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Online motivations predict social media behaviors and emotional adjustment†

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Highlights:

- Like-seeking behaviors have evolved.
- Online motivations, like-seeking behaviors, and emotional adjustment are intercorrelated.
- Manipulative like-seeking behaviors are linked with negative emotional adjustment.
- Popularity goals moderated the relationship between like-seeking behaviors and depression.
- Online motivations have strong relationships with emotional adjustment.

Abstract

As emerging adults continue to be the largest reported age group on multiple social media sites (Gottfried, 2024), the need to understand what they do online and why they go online grows to better explain the associated ramifications. By exploring emerging adults' motivations alongside their online behaviors, researchers may uncover a fuller picture of their online worlds. This study examined relationships among social media motivations (i.e., popularity goals and social comparison), like-seeking behaviors (normative, deceptive, and manipulative-popular), and emotional adjustment (depressive symptoms, social anxiety, and body image satisfaction) in emerging adults, and tested how social media motivations moderated the relationship between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment. The sample comprised 200 college students who completed an online self-report survey. Results showed direct relationships between motivations and emotional adjustment, as well as moderated relationships involving like-seeking behaviors. The findings suggest that motivations for social media use may be more strongly linked to emotional adjustment than the behaviors themselves.

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1. Introduction

Social media continues to be a primary facet of many young adults' lives, and their use remains an important research topic in the field of social and developmental psychology. Emerging adults (ages 18-29) are a demographic of interest because they account for a large share of social media users (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Gottfried, 2024). Specifically, one-third of Instagram users are emerging adults (Dixon, 2024). As frequent online users, they are exposed to many negative effects associated with social media use, such as lower peer belongingness, lower self-esteem, more risky behaviors, and an overall decline in mental health (Hamilton et al., 2023; Nesi et al., 2018a; Romero Saletti et al., 2023; Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017; Vannucci et al., 2020). While news of these negative outcomes is not new, researchers continue to explore the factors that lead to them. One area of interest is social media-related behavior, specifically like-seeking behaviors. What kinds of like-seeking behaviors do young adults use, and how do those behaviors impact their overall well-being? Another area of exploration is the motivation for using social media. What do young adults hope to achieve as they use these different platforms? Sometimes social media motivations can be passive, such as passing the time by scrolling for hours, or active, such as receiving feedback or comparing themselves to others (Cuadrado et al., 2022; Keum et al., 2023; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

To best understand the intricacies of social media behavior, the transformation framework developed by Nesi and colleagues (2018a) offers clarity about this online world. This framework argues that the online world is transforming the social world rather than merely replicating offline social interactions. This theory provides a basis for understanding how social media can transform peer dynamics. For example, in an offline setting, people cannot get an exact number of how many people "follow" them or are interested in their lives. But online, users can see an actual number of how many people follow them, like or comment on their posts, or even just view their posts, and can also directly compare that number to their peers' statistics. This allows for direct social comparison, which could influence both one's online behavior and one's emotional adjustment. Social media also provides unique opportunities to filter the information peers see about a user, allowing youth to curate the image they present of themselves while also showing them an unrealistic view of others' lives (Nesi et al., 2018a). The various ways social interactions are distorted on social media present myriad opportunities for deception, misunderstanding, and unrealistic expectations. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand how and why emerging adults use social media and to further explore how these motivations and behaviors relate, directly and indirectly, to emotional adjustment.

1.1. Like-Seeking Behaviors

There are many different types of behaviors one can engage in on social media. Some behaviors may be passive, such as scrolling or lurking (Meier & Krause, 2022; Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017), whereas other behaviors are more active, such as posting or commenting (Swirsky et al., 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Within each type of behavior, there are even more specific types, such as active like-seeking behaviors, which users engage in to increase the number of "likes" they receive on their social media posts (Dumas et al., 2017). In the original development of their like-seeking scale, Dumas and colleagues (2017) identified a two-factor model comprising normative and deceptive behaviors. Normative behaviors were defined as everyday, typical behaviors used on Instagram (e.g., posting a picture, asking for advice on captions). Deceptive behaviors were defined as sneaky tactics used to gather more feedback on posts or to make them appear more high-impact (e.g., buying likes or buying followers). With both sets of behaviors, users engage online in hopes of receiving likes on their photos. There are distinct emotional and behavioral outcomes associated with these different styles of social media behavior.

1.2. Like-Seeking and Adjustment

As with most social media behavior, like-seeking is associated with poor emotional adjustment among users. Specifically, a negative relationship between deceptive-like-seeking behaviors and peer belonging and overall well-being was found (Dumas et al., 2020). Users may feel disingenuous and less connected when using these deceptive and manipulative behaviors (Dumas et al., 2020). When users post with the hopes of getting more likes and use Instagram as a feedback source, use is more closely linked with depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein, 2019). On the other hand, normative like-seeking behaviors are associated with stronger feelings of belonging than deceptive behaviors (Dumas et al., 2017). By choosing to engage in common behaviors rather

than manipulative tactics, users can feel good knowing that any feedback they receive is based on their true selves.

Like-seeking has also been linked to poor body image satisfaction in high school and college students (Verrastro et al., 2020). When users spend time editing and perfecting their pictures before going "live," users internalize greater pressure to meet unrealistic beauty standards (Verrastro et al., 2020). Especially if users turn to social media as a way to reinforce their feelings about their appearance and already suffer from low self-esteem, they are at greater risk for body surveillance and body dissatisfaction (Lyu et al., 2025). As such, social media use can lead to unrealistic expectations about what body shapes and other aspects of physical appearance are "normal," leading to greater mental health problems resulting from not achieving such unrealistic goals (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020). The "Instagram beauty standard" can create pressure to meet unreasonable expectations and ultimately pose a risk of a negative body image (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). In addition, especially in young girls, "looking good" is an important predictor in achieving peer status (Lansu et al., 2022). When young adult women engage in upward social comparison regarding their looks, they post more heavily edited and curated selfies to their Instagram feed (Lyu et al., 2025). This pressure to look good may lead to more manipulative social media behaviors, which, in turn, could increase the risk of a declining body image if feedback on social media content is not positive. Alternatively, those who already suffer from poor body image may be more inclined to use online deceptive behaviors to hide their poor body image and manipulate their image to present their personal ideal "look."

Lastly, the "Instagram beauty standard" may be associated with social anxiety. The pressure to create the perfect posts may place unnecessary strain on an emerging adult, potentially leading to social anxiety (Verrastro et al., 2020). For example, social media highlights trends and norms within peer groups, which may create pressure to keep up with peers who promote those trends (Schwartz et al., 2019). This pressure may be associated with increased anxiety levels (Vannucci & Ohannessian, 2019). Further, the fear of missing out (FoMO) can be a concern for individuals who consistently turn to social media (Casale et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2024). Seeing friends or peers spending time without them may lead to a decreased sense of belonging and higher concern about peer rejection. Thus, emerging adults who feel heightened pressure to achieve the "Instagram beauty standard" or who experience FoMO may engage in deceptive or status-seeking behaviors on social media to avoid or reduce their feelings of not living up to social expectations or their worries about social inclusion. Like-seeking behaviors are used by many young adults, and they have strong ties to different emotional outcomes such as depressive symptoms (Dumas et al., 2020; Nesi & Prinstein, 2019), body image satisfaction (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020; Verrastro et al., 2020; Lyu et al., 2025), and social anxiety (Nesi & Prinstein, 2018b). However, an important piece of this social media puzzle is young adults' motivations for using it.

1.3. Motivations for Social Media Use & Links to Emotional Outcomes

Social Comparison. To understand why users engage in certain behaviors on social media, researchers explore users' motivations. Research has uncovered many reasons people use social media, including seeking social and romantic support, learning about others, and learning how others view them (*Motivations for Electronic Interaction Scale*; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). This scale, originally developed by the researchers to measure social media use among adolescents, was later adapted for college students and includes five factors: *sexual health, feedback seeking, social comparison, emotion regulation,* and *romantic communication* (Harmon et al., 2021). The current study focuses on *social comparison.* Examples of social comparison items include "I use social media to compare the way I look with other people's looks" or "I use social media to compare my life with other people's lives."

Social comparison in the context of social media use has been linked with depressive symptoms, particularly in adolescence (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). If youth notice that their peers receive more positive activity (i.e., likes and comments) than their own posts, this comparison can contribute to lower self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Nesi et al., 2017). Social comparison has also been found to predict depressive symptoms in college students, especially when they feel they are "missing out" on social events (Burnell et al., 2019; Casale et al., 2023). Social media users risk seeing evidence that their peers are spending time together without them, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and a diminished sense of belonging within their peer group.

Social comparison has also been linked with social anxiety (Lam et al., 2022). Due to the quantitative nature of social media, users can directly compare themselves to their peers, for example, in terms of the number of likes and comments (Nesi et al., 2018a). When someone does not receive the amount of feedback they were hoping for, it can feel as if they do not fit in with their group, heightening their social anxiety. Also,

due to the asynchronous nature of social media, users have ample time to ruminate on the lack of feedback and compare themselves to peers who receive many likes or comments (Lam et al., 2022; Winstone et al., 2023). Social comparison is linked with worsening body image satisfaction (Jones, 2001). Users are bombarded with photographs and posts that highlight unattainable standards of appearance. Social media apps allow users to carefully edit and perfect an image before sharing, meaning that viewers are often comparing themselves to an inaccurate or unattainable image (Fioravanti et al., 2022). Thus, social media users have many unrealistic sources to compare themselves to, which can contribute to poor body image (Cohen et al., 2018; Fioravanti et al., 2022). Especially among women, even brief exposure to beauty-focused images can lead to decreased body satisfaction (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Fioravanti et al., 2022). To our knowledge, the association between social comparison motivation and like-seeking behaviors has not been directly tested. However, if college students want to appear more socially desirable to their peers, it would be logical to hypothesize that they may choose to engage in deceptive and manipulative online behaviors to achieve a positive upward social comparison.

Popularity Goals. The desire to increase popularity may be an additional, yet understudied, motivation for social media use. Popularity is defined by one's social visibility among peers (Cillessen & Rose, 2005) and their connectedness to others within the peer group (Cillessen & Marks, 2011). In particular, a defining characteristic of popularity in emerging adulthood is *prestige* (Lansu et al., 2022). College students are often willing to prioritize popularity over other social goals, such as being a good friend (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). As emerging adults continue to prioritize popularity in their lives (Lansu et al., 2022), it is important to understand how this social goal extends to the online setting. There is a strong relationship between popularity and social media likes in adolescence, such that more popular individuals receive more likes (Nesi & Prinstein, 2019) and that popular youth show higher levels of social media use than nonpopular youth (Schwartz et al., 2024). There is also a direct link between social media behavior and popularity goals in adolescence (Swirsky et al., 2021). These findings suggest that if users "want people to think they are cool" or "it matters to me if people think I'm popular," then their rate of active social media behavior online increases (Swirsky et al., 2021), specifically their like-seeking behaviors (Dumas et al., 2020). If emerging adults are motivated to achieve prestige in the form of likes associated with online popularity (Lansu et al., 2022), their popularity goals may contribute to why (and how) they use social media.

Popularity has also been associated with adjustment outcomes related to social media use. For example, in adolescence, popularity was found to moderate the relationship between social media behaviors and depressive symptoms, such that adolescents' social media use was positively associated with depressive symptoms for highly popular individuals but was not associated with depression for lower-status individuals (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Popularity has also been associated with social anxiety (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), in that users feel pressure to be included in popular peer groups and to be seen with their high-status peers. This pressure may be especially heightened on social media, where there is less direct human interaction (Nesi et al., 2021). If users are motivated to become popular, they may feel pressure to appear trendy and attractive on social media (Schwartz et al., 2019). As with social comparison motivations, users with popularity goals may be highly attuned to the amount of feedback they receive on their posts relative to others', using it as an indicator of their online prestige. In addition, they may focus heavily on their follower count and worry about whether they have enough followers, which could exacerbate social anxiety (Parsons et al., 2021; Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017).

Limited research has focused on the relationship between online popularity goals and body image concerns. However, offline popularity has often been associated with attractiveness and trendiness (Mayeux & Kleiser, 2020; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006), two attributes that are often highlighted on photo-based sharing platforms. If online status is associated with high feedback from followers, the number of likes or comments could affect satisfaction with one's appearance when it is lower than expected (Nesi et al., 2018b). Thus, if young adults go online motivated to gain status, this could contribute to dissatisfaction with their appearance and ultimately lower body image satisfaction.

1.4. Online Motivations as Moderators

Studies have linked social media use to depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Nesi et al., 2017; Twenge et al., 2018), body image satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2018), and social anxiety (Lam et al., 2022). Recent research has begun to uncover the individual differences that moderate these associations. For instance, users who report more negative affect experience comparatively more depressive symptoms in the wake of feeling rejected or left out (Nesi et al., 2021). On the other hand, users who have a positive emotional experience online

are also at risk for greater depressive symptoms because they rely on social media for positive peer experiences and miss out on in-person interactions. Emerging adults who have already suffered from peer victimization in the past are more likely to report more rejected feelings and greater negative internalizing feelings after experiencing rejection online (Dumas et al., 2020). Thus, users who turn to social media to compare their own social experiences with others' may be at greater risk of negative outcomes than those who do not engage in such comparisons.

In addition, researchers have begun to examine how peer status moderates the relationship between social media use and maladaptive outcomes. Adolescent users with stronger popularity goals also reported higher levels of social media engagement, in both active and passive behaviors. In addition, popularity moderated the relationship between active social media behaviors (i.e., posting photos) and depressive symptoms (Swirsky et al., 2021). Popular adolescents who engaged in active social media behaviors were more at risk for depressive symptoms than non-popular adolescents who engaged in these behaviors (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Research has also linked falsification on social media with higher levels of social anxiety, particularly for those hoping to gain status (Nesi et al., 2021). These studies suggest that emotional adjustment may be at increased risk for youth who both engage in deceptive or manipulative behaviors online and also have a goal of elevating their peer status.

Importantly, these findings provide evidence that simply "being on" social media does not always correlate with worsening emotional adjustment. Instead, there may be multiple factors at play, including motivations for using like-seeking behaviors. For example, engagement in deceptive behaviors may be related to emotional adjustment (i.e., depression) among young adults only if they have particular motivations for being deceptive online, such as popularity goals. The purpose of this study is to examine how two specific motivations for social media use, popularity goals and social comparison motives, moderate the association between engagement in like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment.

1.5. Current Study

Thus far, research has explored the different relationships between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment, such that engaging in both normative and deceptive behaviors is associated with negative outcomes like depressive symptoms (Dumas et al, 2020), social anxiety (Verrastro et al., 2020), and body image dissatisfaction (Lyu et al., 2025). In addition, prior research has found relationships between these adjustment variables and online motivations such as social comparison (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), as well as links between offline popularity and emotional adjustment (Lansu et al., 2022). However, to our knowledge, researchers have yet to explore how specific motivations might moderate the relationship between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment. In addition, how popularity goals could motivate like-seeking behaviors and moderate the resulting emotional outcomes has yet to be examined. The current study's goal is to understand the relationships between social media motivations (*social comparison* and *popularity goals*), like-seeking behaviors, and emotional adjustment *(depressive symptoms, social anxiety,* and *body image satisfaction),* and to explore whether social media motivations moderate the relationship between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment. The current study addressed the following research questions and hypotheses in a sample of emerging adults:

RQ1: What are the associations among social comparison and popularity motivations, like-seeking behaviors, and emotional adjustment? Based on prior research, we expected positive correlations between like-seeking behaviors and both social comparison and popularity motivations. We also expected like-seeking behaviors to be positively correlated with depressive symptoms and social anxiety, but negatively correlated with body image satisfaction. We also predicted that both motivations would be positively related to depressive symptoms and social anxiety and negatively related to body image satisfaction.

RQ2: Do social media motivations moderate the associations between like-seeking and emotional adjustment? For this research question, we expected that normative and deceptive like-seeking would have stronger positive associations with emotional adjustment for users who report high levels of social comparison and popularity motivations, compared to individuals who report low levels of these social media motivations. When users are more motivated to engage with social media for social comparison or popularity-seeking purposes, their need for likes and comments will be stronger, as they seek those indicators of online status or approval (Dumas et al., 2020). Discrepancies between their own social media metrics and others', which are inevitable, are likely to be associated with more negative emotional adjustment indicators.

Beyond the focus on social media motivations as moderators, the current study makes three specific contributions to the literature on social media use. First, it tests the association of popularity goals with social media like-seeking behaviors. Although limited prior work has linked popularity goals to overall indicators of

social media use, such as frequency and monitoring (e.g., Swirsky et al., 2021), it remains unclear whether such goals are associated with deceptive social media behaviors. Second, it measures a broader array of like-seeking social media behaviors, including specific items relevant to popularity. Finally, this study focuses on emerging adults, a demographic that reports substantial social media use (Gottfried, 2024) but about whom little is known regarding the interplay of motivation, social media behavior, and adjustment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

253 undergraduate students (22% male, 71% female, 3% other; M_{age} = 19.17, *SD* = 2.98) were recruited from the Department of Psychology participant pool at a large public university. IRB approval was granted in the Fall of 2021 by the university where the research took place. 38 participants were excluded either due to missing data, for being outside the target age range (i.e., below 18 or above 29), or because they completed the survey in less than five minutes or took more than 24 hours. Lastly, since most questions focused on Instagram use and photo-sharing applications, we included only participants who reported using Instagram. This excluded an additional 15 participants. Thus, 200 participants were included in analyses (23% male, 75% female, 2% other; M_{age} = 18.98, *SD* = 1.86). A post-hoc power analysis, conducted with G*Power 3.1, indicated that the current study had a power of (1 - β) = .95 to detect a medium effect size (.15) at a significance level of (α = .05) with a total sample size of 200. Participants were given course credit for their participation. Most participants were second-semester, first-year students (75%). Participants completed an online, self-report survey that took approximately 30 minutes.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Like-Seeking Behaviors.

Participants were asked to rate, on a 3-point Likert scale (never, once or twice, multiple times), how often they engaged in three types of like-seeking behaviors when using Instagram. New items were included in this scale to account for the evolving nature of Instagram use, whose functions have changed since the original like-seeking scale was developed by Dumas and colleagues (2017). For instance, users can now share their posts to their own stories or to friends' stories to gain more views. We also developed items that allowed us to tap into users' peer status-related posting behavior, such as posing with popular peers or tagging popular individuals in their pictures. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), conducted using MPlus, were used to test these new items. The final scale, with factor loadings and overall model fit indices indicating good fit, is shown in Table 1. The model indicated three types of social media behaviors: normative (α = .82), which included behaviors like Use a hashtag and create multiple captions and ask your other friends which caption is best; deceptive (α = .94) which included behaviors like purchase likes and purchase followers; and manipulative-popular (α = .42) which included behaviors like tag a popular person in the photo and include a picture with a popular person. Although the Cronbach's alpha for the manipulative-popular subscale was moderate, the EFA and CFA yielded strong and reliable fit indices for this subscale. To further test its reliability, we obtained the item-by-item correlation, which indicated a very strong association (r = .28, p < .01). In addition, we explored combining these items with the deceptive items, but model fit worsened significantly.

2.2.2. Social Comparison Motivations for Social Media.

Based on the *Motivations for Electronic Interaction Scale (MEIS)* scale developed by Nesi and Prinstein (2015), which was further validated by Harmon and colleagues (2021) for emerging adults, participants' *social comparison* motivations for using social media were measured via five items, on a Likert scale from 1(never) to 5 (always). An example of a social comparison item is *that I use social media to compare my life with other people's lives.* This scale had good internal reliability (α = .89).

2.2.3. Popularity Goals

Participants were asked to rate their endorsement of popularity-related goals and behaviors using a 5-point Likert scale (*never true* to *always true*) on the popularity goals and behavior scale developed by Dawes and Xie (2014). This scale had five items and acceptable reliability (α = .76). Example items include *I try to hang*

out with people just because they are popular and *I change the way I dress in order to be more popular.* Participants were given one score based on the average of all five ratings.

2.2.4. Emotional Adjustment.

To measure depressive symptoms, participants completed the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1996). Participants were shown twenty sets of four statements, reflecting increasing levels of severity of a given depression symptom (e.g., feeling sad). Participants were asked to indicate which of the four statements reflected how they most accurately felt in the current moment. For example, participants read the instructions *Please select the answer that is most appropriate to how you feel* and then were shown the following four statements: (0) *I do not feel like a failure;* (1) *I feel like I have failed more than the average person;* (2) *As I look back on my life, all I can see is a lot of failures;* (3) *I feel like I am a complete failure as a person.* The original scale includes 21 questions, but the question regarding suicidal ideation was removed due to the sensitive nature of the item. To calculate the total score, each statement had a point value that corresponded to its severity (0, 1, or 2 points), and the points for each statement were summed across the 20 sets. Scores typically range from 0 to 63 on a 21-question scale, but we modified our scoring to have a range of 0 to 60 to account for the missing item. Reliability was very good for this scale (α = .90).

2.2.5. Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents

Social anxiety was measured using the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SAS-A; La Greca & López, 1998). The validity of SAS-A has been documented across age and gender, with no significant differences found when used with young adolescents (younger than 16) compared to older adolescents (18 or older; La Greca et al., 2015). Furthermore, it has been used successfully in prior research with young adult populations (see Borg & Willoughby, 2021; Lei & Russell, 2020; Pharo et al., 2011). The SAS-A includes 18 items that measure three subscales: *fear of negative evaluation* (8 items), *social avoidance and distress to new situations* (6 items), and *social avoidance and distress in general situations* (4 items). Participants read a list of statements and were asked to rate how well each statement describes them on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*All the time*). Example items include "*I'm afraid that others will not like me*" and "*I worry about what others think about me*." Responses to all statements were averaged to obtain an overall score for social anxiety. Reliability was very good for this scale (α = .92).

2.2.6. Body Image Satisfaction

Body image satisfaction was measured using a four-item scale developed by Prichard and Tiggeman (2012). Participants were asked to rate on a sliding scale of 1-100 how well the following descriptions applied to them: *Satisfied with your body size and shape, confident, physically attractive,* and *fat. Fat* was reverse-coded. An overall score was computed as the average of the four items. Reliability was acceptable (α = .77).

2.3. Data Analysis

The CFAs and EFA reported earlier were conducted in Mplus, and the remaining analyses were conducted in SPSS v. 25. This project used bivariate correlations and hierarchical regression models. Composite variables were created within SPSS and mean-centered. First, demographic and descriptive statistics were analyzed. The correlations, means, and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 2. Then, correlational analyses and regressions were conducted.

To maximize power in the regressions, each motivation was tested individually to predict each adjustment index. We specified six regression analyses, using the three emotional adjustment variables (*depression, social anxiety,* and *body image)* as dependent variables. Before analysis, assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested; all were within acceptable ranges. Across all models, gender, the other motivation (i.e., popularity goals in the analysis testing social comparison, and vice versa), and the other correlated adjustment variables were entered in Step 1 as control variables. Step 2 included the motivation of interest, and the three different like-seeking behavior scales. Step 3 included the interaction terms of the corresponding motivation with each of the like-seeking factors.

3. Results

To answer the first research question, which explored the associations among social comparison and popularity motivations, like-seeking behaviors, and emotional outcomes, correlational analyses were conducted.

As seen in Table 2, social comparison was positively related to social anxiety (r = 0.30, p <.01) and depressive symptoms (r = 0.20, p < .01), and negatively related to body image satisfaction (r = -0.22, p < .01). However, popularity goals only had a significant relationship with social anxiety (r = 0.21, p < .01) and was not significantly related to body image satisfaction or depressive symptoms. Popularity goals and social comparison were significantly positively related to all three types of like-seeking behaviors. Of interest, popularity goals had a significant positive relationship with deceptive like-seeking (r = 0.43, p < .01), and social comparison motivation was significantly associated with normative like-seeking (r = 0.43, p < .01). Like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment had no significant correlations with each other, which was inconsistent with prior literature and contrary to our first hypothesis.

Table 1. Like-seeking Behavior –Factor Analyses, Standardized Factor Loadings, and Model Fit Indices

	Model 1- EFA			Model 2 - CFA		
Items	Norm	Decep	Man-Pop	Norm	Decep	Man-Pop
Use a filter	0.68			0.69		
Use a hashtag	0.67			0.67		
Upload the post at a certain time of day	0.68			0.68		
Share the post to other social media networking sites	0.55			0.55		
Like other people's pictures to receive likes in return (i.e., get a like for like)	0.46			0.46		
Share the post to your Instagram stories	0.56			0.56		
Post multiple pictures instead of just one	0.50			0.48		
Create multiple captions and ask your friends which caption is best	0.64			0.64		
Use software to help modify your physical appearance	0.60	.10		.62		
Purchase followers		.89			0.89	
Purchase likes		.93			0.96	
Tag a popular person in the photo			.46			0.45
Make sure to include a picture with a popular person from campus			.71			0.73

Model Fit Indices					
	$\chi 2$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Model 1 - EFA	(42) = 90.419, p<.01	.085, with a 90% confidence interval [.061, .109]			.053
Model 1 - CFA	(61) = 91.74, p<.01	.05, with a 90% confidence interval [.03-.07]	.96	.95	.06
Model 2 - CFA	(62) = 94.38, p<.01	.05, with a 90% confidence interval [.03-.07]	.96	.95	.06

Note: Bolded numbers indicate significant factor loadings at p<.01

To address the second research question, which explores the moderating effects of social comparison and popularity motivations on the relationship between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment, multiple hierarchical linear regressions were used. The first set of hierarchical regressions (Table 3) tested whether social comparison motivation was associated with *depression, social anxiety,* and *body image satisfaction*. In addition, these three regressions tested whether social comparison moderated the relationships between the three types of like-seeking and emotional adjustment. Variance explained in the three adjustment variables was significant (41% of the variance in depression, 40% of the variance in social anxiety, and 37% of the variance in body image satisfaction was explained by the specified model). An additional 4% of the variance in the social anxiety model was explained in step 2, which added the three different like-seeking variables and social comparison. Social comparison motivation negatively predicted body image satisfaction (β = -.16, p < .05), but did not have any direct associations with depression or social anxiety. Normative like-seeking behavior was

negatively related to social anxiety (β = -.19, p < .01). Manipulative-popular like-seeking behavior was positively related to social anxiety (β = .12, p < .05). However, there were no significant moderating effects of social comparison in the associations of like-seeking with emotional adjustment.

Table 2. Correlations, means, and standard deviations

	M(*SD*)	Social Anxiety	Body Image	Depression	Pop Goals	Social Comparison	LS Norm	LS Decp	LS Pop
SA	2.90(*.78*)	1.00	**-.48**	**.54**	**.21**	**.30**	.04	.08	.11
BI	57.75(*24.55*)		1.00	**-.54**	.06	**-.22**	-.04	.01	.07
Dep	32.55(*8.86*)			1.00	-.01	**.20**	.06	.08	-.03
Pop Goals	1.87(*.51*)				1.00	**.50**	**.34**	**.43**	**.33**
SC	2.27(*.98*)					1.00	**.43**	**.22**	**.24**
LS Norm	1.98(*.52*)						1.00	**.22**	**.34**
LS Decp	1.05(*.24*)							1.00	**.28**
LS Pop	1.29(*.44*)								1.00

Note: Bolded numbers indicate significance at p<.01

The second set of hierarchical regressions (Table 4) examined whether popularity goals related to *depression, social anxiety,* and *body image* were present and whether they moderated the association between the like-seeking factors and these three adjustment variables. Total variance explained was again significant (41%, 38%, and 36% for depression, social anxiety, and body image, respectively). Additional variance explained in the second step of the social anxiety model was significant (6%), as was variance explained in the third step of the depression model (2%). Normative like-seeking negatively predicted social anxiety (β = -.19, p < .01). Manipulative-popular like-seeking positively predicted social anxiety (β = .12, p < .05). Popularity goals also positively predicted social anxiety (β = .24, p < .01), as well as body image satisfaction (β = .16, p < .05).

Table 3. Hierarchical Linear Regressions - Social Comparison Motivation

	Depression			Social Anxiety			Body Image		
	β	t	ΔR^2	β	t	ΔR^2	β	t	ΔR^2
Step 1.			.41**			.40**			.37*
Gender	.10	1.69		.08	1.38		-.12	-2.03*	
Depression	^+	--	--	.38	5.65**		-.35	-5.05**	
Body Image	-.33	-5.06**		-.26	-3.84**		--	--	--
Social Anxiety	.37	6.65**		--	--	--	-.28	-3.88**	
Pop Goals	-.06	-1.06		.23	4.03**		.10	1.63	
Step 2.			.01			.04*			.02
Like-seeking Normative	.02	.32		-.19	-2.77**		.01	.14	
Like-seeking Deceptive	.11	1.72		-.07	-1.07		-.02	-.35	
Like-seeking Popular	-.05	-.88		.12	2.00*		.07	1.15	
Social Comparison	.05	.67		.10	1.38		-.16	-2.23*	
Step 3.			.02			.02			.01
SC X Normative	.06	1.10		-.01	-.11		.03	.52	
SC X Deceptive	-.08	-.44		-.12	-1.16		.02	.22	
SC X Popular	.14	1.82		-.08	-1.00		.09	1.12	

Note: Based on Table 2, opposing motivation and outcomes were significantly correlated so they were controlled for in Step 1. *=p<.05; ** = p<.01

There were two significant moderation effects. First, popularity goals moderated the relationship between two forms of like-seeking behaviors and depression. These interactions were probed by creating prototypical plots illustrating the association of popularity goals and depression at high (+1 *SD*) and low (-1 *SD*) levels of like-seeking behaviors. Popularity goals moderated the relationship between manipulative-popular like-seeking behaviors and depression (β = .27, p < .01) as hypothesized. Prototypical plots (see Figure 1) revealed a significant association between depression and manipulative-popular like-seeking behaviors for emerging adults with low popularity goals (β = 5.99, t = 2.00, p< .05) and a significant association at high levels of popularity goals (β = 12.01, t = 3.20, p < .02). In addition, popularity goals moderated the relationship between deceptive like-seeking behaviors and depression (β = -.35, p <.02). However, the nature of the moderating relationship was different than expected. Prototypical plots (see Figure 2) revealed a negative association between depression and deceptive like-seeking behaviors for emerging adults with low popularity goals (β = -1.59, t = -.54, *ns*) and a marginally non-significant association at high popularity goals (β = -9.35, t = -1.79, p <

.08); the slope of the regression line for high popularity goals was significantly steeper than for low popularity goals.

Table 4. Hierarchical Linear Regressions – Popularity Goals

	Depression			Social Anxiety			Body Image		
	β	*t*	ΔR^2	*β*	*t*	ΔR^2	*β*	*t*	ΔR^2
Step 1.			.41*			.38**			.36**
Gender	.11	1.86		.05	.83		-.14	-2.28	
Depression	--	--		.37	5.42**		-.36	-5.22*	
Social Anxiety	.35	5.40**		--	--		-.23	-3.20*	
Body Image	-.34	-5.23**		-.23	-3.20**		--	--	
Social Comparison	.01	.09		.16	2.75**		-.07	-1.09	
Step 2.			.02			.06**			.03
Like-seeking Normative	.02	.33		-.19	-2.78**		.01	.14	
Like-seeking Deceptive	.11	1.72		-.07	-1.07		-.02	-.35	
Like-seeking Popular	-.05	-.88		.12	2.00*		.07	1.15	
Popularity Goals	-.12	-1.70		.24	3.28**		.16	2.11*	
Step 3.			.02*			.01			.01
PG X Normative	.01	.17		-.03	-.37		-.05	-.75	
PG X Deceptive	-.35	-2.55**		-.13	-.96		-.12	-.82	
PG X Popular	.27	2.56**		-.04	-.37		.14	1.26	

Note: Based on Table 2, opposing motivation and outcomes were significantly correlated, so they were controlled for in Step 1. *= $p<.05$; **= $p<.01$

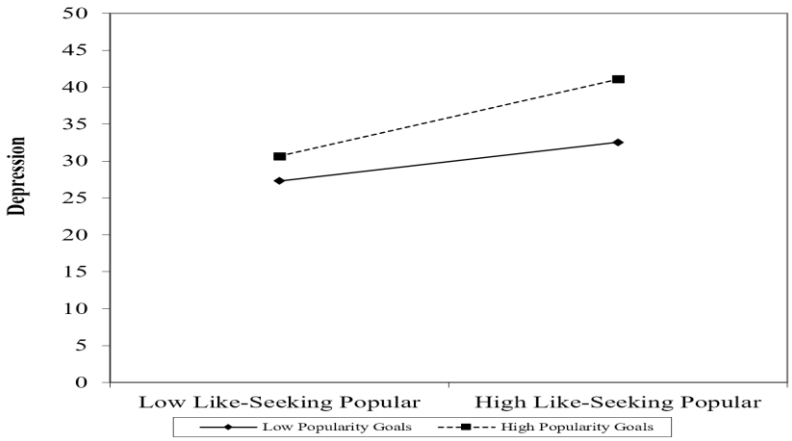

Figure 1. Popularity goals moderate the association between manipulative-popular like-seeking behaviors and depression.

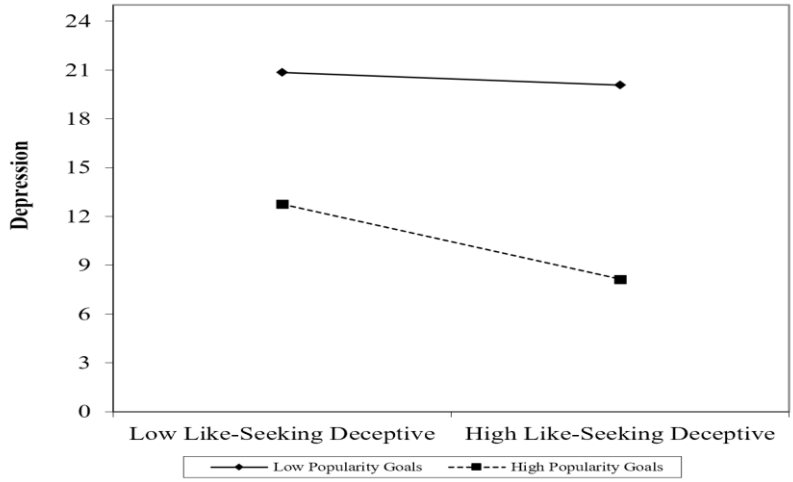

Figure 2. Popularity goals moderate the association between deceptive like-seeking behaviors and depression.

4. Discussion

The results from this project provide insight into the relationship between social media use and emotional adjustment for emerging adults. This study in particular provided support that popularity is a significant positive predictor for social media use in emerging adults, that aspects of emotional adjustments are significantly related to having specific social media motivations, that like-seeking behaviors have diverse relationships amongst each other on differing emotional adjustments, and that popularity goals moderate the relationship between specific like-seeking behaviors and depressive symptoms. While an increasing number of studies report negative outcomes associated with social media use (e.g., Verduyn et al., 2017), recent research has begun to question whether other factors can exacerbate or attenuate these outcomes (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). In response to this call, this project expanded prior research by deepening our understanding of the direct relationships between social media behaviors and emotional adjustment, between social media motivations and emotional adjustment, and by addressing the moderating role of social media motivations.

4.1. Social media motivations, like-seeking behaviors, and emotional adjustment

Our results showed significant support for relationships between like-seeking behaviors and social media motivations, between emotional adjustment and social media motivations, and partial support for the relationship between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment. In addition, our regression models provided further evidence of a significant negative relationship between social comparison and body image satisfaction, a significant positive relationship between popularity goals and social anxiety, and a significant positive association between popularity goals and depression under certain circumstances. These findings provide evidence that like-seeking behaviors and social media motivations independently contribute to self-reported social anxiety, depressive symptoms, and body image satisfaction in adulthood.

The relationship between like-seeking behaviors and social media motivations supports prior research (Dumas et al., 2020). It is also consistent with the idea that emerging adults with popularity goals may be more motivated to engage in like-seeking behaviors that could translate into online status (Lansu et al., 2022). If the priority is to be perceived in a certain way (e.g., trendy, attractive) on their social media feed, emerging adults may continue to feel that it is better to post the “best edit” of themselves online rather than their “true selves” online. In addition, this relationship provides further support for recent findings that the desire to achieve or maintain popular status continues past adolescence (Lansu et al., 2022) and that social media can be used to achieve such status.

Both social comparison and popularity motivations were significantly related to emotional adjustment in our sample. Young adults who reported stronger social comparison motivations had more depressive symptoms and higher social anxiety, and lower body image satisfaction. As long as social media continues to be more like “highlight reels” rather than honest depictions of life, users will compare themselves to a perfectly curated profile rather than a real person with flaws and faults (Yau & Reich, 2019). Achieving that unrealistic level of perfection is impossible, at the cost of users’ well-being or body image. These findings are consistent with existing research indicating that online social comparison is related to poor emotional adjustment (Seabrook et al., 2016; Weidman et al., 2012).

Popularity goals, on the other hand, were only positively related to social anxiety, suggesting that the pressure of status goals links to thoughts of feeling inadequate or not up to the level of others, which is in line with prior research (Parsons et al., 2021; Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). This relationship was found both in the correlation and regression analyses. As users feel more pressured to achieve their status goals, they may fear that people judge their online presence negatively. Alternatively, highly socially anxious individuals may be more motivated to engage in popularity-related behaviors online to achieve some online peer status. This relationship may be even stronger in an online setting because users can quantitatively evaluate how well they fit in with their peers through likes and comments (Nesi et al., 2018a). Prior research has found that individuals who are socially anxious tend to compare themselves unfavorably to others (Parsons et al., 2021). If users are trying to earn status amongst their peers, they may be more preoccupied with the content of their posts and be mindful of like-seeking behaviors that can bolster their online presence. However, this adds pressure to maintain an online image that garners likes and other engagement and is interesting to other users, which could be related to increased social anxiety (Nesi et al., 2021). To our knowledge, this is the first study to report that having a goal of becoming popular is associated with social anxiety among emerging adults. Thus, this finding contributes to the emerging adult literature on popularity and suggests potential avenues for study to understand the associations between peer status and emotional adjustment during this developmental stage.

None of the like-seeking behaviors showed significant bivariate correlations with emotional adjustment outcomes, which differed from findings in prior studies (Dumas et al., 2017; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). However, our regression analyses provided a more nuanced view of associations between like-seeking and emotional adjustment. Specifically, normative like-seeking behaviors were linked to lower social anxiety, whereas manipulative-popular like-seeking behaviors were positively related to social anxiety. Because normative like-seeking behaviors are categorized as "everyday online behaviors" (Dumas et al., 2017), users may feel a sense of belonging when engaging in them, since they mirror what their peers report doing. As such, they may be less concerned about whether others like them or their posts, since they are engaging in normal, everyday behaviors. Alternatively, users who are high in social anxiety may use fewer normative behaviors and more manipulative-popular behaviors to maintain their preferred online image (Dumas et al., 2017). Users who feel heightened pressure to look a certain way or be viewed in a certain light may turn to manipulative behaviors online to "save face." By doing something different from their peers, they may worry that others are judging them and their posts, or care more about what others think of their posts than they would if engaging in everyday behaviors that may not warrant such concerns (Dumas et al., 2020).

However, depressive symptoms and body image satisfaction were not associated with like-seeking variables, which is inconsistent with previous research. One possible explanation is that as like-seeking behaviors become more commonplace, their impact on well-being diminishes. This null finding also suggests that online behaviors in isolation are not indicative of negative emotional outcomes, but that other factors, such as motivations for going online, should also be considered. For example, in our analyses, the interaction of popularity goals and like-seeking behaviors predicted depressive symptoms. Future research should explore these relationships through a multifaceted, longitudinal lens to provide greater clarity on their causality and direction, and examine other online motivations.

4.2. Social media motivations as moderators

Limited support was found for the role of social media motivations as moderators of the associations between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment. Specifically, social comparison had no significant moderating effect on the association between like-seeking behaviors and emotional adjustment, which was contrary to our hypotheses. However, as seen in earlier findings, social comparison had direct relationships with like-seeking behaviors and body image satisfaction. Because these emerging adults grew up with social media culture in adolescence, these motives are a foundational aspect of how and why they go online. Thus, this lack of moderating effect could suggest that social comparison is linked to adjustment regardless of how emerging adults use these behaviors. This would support prior research that explores social comparison as a reason for online engagement (Chua et al., 2016; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

On the other hand, popularity goals significantly moderated the link between deceptive and manipulative-popular like-seeking behaviors and depression. The significant moderation effect of the association between manipulative-popular like-seeking and depression suggests that young adults who have strong popularity goals and engage in high levels of manipulative-popular like-seeking behavior on social media have more symptoms of depression compared to those who have low popularity goals and engage in manipulative-popular like-seeking. Young adults with popularity goals may engage in manipulative-popular like-seeking behaviors as a way to garner more attention, but at the cost of feeling more depressed, which is in line with what researchers have found in adolescence (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). They may appear to be well-connected to high-status individuals, but in reality, they feel alone because they are putting on a façade to achieve status, which contributes to greater emotional distress. Emerging adults who had low popularity goals and engaged in low levels of deceptive like-seeking behaviors had higher rates of depressive symptoms compared to adults who had high popularity goals and engaged in low levels of deceptive like-seeking behaviors. This finding contradicts the previous finding linking deceptive like-seeking behaviors and depression in college students (Dumas et al., 2020), and contradicts the finding of popularity being positively related to deceptive like-seeking (Dumas et al., 2017). One explanation for this finding could be that emerging adults with popularity goals may view these deceptive behaviors as ways to achieve status and ultimately receive a small confidence boost by feeling as though they have taken proactive steps to improve their peer status. Thus, by engaging in these behaviors, they emulate what a popular person does and, as such, feel a sense of agency. However, research should look to replicate this finding.

4.3. Limitations

These findings should be interpreted in light of several study limitations. First, the sample is limited to primarily first- and second-year college students from the southwestern United States and uses a convenience sampling method. In addition, the sample was not gender-balanced, so gender differences could not be reliably tested. However, according to a recent Pew Research Center article, women are more likely than men to use Instagram (Gottfried, 2024), so the gender imbalance in our sample likely reflects the current Instagram user population. Still, our results may not generalize to young men or older adults who use social media.

In addition, the findings in this study are based on self-reports, which may introduce shared method variance and reporting bias. However, because we found that participants report engaging in most of the like-seeking behaviors we assessed, and even partial engagement in deceptive behaviors, social desirability effects are likely minimal. Our approach is consistent with prior research, which also relied on self-report measures (e.g., Dumas et al., 2017). That said, going forward, researchers should seek corroboration via alternative data collection methods, such as peer reports of social media reputations and access to participants' actual social media data. Furthermore, our study can only be generalized to emerging-adult Instagram users. Instagram is primarily used for photo-based content and allows users to see likes and comments on other users' posts, making it an ideal online context for pursuing our research aims. Associations among like-seeking behaviors, social media motivations, and adjustment may differ for individuals who regularly use other platforms. Future studies should explore similar research questions on other popular sites, such as TikTok or X. Finally, a word about effect sizes is warranted. The magnitude of the regression coefficients we obtained in our analyses, together with the limited variance explained by our main effects and interactions, suggests that we are only scratching the surface of the intricacies of social media use.

4.4. Future Directions

Given the correlational and cross-sectional nature of our data, longitudinal or experimental research would allow for more nuanced exploration of these associations, including causal pathways. Further, our findings inspire additional questions about the nature of social media use. One future variable to consider is who users follow online. Do they follow (and engage with) their peers or celebrities and influencers? If users have more celebrities in their feed, they may be less affected by social comparison regarding the likes and comments they receive on their own posts, because they know celebrities should receive more likes and comments than they do due to their visibility. If someone primarily follows people they actually know, especially friends, coworkers, or other close peers, seeing evidence of social interactions they were not invited to or relationships they are not a part of might lead to significant feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Similarly, social media users are likely aware that celebrities have a whole team devoted to their appearance, and that it is near-impossible to achieve the same polish. Thus, lower body image satisfaction may be more likely if users compare their appearance to that of their peers online. Understanding the role of the makeup of social media users' networks in their social media-related behaviors, cognitions, and emotions is an important direction for future work.

4.5. Implications

These findings advance our understanding of social media use among emerging adults and provide further context for how the online world of young adults operates differently from their offline world (Nesi et al., 2018a). One of the major contributions of this project is the updated like-seeking behavior scale, which showcases the rapidly evolving nature of social media behaviors. Behaviors once considered deceptive are now considered normative, and new behaviors have emerged, highlighting the importance of using up-to-date scales in research.

A second major contribution is the set of findings on popularity and popularity goals. Specifically, popularity goals remained salient in our analyses, adding to the limited research exploring popularity as a motivating factor in emerging adulthood (Lansu et al., 2022) and providing evidence that college students may use social media to pursue prominent online status. Emerging adults who engaged in more manipulative behaviors and had goals of becoming popular had higher levels of depressive symptoms. This finding highlights the persistence of popularity goals in emerging adulthood and suggests they may have direct and indirect effects on emotional outcomes. This project expands the online social comparison literature by documenting a negative relationship with mental health outcomes, specifically body image satisfaction. A major takeaway is that social comparison and popularity motivations are key factors in the relationship between Instagram use and emotional adjustment.

5. Conclusion

What users do online and why they go online are important to understanding social media and negative emotional outcomes. As this study shows, emerging adults are not immune to negative outcomes associated with their social media use. As such, for leaders and experts in the field who seek to teach healthy online habits, understanding the motivations behind these behaviors will be critical to their teaching. As social media sites evolve quickly, researchers need to remain up to speed on users' motivations, behaviors, and emotional and behavioral adjustments when engaging with these sites. This study supports the notion that it is not just about what you do online and how that relates to your emotional outcomes, but also about why you go online and which specific behaviors you choose.

Statement of Researchers

Researchers' contribution rate statement:	**MKP:** Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, validation, formal analysis, writing- original draft preparation, writing - review & editing, data curation. **LM:** Data curation, writing-original draft preparation, validation, and formal analysis.
Conflict statement:	The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
Data Availability Statement:	The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author. However, the data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.
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Presentation(s) or Awards at a meeting:	Part of this research was presented at SRA 2023 and MPA 2024 in a conference poster.
Ethical Considerations:	All procedures in the study were approved by the IRB. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study. The research presented here was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the APA and was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Oklahoma (Protocol #13833 and #14272) for the period between August 2021 and August 2022.

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