

CHAPTER

5

EFFECT OF SOCIAL COMPARISON ORIENTATION

Khairunnisa Abd Satar and Farah Adibah Ibrahim

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The sudden coronavirus epidemic at the end of 2019 significantly impacted many parts of our lives, regardless of where we lived. Even in Malaysia, when the number of persons infected with coronavirus unexpectedly increased in early March 2020, which resulted in Movement Control Order as one of the interventions to halt the country's rapid spread of the devastating virus. The whole country was placed on lockdown, and people who were infected or suspected of having COVID-19 symptoms were quarantined and isolated for two weeks in accordance with customary protocol. Meanwhile, others must practice social distancing and limit face-to-face encounters to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Due to this condition, people were constantly anxious and worried about their health and financial problems due to the economic downturn and the unpredictable future during catastrophic times (Satpathy & Ali, 2020). Additionally, the various changes in routine and lifestyles, as well as the quarantine or isolation period, have peaked people's anxiety and stress levels, especially among college students who are uncertain about their future (Sundarasan et al., 2020). This leads

people to use social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter to stay connected with others.

Given the prolonged unpleasant experiences and difficulties that people have endured throughout this pandemic, most people report lower psychological motivation and greater levels of stress and anxiety. The need to consistently compare themselves to others resulted in greater degrees of stress and anxiety. Social networking sites provide an ample platform for users to gain information about others and make adequate social comparisons. To make matters worse, social networking site users will only display the good and favorable aspects of themselves, encouraging others to participate in upward social comparisons more frequently since people tend to see others as far more superior than them.

The following section aims to delve deeper into the scholarly discourse surrounding this issue. It will explore various studies that examine the correlation between social networking usage and its effects on mental health.

5.2 THEORY OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

Following Leon's Festinger theory of social comparison, there are two types of direction in making social comparison: Upward and downward social comparison (Festinger, 1954). The three aspects that influence the effects of social comparison are the importance of the subject or area of the comparison, the level of the comparison (individual or within an ingroup level), and the interpersonal relationship distance of the person and their comparison target (close or not). Although it is a universal human nature to engage in social comparison, various researchers have clarified that certain individuals are hesitant to admit that they have made any social comparison toward others, thus claiming they have lower tendencies in making social comparisons. Due to this reason, Gibbons and Buunks (1999) developed a model of social comparison orientation (SCO) to measure whether different individuals have different levels of needs or frequency in engaging with social comparison processes. In the model, they proposed

that different people have different levels of inclination when comparing themselves with other people.

For psychological well-being, it can be explained through two different constructs: Subjective or psychological perspectives of well-being. Firstly, subjective well-being follows the hedonic principles, prioritizing fulfilling one's pleasure and happiness. According to Diener's tripartite model of SWB, there are three fundamental aspects of well-being, which are the emotional experience of positive feelings, the decreasing emotional experience of negative feelings, as well as the occurrence of cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction (Diener, 2013).

5.2.1 Social Comparison Orientation

Social comparison is comparing oneself to another individual or a group of people for self-evaluation or self-enhancement. This definition has indeed become the pioneered central concept of studies in social psychology that has been accepted and widely used until today (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Gibbons and Buunks (1999) further defined social comparison as utilizing other people's information (achievement, status, lifestyles) to evaluate and make sense of the world around them. In addition, there are two directions of social comparison: Upward and downward. Wheeler (1966) explained that the process of comparing ourselves to someone we perceive as superior to us is called an upward social comparison, while Wills (1981) defined downward social comparison as the process of making social comparison toward someone we perceive as more inferior than us.

Social comparison has also extended to health psychology throughout the decades. It mainly involves the studies of coping mechanisms and health behavior interventions like motivation and expectation. Intriguingly, it was found that the process of social comparison has become the amplifier for the positive construction of numerous social support groups among patients. This is due to human nature affiliating themselves with a group of people they perceive as having the same conditions as them by comparing themselves to others around them when facing a stressful or difficult situation (Ruggeri et al., 2020).