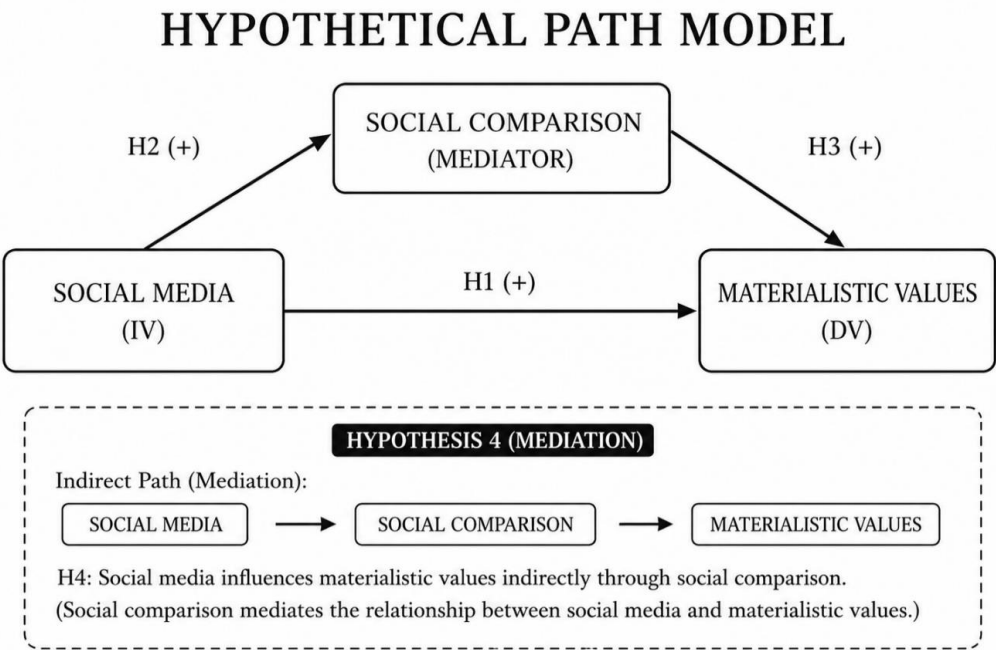
Materialism theory was developed by Belk (1985) and Richins & Dawson (1992), and it posits that individuals focus on material products as the primary aspiration in their lives. People believe that the key to their happiness is wealth and success. The theory highlights that, nowadays, social media is a powerful tool that inclines people toward attaining material success. A glance at the theory's propositions also indicates that people evaluate themselves and others based on owning expensive material products. Other people's status, material possessions, and aspirations for material and digital success are major factors in how people form bonds with others (Ger & Belk, 1996; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

The theory is relevant to the present study because it indicates that social media is the underlying factor that provokes the development of materialistic values among youth. The theory suggests that continuous exposure to social media increases consumption-oriented content, which strengthens young people's desire for material possessions.



Hypothetical path model

From the theories above, the following hypothetical model was derived.



Methodology

Research design

The present study used an explanatory quantitative research design to find out the relationship among the study variables.

Universe and target population

The universe of the present study was all the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students at Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. The main reason for this selection was that educated youth are the largest users of social media, which compels them to develop materialistic values. The target population was undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students at the university who were active social media users and influenced by materialism.

Sampling procedure

A multistage sampling technique was used. The stages of this sampling procedure are mentioned below;

First stage

In the first stage, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences was purposively selected from the 10 faculties, as described in Table 3.1.

Faculties and the respective number of departments in Bahauddin Zakaria University, Multan

Names of the faculties	Number of departments
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences	15 departments
Faculty of Commerce, Banking, & Business Administration	3 departments
Faculty of Engineering and Technology	8 departments
Faculty of Islamic Studies	8 departments
Faculty of Pharmacy	5 departments
Faculty of Science	13 departments
Faculty of Agricultural and Science Technology	9 departments
Faculty of Veterinary Science	5 departments
Faculty of Food Science and Nutrition	5 departments
Faculty of Law	1 departments

Second stage

The selected faculty comprised 15 departments. From each department, the researchers gathered the enrolment/attendance sheets, which contained all students' details

Third stage

In the third stage, the researchers selected the programs in each department, such as BS, M.Phil, and Ph.D. The first author decided to collect data from each program, as they were all inclined toward social media use, social comparison, and the development of materialistic values. For the BS program, the researchers chose the morning sessions, as some departments halted the evening programs. Moreover, the chairmen of 3 departments did not allow us to collect data from the BS evening programs as the students had to go home on routes before 5 pm. In addition, the researchers approached available students from M.Phil and Ph.D. coursework and research.

Fourth stage

In the fourth stage, the researchers selected semesters from each program. The authors of the paper mutually decided that the most senior semesters, such as 6th and 8th in BS, and 2nd in M.Phil, and the dissertation-conducting semesters of Ph.D., were targeted for data collection. The main reason was that students in the initial semesters were more inclined to adjust to the new degree; over time, they became more engaged with social media and compared themselves with others, ultimately developing materialistic values.

Fifth stage

After selecting the semesters, the students were approached for data collection. These students were selected based on the law of large numbers, with a larger sample from the department with the larger population and a smaller sample from the department with fewer enrolled students. The sample size was N=450 students selected through a systematic random sampling procedure, in which every 5th student was selected for data collection.

Tool for Data Collection

A semi-structured questionnaire comprising open and closed-ended questions was used as the data collection tool. The tool was divided into five sections: 1: Demographic correlates of the respondents; 2: Social media use; 3: Social comparison; 4: Development of materialistic values; 5: Suggestions to lessen the development of materialism among youth through the use of social media and social comparison.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using two statistical software programs, i.e., SPSS and PLS-SEM-4. Because the data were numeric, SPSS was the best tool for univariate and bivariate analyses. PLS-SEM provided advanced and reliable results for data analysis with small to medium sample sizes when the data were normally distributed. Three variables were used in the data analysis, i.e., social media use (independent variable), social comparison (mediation variable), and materialistic values development (dependent variable). The analysis was conducted in PLS-SEM-4 using factor loadings (for associations between variables), reliability, validity, discriminant validity, R-squared, and a hypothesis-testing method in which the variables were tested through the path IV-DP, IV-MV-IV-MV-DV.

Response Rate

A total of N=392 questionnaires were received out of N=450 questionnaires distributed. N=08 questionnaires were unreadable, either because half were left blank or because they had ink spots on the answers. Therefore, N=382 questionnaires were readable and included in the data analysis. The actual response rate was 85.9%. This response rate is sufficient to generalize to the larger population of the study area.

Results

Table-4.1: Demographic profile of the respondents (N=382)

Variable	Categories	Frequency/Percentage
Gender	Male	190 (49.7)
	Female	192 (50.3)

Age in years	>20	102 (26.7)
	20-25	230 (60.2)
	<25	50 (13.1)
Academic level	Undergraduate	244 (63.9)
	Graduate	88 (23.0)
	Postgraduate	50 (13.1)
Monthly income of the household in PKR	>50,000 PKR	70 (18.3)
	51,000-1,00,000 PKR	114 (29.9)
	<1,00,000 PKR	117 (30.6)
	Not a fixed amount as the monthly income fluctuates due to business or changing job patterns	81 (21.2)

Demographics of the respondents

Table 4.1 shows the gender distribution of the university students: n=190 (49.7% males) and n=192 (50.3% females). The age variable also showed that n=230 (60.2%) university students were in the 20-25 age group, while n=102 (26.7%) were under 20 years old. The academic level demonstrated that n=244 (63.9%) respondents were studying at the undergraduate level, while n=88 (23.0%) were at the graduate level. Regarding household monthly income in PKR, n=117 (30.6%) students belonged to families with a monthly income exceeding 1,00,000 PKR. In addition, n=114 (29.9%) respondents had a monthly family income of less than 51,000-1,00,000 PKR.

Table-4.2: Type and frequency of social media usage (N=382)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (Percentage)
Type of social media usage	Facebook	103 (27.0)
	Instagram	96 (25.1)
	Twitter	24 (6.3)
	Snapchat	61 (16.0)
	TikTok	73 (19.1)
	YouTube	25 (6.5)
Frequency of social media usage	> 1 hour	4 (1.0)
	1-2 hours	111 (29.1)
	3-4 hours	204 (53.4)
	< 5 hours	63 (16.5)

Social media usage patterns among respondents

According to Table 4.2, n=103 (27.0%) respondents used Facebook, and n=96 (25.1%) used Instagram as their primary social media platforms. In addition, a smaller percentage of university students also used TikTok (n=73, 19.1%), Snapchat (n=61, 16.0%), YouTube (n=25, 6.5%), and Twitter (n=24, 6.3%). A significant majority of respondents used social media for 3-4 hours per

day (n=204, 53.4%). In addition, n=111 (29.1%) university students used social media for 1-2 hours per day.

Table-4.3: Perception of students about the influence of social media usage on their personal values and materialistic possessions (N=382)

Variables	Categories	Frequency (Percentage)
Influence of social media on their personal values	Significantly high	105 (27.5)
	To some extent	138 (36.1)
	Occasional	84 (22.0)
	Not at all	36 (9.4)
	Not sure/Doubted	19 (5.0)
Influence of social media in making comparisons with others with respect to materialistic possessions	Very often	70 (18.3)
	Often	108 (28.3)
	Sometimes	106 (27.7)
	Rarely	56 (14.7)
	Never	42 (11.0)

Students' perceptions of the influence of social media on personal values and material possessions

Table 4.3 also revealed that n=105 (27.5%) respondents reported that their personal values were highly affected by social media, while n=138 (36.1%) university students reported that their personal values were affected by social media to some extent. In addition, n=36 (9.4%) university students argued that social media usage has a mild (to some extent) effect on respondents' personal values. Data divulge that n=108 (28.3%) university students were engaged in social comparison with others (social media influencers, social circle, and other individuals) on social media, while n=42 (11.0%) university students denied this.

Table-4.4: Structural and measurement model depicting the mediation pathway model among university students (N=382)

Measurement Model

Assessment of the PLS-SEM Model

Table 4.4 presents the relationships extracted using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS-4 to test the hypothetical models shown above. Following assumptions from Chin (1998), Hair et al. (2022), and Klesel et al. (2019), the structural and measurement models were constructed. The measurement model of the present study depicted the reliability and validity of the study variables, while the structural model depicted the direct and indirect (mediation) pathways of the study variables.

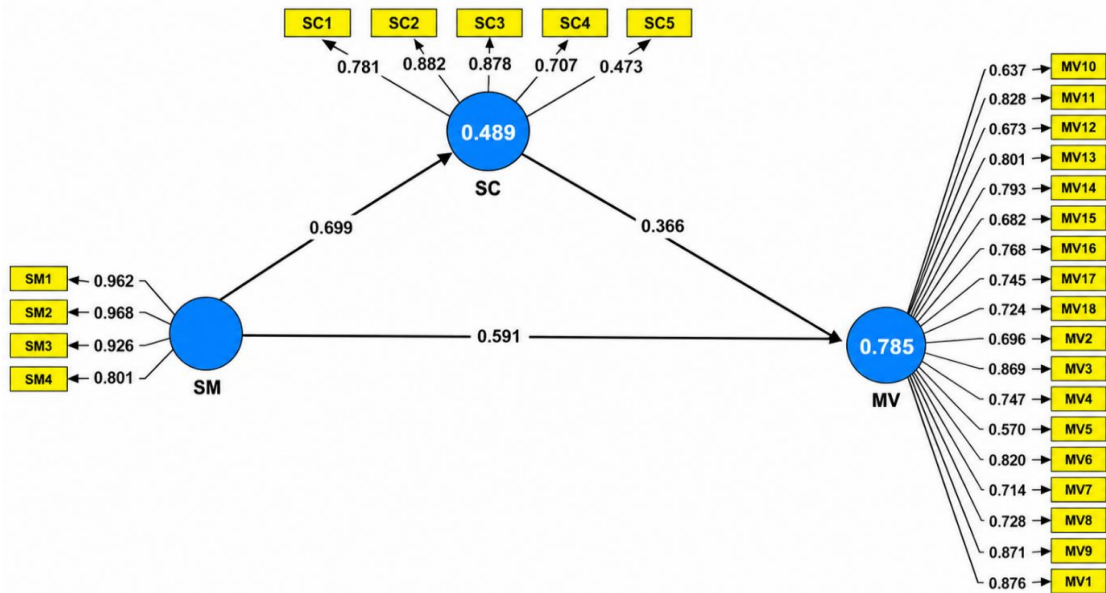


Fig. 1: Measurement model

Table 4.4a: Factor loadings

Construct	Item	Outer Loading
Materialistic Values	MV1	0.876
	MV2	0.696
	MV3	0.869
	MV4	0.747
	MV5	0.570
	MV6	0.820
	MV7	0.714
	MV8	0.728
	MV9	0.871
	MV10	0.637
	MV11	0.828
	MV12	0.673
	MV13	0.801
	MV14	0.793
	MV15	0.682
	MV16	0.768
	MV17	0.745
	MV18	0.724
Social Comparison	SC1	0.781

Social Media Usage	SC2	0.882
	SC3	0.878
	SC4	0.707
	SC5	0.473
	SM1	0.962
	SM2	0.968
	SM3	0.926
	SM4	0.801

Indicator Reliability

Indicator reliability, as shown in Table 4.4-a, depicted the standardized factor loadings of all measurement items. As indicated by the assumptions derived from Hair et al. (2022), the factor loadings exceeded 0.708; however, the loadings of 0.40-0.70 may be retained. Based on these assumptions, the social media construct also exhibited excellent loadings ranging from 0.801 to 0.968. Likewise, the social compassion constructs showed loadings ranging from 0.707 to 0.882, except for SC5 (0.473), which was retained because it met the recommended thresholds for R and AVE. The materialistic values construct showed acceptable loadings ranging from 0.570 to 0.876. The indicators' loadings for materialistic values (MV5, MV10, MV12, MV15, and MV2) were acceptable, as they exceeded 0.40.

Table 4.4-b: Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Materialistic Values	0.956	0.960	0.573
Social Comparison	0.814	0.867	0.576
Social Media	0.935	0.954	0.840

Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Convergent Validity

As shown in Table 4.4-b, the internal consistency indicated by the Cronbach's alpha (α) value ranged from good to excellent. The reliability values were also in the acceptable range, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (i.e., 0.867 to 0.960). Furthermore, convergent validity showed acceptable, significant values ranging from 0.573 to 0.840 for the three study constructs.

Table 4.4-c: HTMT Ratios

Constructs	MV	SC	SM
Materialistic Values	—		
Social Comparison	0.824	—	
Social media	0.866	0.726	—

Discriminant Validity

Table 4.4-c indicated that the HTMT values were acceptable and significant, ranging from 0.726 to 0.866, for the study variables, all below 0.90. Discriminant validity was established, indicating that social media, social comparison, and materialistic values are conceptually distinct.

Structural Model

Assessment of the Structural Model

The structural model was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The assessment included the Coefficient of Determination (R^2), path coefficients, and hypothesis testing.

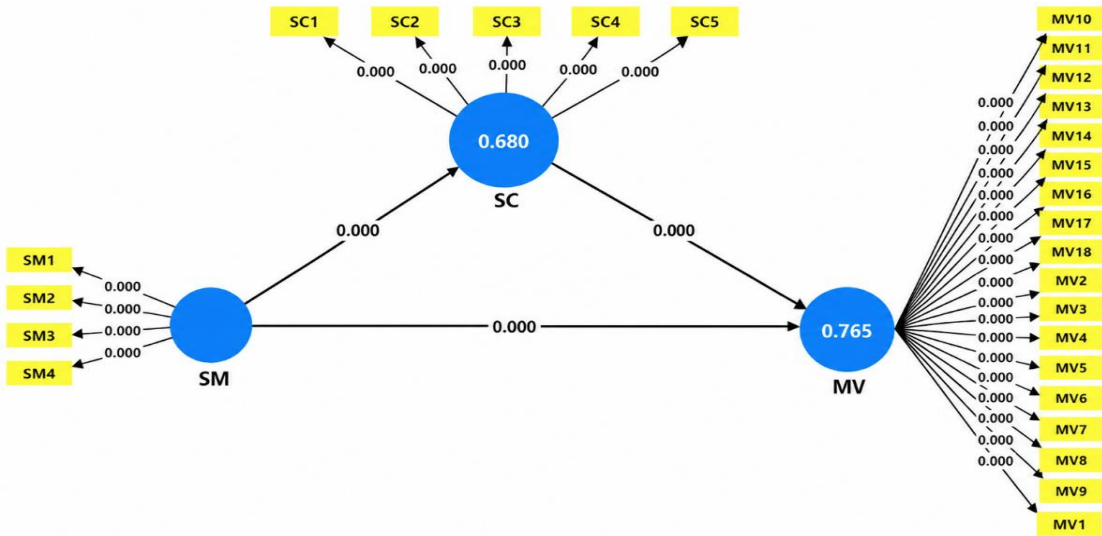


Fig. 2: Structural model

Table 4.4-d: Coefficient of Determination

Construct	R^2
Social Comparison	0.489
Materialistic Values	0.785

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The R^2 values indicated in Table 4.4d show that social comparison is responsible for 48.9% of the variance in materialistic values. In addition, the combined effect of social media use and social comparison is responsible for 78.5% of the variance in materialistic values.

Table 4.4-e: Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p
H1	SM $\rightarrow$ MV	0.591	13.137	<0.001
H2	SM $\rightarrow$ SC	0.699	22.343	<0.001
H3	SC $\rightarrow$ MV	0.366	7.667	<0.001

Hypothesis testing

Results in Table 4.4-e indicate that social media usage has a positive, significant, and direct relationship with developing materialistic values (Supporting the H1 $\beta = 0.591$, $t = 13.137$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, social media significantly and positively affects social comparison (supporting H2: $\beta = 0.699$, $t = 22.343$, $p < 0.001$). Another direct path supported the relationship between social comparison and materialistic values (Supporting H3: $\beta = 0.366$, $t = 7.667$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4.4-f: Indirect Effect (Mediation Analysis)

H4: Social comparison mediates the relationship between social media and materialistic values

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	β	t	p	Decision
H4	SM $\rightarrow$ SC $\rightarrow$ MV	0.256	7.345	<0.001	Supported

Mediation Analysis

Table 4.4-f shows the indirect and mediating pathway, indicating that social comparison mediates the relationship between social media usage and materialistic values among university students in Multan (supporting H4: $\beta = 0.256$, $t = 7.345$, $p < 0.001$). The mediation is partial, indicating that social media influences materialistic values both directly and through social comparison.

Structural Model Summary

The structural model indicated the explanatory power for understanding how social media influences materialistic values among youth. Social media significantly predicts both social comparison and materialistic values, and social comparison also exerts a significant positive effect on materialistic values. The model explains that social media alone accounts for 48.9% of the variance in materialistic values, while its potential effect increases in the presence of social comparison (i.e., 78.5%).

Discussion

The present study also indicated that social comparison mediates the link between frequent exposure to idealized lifestyles on social media and individuals comparing themselves with others, thereby strengthening materialistic values. These findings revealed that social media exposure shapes individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward materialism. Previous studies in international and Pakistani contexts by Kamal et al. (2013) and Hu et al. (2023) used the theoretical framework of the present study. The theories put forward how social media platforms became an addiction for the youth, and they adopted materialistic values by comparing themselves to other social media influencers along with other associated classmates.

As evident, Hypothesis 1 stated that social media has a direct and significant relationship with materialistic values. This direct pathway exposed that social media platforms encourage individuals to place greater importance on acquiring material possessions and consumption-oriented lifestyles. These platforms frequently present branded products and influencer-generated content as desirable. This finding is consistent with previous studies in China that reported that social media significantly contributes to the development of materialistic values (Yang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025). Another study from Pakistan also supported the same finding (see Bukhari et al., 2024). These studies showed that the young generation, especially those studying in colleges and universities, extensively use social networking sites. This has become a major cause of their lower self-control, which in turn is related to the development of materialism among them. The findings from Hypothesis 1 are also supported by cultivation theory, which argues that prolonged exposure to social media shapes individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and values. Repeated exposure to idealized lifestyles on social media cultivates the belief that happiness and success are closely associated with material possessions. A recent study from Pakistan also supported the application of the cultivation theory for the development of materialistic values through celebrity influence on social media (Tahir & Ahmmad, 2026; Sabir et al., 2016).

The data also showed that Hypothesis-2 shows the direct relationship between the study variables. The relationship was depicted between social media usage and social comparison among educated youth. Social media became involved in social comparison, where students compare their current position with the material status and prosperity of social media influencers, celebrities, and others in their social circle. Previous studies conducted by Butler (2024) and Hassim et al. (2020) also supported these findings. Another study by Yahya et al. (2023) on Palestinian women reported that women who used Instagram frequently were more engaged in social comparison with media figures and other social circles worldwide. The findings were also supported by the present theoretical framework, which shows that individuals use social media to compare themselves with others in terms of material possessions (Hu & Liu, 2020).

The data showed that Hypothesis 3 was supported, as social comparison provokes materialistic values among educated youth. This social comparison creates a stronger desire for possessions that symbolize status and success, especially through social media celebrities and other social circles.

When educated youth see others with material possessions, they compare themselves and develop material aspirations. Previous studies by Chan (2013) and Dávila & Casabayó (2025) supported these findings. These studies also showed that people who use social media and compare their material possessions with others become more inclined towards developing materialistic values. These findings further support social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals compare themselves with others, often leading to greater emphasis on material possessions.

The study reported three direct relationships, consistent with prior literature. Despite the direct path relationship, the present study also found indirect and mediation paths. This pathway showed that social media, through social comparison, indirectly influences materialistic values. These findings align with previous research indicating that social comparison is the socio-psychological mechanism linking social media to materialistic values (see Missaoui, 2024; Rasool & Waqar, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, social media significantly predicts social comparison and the development of materialistic values among university students. This educated segment of society was among the biggest social media users, spending many hours a day on it. These students were influenced by unrealistic media content that promoted success, happiness, and materialism. Impressed by and internalizing this materialism on social media, these students began comparing themselves with social media celebrities and their associated social circles, which led to the development of materialistic values. Organizing seminars, training sessions, and conferences can help students understand the importance of moderate social media use and avoid comparing themselves with others based on material possessions. In addition, parents can also play a pivotal role in socializing their children about the importance of traditional values rather than impressing and internalizing material values from others. Faculty members can also encourage students to develop critical thinking and academic skills rather than comparing themselves and developing materialistic values through frequent social media use.

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