‘Do It for The Gram:’ An Examination of Social Networking Site Usage and Self-Esteem, among Black American Millennial Users

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Abstract

Millennials are the first generation to witness firsthand the rise of the internet, and social networking sites— making them uniquely positioned to experience both the benefits and risks of digital life. Despite being among the most active SNS users, Black American millennials remain significantly underrepresented in research that examines the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem (Pew Research Center, 2021). Drawing on Social Comparison Theory, Social Identity Theory, Sociometer Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory this paper examines how SNS usage shapes the self-esteem and well-being of Black American millennials through three major themes: comparison, identity, and connection. The ethical implications of this specific research gap and targeted policy recommendations are also discussed. This paper contributes to a more culturally responsive understanding of SNS related- mental health outcomes for a population whose digital experiences have been largely overlooked by existing research.

Keywords: Black Americans, comparison, connection, identity self-esteem, social media, social networking sites, SNS

Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Problem Statement 7

Literature Review 8

Millennials and SNS Usage 9

Black American SNS usage 11

Black Americans and Self-Esteem 13

Analysis 16

Social Comparison 16

Psychological Perspective 17

Sociological Perspective 18

Cultural/Racial Perspective 19

Identity 21

Psychological Perspective 21

Sociological Perspective 22

Cultural/Racial Perspective 23

Connection 23

Psychological Perspective 24

Sociological Perspective 25

Cultural/Racial Perspective ***26***

Ethical Implications ***27***

Policy Recommendations ***29***

Summary ***31***

'Do It for The Gram:' An Examination of Social Networking Site Usage and Self-Esteem, among Black American Millennial Users

Social media has been an integral part of fostering and rekindling relationships in the 21st century. Over the years, social networking sites (SNS) have become a space where individuals can share their experiences to feel less alone. On a global scale, the 4.8 billion social media users represent 59.9% of the global population and 92.7% of all Internet users (Nyst, 2023). According to a survey by the McKinsey Health Institute, millennials are more active on social media compared to other generations, with 32% of millennials reporting that they post daily or multiple times a day compared to a similar percentage of Gen Z respondents stating that they spend over 2 hours daily on social media sites (Coe et al., 2023). The growth of SNS was rapid, and their exponential speed of growth occurred during millennials developmental years, who were therefore equipped with the savviness to keep the sites thriving.

Millennials are individuals who were born between the years of 1981 and 1996. This specific generation can be described as *the bridge*. They are aware and cognizant of life that was not defined by technology and yet are still the first group of children and adolescents to see the evolution of personal computers, cell phones with Internet access, and most importantly, social media. Exposure to technology from a young age has informed millennials' perception of reality, shaping how they learn, behave, and think, making them different to previous generations their same age (Bowe & Wohn, 2015).

SNS were first created for the intention of helping people build networks and make connections, but over time, they morphed into something greater. SNS have become a platform that give users the possibility to showcase the facets of everyday life. SNS have assisted in enabling human interaction by connecting users, but these sites have shifted the focus of

interaction on generating and sharing content (Aichner et al., 2019). Over the course of a decade, connection shifted into comparison, by allowing new avenues for people to observe and compare themselves with others in an online context (Meshi et al., 2015). Although social media can be used as a tool to connect with family, friends, and communities, it is often used as a highlight reel. SNS gives users a platform to put on a façade that highlights the fun and excitement happening in everyday life, but it often does not tell other SNS users how much others are struggling in daily life at a deeper level (Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2014; Karim et al., 2020). Not knowing the distinction between what is real and what is performative can pose harm to those who are not mindful users and engage in social networking sites for emotional connection (Roeder, 2020). Whereas the benefits and harms of SNS use varies across demographics, its harms tend to be associated with older age, less education, and being a racial minority (Roeder, 2020).

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In 2016, it was reported that 55% of Black SNS users, aged 25-34 spent an hour or more each day on social media, which is 11% higher than the total millennial population (McCorvey, 2016). According to an annual report from Nielsen, a media analytics firm, Black influence on the economy and pop culture has been intensified by Black participation in the digital universe and adoption of social media and technology platforms (Nielsen, 2018). Black Americans are an integral part of online culture, with more than half of the demographic (54%) living their entire life in the digital age (Nielsen, 2018). These statistics illustrate that there is a strong relationship between Black Millennials and SNS— but there is a lack of research that assists in examining this relationship and how it could potentially affect a major role of well-being: self-esteem.

Problem Statement

The relationship between social media and self-esteem has received significant attention through research (Colak et al., 2023) due to the tendency of users to compare themselves unfavorably to others, which results in lower self-esteem (Pantic, 2014). However, much of the existing research has focused on White American adolescents, possibly due to adolescents using social media at higher rates when compared to other age groups (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). According to Anderson and Jiang, (2018), 45% of adolescents report that they are online "almost constantly," and another 44% report being online at least several times a day.

Despite prior studies recognizing that Black Americans are more prone to mental health issues (Pederson, 2023; DeAngelis, 2024; Coombs et al., 2022), existing research has not thoroughly examined how social media affects the mental health of Black American millennials—who are the most active on social networking sites for a wider variety of activities (Ridedout & Watkins, 2019). Black American millennials have been under-researched, despite their comprising a significant portion of individuals who make up SNS users (Pew Research Center, 2021). Through the lens of social comparison, identity, and connection, this paper investigates the relationship between SNS usage and self-esteem, among Black Millennials.

Literature Review

Media consumption through SNS has become a daily function of life. According to Pew Research (2021), approximately 7-in-10 Facebook users and 6-in 10 Instagram users check their accounts at least once a day. Black Americans make up 77% of social media users, non-Black Minorities comprise 80%, and 69% of White users reported using at least one social media site (Pew Research Center, 2021). These previously documented statistics illustrate that minorities, and specifically minority millennials, are using social media sites at a higher rate when compared to other demographics.

Social comparison is one of the most common aspects of human nature (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018). It will always be inevitable; the fundamental human tendency to look to others for information about how to think, feel, and behave has provided us with the ability to thrive in a highly complex and interconnected modern social world (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018). Research has found that SNSs can decrease psychological wellbeing due to unfavorable social comparison or envy (Krasnova et al. 2013; Verduyn et al. 2015; Kyun Lee, 2022). The notion of social comparison is often paired with upward comparison, which takes place when individuals compare themselves to others who are better off and look for ways to achieve similar results (Erdogan & Kesici, 2010).

On SNSs, upward comparison harms self-esteem and psychological wellbeing and recent research has found that upward comparison via SNS can result in several negative psychological outcomes (Dolan, 2023). Many studies have delved into investigating the association between social media and psychological wellbeing. However, comparatively, the extant literature focusing on the effects of social media use on psychological wellbeing for specifically Black populations is sparse (Park, Hallman, Liu & Hancock, 2023).

Krause et al. (2021), conducted a literature review to examine the existing relationship of social networking site usage and self-esteem. The examination found that self-esteem was based upon three different processes that they identified as social comparison, social feedback processing, and self-reflection. The results of this particular review found that when social networking sites are used to compare oneself with others, it mostly decreases user's self-esteem— but when users receive positive social feedback from SNS or use it as a tool of self-reflection, its results are beneficial. A recent investigation, explored the cyberpsychology of social media and public health risks among Black American Women in the USA (Burrell, 2024). Burrell concluded that comparison and envy were one of the unique public health challenges posed by the digital landscape of SNS. The research findings stated that those who engage in frequent comparisons with those on SNS may develop feelings of inadequacy, envy, or low self-esteem.

Millennials and SNS Usage

Comprising approximately 72 million adults in the United States (Zelazko, 2024), millennials, who are born between the years of 1981-1996, constitute one of the largest generations of adults. Millennials are more ethnically and racially diverse than generations before and are also considered to be the most educated generation in American history (Pew Research Center, 2010). Park et al., (2021) examined millennial SNS users and what drives them to use SNS. The survey of 161 millennial users found that motivation and network centrality were linked to enjoyment and social rewards such as connection, information, and support. The results concluded that there is significant relationship between density and flow with a significant relationship between density and social rewards. These results helped to illustrate that as SNS density increases, so does the desire for recognition from others; this desire can be

defined by daily postings and “likes”. Park et al., (2021) indicated that SNS flow, social reward and intention to continuous SNS usage was found to be significant; showing social reward as a driver for SNS usage.

FOMO refers to the fear of not being included in something that others are experiencing; usually an interesting or enjoyable activity (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This fear can lead to negative comparison, feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and can affect self-esteem. Although FOMO does not seem harmful, research has been found that it has been associated with social anxiety, depressive symptoms, and negative alcohol-related consequences, such as heavy drinking and engaging in risky behaviors (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). The need to always stay connected to SNS to extinguish FOMO may cause users to feel obligated to always be available and accessible through the Internet. Through SNS, users have unlimited access to their social network; this specific access to glamorous images may create envy, and social comparison can consequently have a negative impact on an individual’s wellbeing and cause life dissatisfaction (Carraturo et al., 2023).

Prior research indicates that millennials hold favorable attitudes toward SNS usage and are more likely to use the platforms as tools for connection and social reward. However, gaps in literature remain regarding how time spent on SNS affects millennial users’ self-esteem and wellbeing. With millennial users as the earliest group of individuals to adopt social media usage and use SNS at higher levels, it is probable that such usage has an impact on their wellbeing (Verduyn et al., 2017; Griffioen et al. 2021).

Black American SNS Usage

For Black Americans, SNS have been able to provide a sense of refuge and escape from a society that can create internalized racism. Platforms, such as Facebook and X, formerly known as Twitter, function as the digital equivalent of the barber shop, church, and beauty salon for Black people—virtual spaces where Black people can connect and celebrate their racial identities with love, light, and laughter (Mastantuono, 2023). SNS serve as a means by which Black people challenge stereotypes, bias, and racial injustice. They challenge these through posts and hashtags that assist with organizing protests and starting social justice movements. SNS allow a way for Black voices to be heard. Although social media can be viewed as a harmful tool of connection, it can aid Black Americans in feeling a greater sense of pride in racial identity while simultaneously strengthening self-esteem.

Often not understood by those who are not a part of it, Black Twitter has become an integral part of Black communication and Black culture. In 2010, an article entitled “How Black People Use Twitter” written by Farhad Manjoo, enticed a fierce response in Black American Twitter users, and people truncated the headline to “Black Twitter” (Reid, 2018). Black Twitter provides a safe space for Black Americans to have conversations within community. For Black millennials, Black Twitter is not only a social networking tool but also a source of daily news. According to a report by the American Press Institute in 2022, Black Americans under age 40 get news from SNS at a higher rate than their White peers (Loker, 2023).

Infamous hashtags created by Black Twitter in response to police violence and brutality set the Internet ablaze several years ago at the time Manjoo’s article in 2018. On Twitter’s 10-year anniversary, the SNS published the top 10 hashtags that changed the way society talked about social issues (Sichynksy, 2016). Two of the top three hashtags were directly related to

race: #Ferguson had been tweeted 27,200,000 times as a result to the death of Mike Brown caused by police violence and #BlackLivesMatter was used 12,000,000 times which transformed an online-community unifier to political movement and tangible organization (Sichynksy, 2016). Black Twitter has not just influenced online conversation through trends made through hashtags; it has created conversations that reach past digital platforms and become the most dynamic subset not only of Twitter but of the wider social Internet (Parham, 2021).

Matsuzaka et al., (2023) conducted a research study that examined social media integration, addiction, connectedness to other Black women, perceived isolation, and self-esteem. This specific study was of importance because it assisted in filling a gap of literature that is usually overlooked within prior studies that have used majority White samples (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). The study surveyed 354 Black American women who were 18-30 years old and the results found that higher self-esteem, was associated with lower social media addiction. The study assisted in highlighting how platforms can serve as a space for community and resistance to gendered racism. Researchers also concluded that social media use integration was positively associated with social media addiction (Matsuzaka et al., 2023).

In the realm of Black Twitter, many individuals from Black communities view the SNS as a safe space open to freedom of expression. However, it is important to note that safety in the Black Twitter community can be threatened due to hate speech and online harassment. As an SNS that was created with the intention of allowing users to share their thoughts with their followers, Black Twitter has been able to illustrate the collective attention a demographic can gain when they all lend their voices to culture and justice. Black Twitter has helped to define pop culture, create social justice movements, raise awareness about important issues, create refuge,

build community, and empower others. Even though Black Twitter has been characterized as a communal space by its users, it still does not protect them from potential hurt or harm.

Black Americans and Self-Esteem

Black individuals have been found to report the highest levels of self-esteem of any racial group in the United States (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2011). In 2017, Glamour Magazine teamed up with L'Oréal Paris to conduct a study of 2000 women in all 50 states of America. The survey found a consistent pattern amongst Black women: higher levels of self-esteem than White or Hispanic women (Dreisbach, 2017). Past research studies have attributed the link to high self-esteem in Black Americans to positive racial identity (Hughes et al., 2015). A positive racial identity is characterized by embracing one's own. For Black Americans, racial identity is found to be of importance. No matter regional location or their socioeconomic background, 3/4 (76%) of Black Americans report that being Black is extremely or very important to how they think about themselves (Cox & Tamir, 2022). Researchers have found that racial identity is related to better psychological outcomes for Black Americans (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Bell-Hughes, 2014; Caldwell et al., 2004; Carter, 1991; Eaton et al., 2010; Livingston et al., 2020; Munford, 1994), and Black Americans who were found to have a less salient racial identity experienced higher depression levels and reported higher depression levels and reported higher rates of alcoholism (Carter, 1991; Livingston et al., 2020).

From prior research showing higher levels of racial identity associated with better psychological outcomes (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Bell-Hughes, 2014; Caldwell et al., 2004; Carter, 1991; Eaton et al., 2010; Livingston et al., 2020; Munford, 1994), and lower levels associated with lower levels of wellbeing (Carter, 1991; Livingston et al., 2020), it follows that cultivating racial identity in Black Americans has been found to be an integral part of mental

wellbeing (Chavous et al., 2008; Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). Decades of research has linked Black American youths' high self-esteem and positive racial identity with their academic success, behavioral adjustment, and positive emotional functioning (Chavous et al., 2008; Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014).

James (2017) conducted a study to understand the influence of internalized racism on the relationship between discrimination and anxiety. The data of 3,570 Black Americans from the National Survey of American Life were used to analyze the mediating and moderating roles of self-esteem and ethnic identity in the relationship between internalized racism and major depressive disorder within the past year. The study hypothesized that internalized racism reinforces White superiority, normalizes oppression, and can consequently lead to negative self-worth. Prior research has shown that for Black Americans, internalized racism is associated with low self-esteem (Brown et al., 2002; Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997; James, 2017; Thomas et al., 2004) and low ethnic identity is associated with increased risk for depression (James, 2017; Seaton et al., 2006; Tynes et al., 2012; Willams et al., 2012). Internalized racism can threaten Black Americans mental wellness and have a lasting impact on their wellbeing.

A recent study conducted by Olayinka et.al (2022), examined the impact of the social media movement on Black women's self-esteem. Researchers conducted an Instagram survey of 134 young Black women; 17 women were between the ages of 25-34 years old, and 1 woman was between the ages of 35-44 years old. The survey asked participants about their current self-esteem, self-perceptions of features that are attributed to being a Black American, and how they believe the SNS movement of #BlackGirlMagic has impacted their self-esteem. The results of the survey concluded that 82% of respondents, believed the SNS movement of #BlackGirlMagic affected their self-esteem, and 69% of those said the effect was positive (Olayinka et al., 2022).

Social creativity is defined as drawing comparisons between ingroup members and avoiding making comparisons with other groups that have surpassed the ingroup (APA, 2018). It is a psychological strategy described in Social Identity Theory, where a group protects self-esteem by shifting how it compares. Black Americans may engage in social creativity to assist them in defying the labels and stereotypes placed upon them (Hughes et al., 2015). Social creativity in Black American culture, birthed the "Black Is Beautiful" movement in the 1960s, which helped to shift the paradigm of beauty for Black Americans, during a time where Whiteness was the prototype (Rodney, 2022). Due to the "Black Is Beautiful" movement, Black Americans started to recognize the beauty that was to be found within their dark hues, full lips, curly hair texture, and broad noses. This movement was important to Black self-esteem in America due to the nature of relationship between Blackness and beauty.

For Black Americans, understanding how self-esteem is influenced by internalized racism, bias, and discrimination is essential to understanding development. Furthermore, being conscious of how positive racial identity effects self-esteem is also of importance. Having high self-esteem allows individuals to make choices for themselves that allow them to be successful and motivated, and for Black Americans, a higher self-esteem is found to be a protective factor (Tynes et al., 2012). Collectively, the literature suggests that millennials are active SNS users motivated by connection, identity expression, and social reward. However, research consistently identifies gaps in understanding how SNS use specifically affects millennial self-esteem, particularly among Black Americans. While research has examined SNS use and self-esteem broadly, few studies focus specifically on millennial Black Americans. This paper contributes to this gap by examining how SNS use relates to self-esteem within this population.

Analysis

An examination of literature reveals three major emerging themes in how Black Americans and millennials interact with social networking sites: social comparison, identity and connection. The analysis draws on Social Comparison Theory, Social Identity Theory, Sociometer Theory, and Uses of Gratifications Theory to examine how SNS shapes these specific themes across psychological, sociological, and cultural perspectives.

Social Comparison

Social Comparison Theory, developed by Leon Festinger in 1945 holds that people evaluate their own abilities, attitudes, and self-worth in relation to others; a process that plays a significant role in self-image and subjective wellbeing (APA, 2018). Although Festinger developed this theory decades before the advent of social networking sites, its principles remain highly applicable to digital environments. Research has found that social media comparisons result in greater declines in self-evaluations than those made in other contexts (Midgley et al., 2021). The core concept of the theory can be divided into two distinct categories: upward social comparison and downward social comparison.

Upward social comparison refers to the process by which individuals evaluate themselves against those perceived to be superior on a given dimension (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2020). Although upward comparison could be seen as an ego-deflating mechanism, it can also function as a tool for self-improvement. Identifying others who outperform oneself may provide valuable information that, in turn, can help improve performance (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2020). Upward social comparison allows individuals to frame others as a role model or a source of motivation that pushes them to excel and succeed.

Downward social comparison refers to comparing oneself favorably with another judged to be not as good (APA, 2018). Comparing oneself to others who are perceived as inferior can make individuals feel a sense of superiority and therefore heighten their sense of self-worth. This specific form of comparison has been found to be an emotional coping technique that can help one feel better in the short-term, but which is not an effective long-term strategy for dealing with a threat to one's own ego (Pomery et al., 2012). Within SNS, both forms of comparison occur frequently, as users are continuously exposed to curated representations of others' lives, achievements, and appearances.

Psychological Perspective

SNS create conditions in which individuals naturally make upward and downward social comparisons. McComb et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis, examining the effects of social media exposure to upward comparison targets on self-evaluation and emotions. The analysis included nearly 15 years of research investigating the effects of social comparison on social media users, and the results showed that making upward comparisons with targets was associated with negative effects on users' emotions and self-evaluations (McComb et al., 2023). After being exposed to upward comparisons, participants experienced negative effects to their body image, mental health, subjective wellbeing, and self-esteem. These findings suggest the need for strategies that address the psychological impact of upward social comparison on SNS.

Sociometer Theory offers a psychological explanation for these effects, suggesting that exposure to upward comparison targets on SNS may signal social inferiority, triggering a decline in self-esteem as the sociometer registers perceived rejection. Stapleton et al. (2017) found that time spent on SNS (e.g., Instagram) did not directly lower self-esteem— SNS users whose self-esteem depended on others' approval were more susceptible to engaging in social

comparison which in turn was associated with lower self-esteem. This suggests that psychological vulnerability to external validation amplifies the harmful effects of SNS comparison. Leary's Sociometer Theory proposes that humans continuously monitor their social interactions to gauge their own level of acceptance or rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). For users whose self-esteem already functions as a measure of others' approval, SNS comparisons may cause feelings of social inferiority, creating sharper declines in self-esteem than those experienced by SNS users less dependent on external validation.

Sociological Perspective

SNS platforms create social environments in which peer networks, engagement metrics, and feedback shape users' sense of belonging and social standing. Andreassen et al., (2017) found that low self-esteem and addictive social media use are highly correlated, suggesting that users may turn to SNS to seek 'likes' and approval as a form of social gratification. Uses and Gratifications Theory supports this, proposing that users are active participants in selecting and utilizing media based on their individual social needs and goals (Katz et al., 1974).

Park et al. (2021) found that millennial SNS users primarily engage with social networking sites to obtain social benefits, as social reward—belonging, recognition, and connection was the strongest predictor of continued use. This suggests that SNS platforms function as hierarchical social structures in which users' network position determines their access to social reward. As SNS users continue to engage with platforms by seeking social benefits, they also expose themselves to social comparison, which can undermine the very sense of belonging and connection they originally sought.

Cultural/Racial Perspective

Platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, function as the digital equivalent of the barber shop, church, and beauty salon for Black people—virtual spaces where Black people can connect and celebrate their racial identities with love, light, and laughter (Mastantuono, 2023). Over the years, the term 'Black Excellence' has referred to Black people who demonstrate high levels of achievement or success (Dictionary, 2022). On SNS, Black excellence is frequently displayed through curated posts highlighting higher education, financial freedom, luxury vacations, and career opportunities. While Black excellence represents an aspirational standard for many Black Americans, consistent exposure to these images can be damaging, as the concept is rooted in respectability politics; the notion that Black people must act the 'right way' to be deemed worth of decency and respect (Asare, 2021). For Black Americans engaging in upward social comparison on SNS, the representation of Black excellence may function as internalized standards against which they measure their own worth.

Social Identity Theory suggests that there is a relationship between group membership and self-esteem; individuals derive their self-concept through both personal and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The idea of 'Black excellence' may unintentionally curate often unrealistic expectations for racial group identity. When individuals perceive themselves as falling short of these standards, both their personal and social self-concept may be threatened, potentially causing a decrease in self-esteem.

Research supports the connection between group representation and self-esteem among Black Americans on SNS. Olayinka et al. (2021) found that although Eurocentric beauty standards on SNS have historically marginalized Black women, 82% of participants believed that #BlackGirlMagic movement on SNS affected their self-esteem, with 69% reporting a

positive impact; Social Identity Theory, suggests that group identity shapes self-concept (Tajfel & Turner 1986). Affirming group representation on SNS can strengthen self-esteem, while unrealistic or exclusionary standards can threaten it. These findings hint that SNS can both harm and support self-esteem among Black Americans, depending on the nature of the representation they encounter. In contrast, Boutté et al. (2025) found that when Black women compared themselves against narrow, Eurocentric beauty ideals that excluded natural Black features, exposure to Instagram was associated with greater appearance dissatisfaction. Notably, internalized racism moderated this effect; women who had internalized Eurocentric beauty standards experienced greater appearance dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Boutté et al., 2025). The evidence implies that the racialized visual environment of Instagram poses particular threat to Black women's self-concept and self-esteem.

SNS platforms further encoded racialized beauty standards through built-in beauty filters. Photo editing applications have become central to selfie production on SNS, including Snapchat, Instagram, and Facetune (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020). Many of these filters automatically lighten skin, thin bodies, and narrow noses, marking them as racialized, gendered and normative (Lavrence & Camber, 2020). Research implies social media has significant impact on the perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects of the body (Fardouly, 2020). The data indicate that repeated exposure to filtered imagery may deepen the gap between Black women's self-image and the Eurocentric beauty standards embedded within these digital platforms. The experience of racialized comparison on SNS is therefore inseparable from questions of identity. There is a significant relationship between how Black Americans see themselves, how they are seen by others, and how digital platforms shape that perception.

Identity

Beyond comparison, SNS also serve as spaces where Black Americans actively construct and express their racial identity through cultural expression, community building and social justice advocacy (Mastantuono, 2023). Klassen et al. (2021) conducted interviews exploring the benefits and challenges of Black Americans' use of Twitter, finding that Black Twitter offered community building, safety, information sharing, empowerment and activism. However, Black Twitter also presented challenges including outsider appropriation, public callouts, and exposure to racism (Klassen et al., 2021). The findings highlight that safety and racism serve as the common thread connecting both the benefits and challenges of Black Twitter, suggesting that racial identity expression on SNS can be both empowering and precarious.

Social Identity Theory proposes the self-esteem hypothesis, which postulates that people are motivated to attain positive group identity to enhance their self-esteem (Huges et al., 2015); a dynamic that is particularly relevant in digital spaces where group identity is publicly performed and evaluated. For Black Americans, a strong sense of racial identification and positive in-group evaluation are related to higher self-esteem, greater psychological wellbeing, and lower depressive symptoms (Brown et al., 2002; Hughes et al., 2015; Ida & Christie-Mizelle, 2012; Postmes &Branscombe, 2002; Rowley et al., 1998; Vandiver et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2012).

Psychological Perspective

Identity construction on SNS involves the active process of self-presentation, curation, and performance of one's personal and social identities. The pressure to present an idealized self on SNS may create a psychological tension between authentic self-expression and curated self-

presentation. Given that authenticity plays a crucial role in psychological wellbeing, understanding how perceived authenticity operates within social media environments may be key to untangling the links between SNS use and mental health outcomes for these populations (Bunker et al., 2024). Klassen et al. (2021) found that Black Twitter exposed Black Americans to racism, appropriation, and attack. According to Sociometer Theory, when racial identity is publicly attached or invalidated on SNS, the individual's sociometer defines it as social rejection, which could result in lower self-esteem. SNS identity expression carries a unique psychological risk, one in which the very act of affirming racial identity may invite social rejection and subsequently harm self-esteem.

Sociological Perspective

Identity on SNS is not formed in isolation; it is shaped by peer networks, group norms, and social hierarchies created by engagement metrics such as likes, followers, and shares. Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, comparable in importance to basic biological drives. Uses and Gratifications Theory supports this, indicating that Black Americans and millennials actively turn to SNS to fulfill social needs. Park et al. (2021) found that millennial SNS users primarily engage with SNS to obtain social benefits, as social reward— belonging, recognition and connection was the strongest predictor of continued use. SNS function as hierarchical social structures in which users' network position determines their access to social reward and internal validation. This means that for Black Americans and millennials, the ability to construct and affirm identity on SNS is shaped by their position within digital social hierarchies.

Cultural/Racial Perspective

Black Americans bring a rich cultural tradition to SNS, using these platforms to create affinity groups that shape culture through shared language, humor, activism, and collective identity. Klassen et al. (2021) found that Black Twitter served as a cultural safe space that facilitated freedom of expression and racial identity affirmation. Black Americans used the platform to engage in culturally affirming conversations, share lived experiences, and collectively construct and defend Black identity. Olayinka et al. (2021) found that #BlackGirlMagic served as a cultural movement that actively redefined and reclaimed Black feminine identity on SNS. By pushing back against Eurocentric beauty standards, the movement affirmed Black women's natural features and strengthened their sense of racial identity, with 82 percent of participants reporting that the movement affected how they saw themselves (Olayinka et al, 2021). SNS can function as a powerful tool for collective identity affirmation, especially when cultural movements center and celebrate Blackness on their own terms.

Connection

Social connections, whether online or offline, provide individuals with a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Through SNS, users can participate in communities that enrich their social lives and fulfill their need for connection. Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that people actively seek out media to satisfy these needs (Katz et al., 1974). Research supports this, with Skues et al. (2012) finding that individuals are more likely to use Facebook to compensate for a lack of offline relationships. While SNS can create virtual relationships, they may simultaneously impede users from establishing meaningful face-to-face connections. Unlike SNS interactions, face-to-face engagement allows individuals to see, feel, interpret, and respond to nonverbal cues in real time, fostering a depth of connection that virtual platforms

struggle to replicate. Teo et al. (2015) found that fewer in-person interactions predict depression. SNS could be used as a tool for fulfilling social needs, but virtual connection alone may be insufficient and particularly detrimental for SNS users whose primary source of social interaction is experienced in digital spaces.

Psychological Perspective

The need for connection on SNS goes beyond simply having followers; it is rooted in a fundamental need for belonging. Sociometer Theory underscores this need, suggesting that perceived acceptance within social groups is essential to maintaining healthy self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). When SNS successfully fulfills this need for belonging, users may experience greater psychological wellbeing. However, when virtual connection proves insufficient, users may experience loneliness, instability, and declining self-esteem. Sharma et al. (2023) found that among millennials, FOMO (fear of missing out) functions as a psychological bridge between SNS use and emotional outcomes. SNS users who felt disconnected from social activities on social media experienced greater emotional instability and anxiety. This shows that SNS connection is not just about meaningful belonging, it is also about the fear of perceived social exclusion, which can be just as damaging as actual exclusion. FOMO may act as the sociometer, registering perceived rejection which could cause a fluctuation in self-esteem, even when no explicit rejection has occurred.

Saura et al. (2019) found that SNS use was associated with increased feelings of loneliness for some users. Specifically, users who sought meaningful connection on SNS but failed to find genuine engagement often experienced greater isolation (Saura et al., 2019). The research provides evidence that SNS promises of connection could possibly deliver loneliness, FOMO, and identity confusion instead (Saura et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2023). Hunt (2018)

found that limiting social media usage had a direct and positive impact on subjective wellbeing over time, particularly in decreasing loneliness and depression. The findings reveal that the psychological costs of excessive SNS use may outweigh its connection benefits for some users. SNS is shaped not only by individual needs but also by the social structures and group dynamics that determine whose need for belonging is fulfilled, a reality that carries particular significant for Black Americans and millennials navigating digital spaces.

Sociological Perspective

Connection on SNS is not equally accessible to all users; it is shaped by peer networks, group dynamics, social structures, and cultural norms that determine whether users' social needs are ultimately fulfilled (Katz et al., 2974). Park et al. (2021) found that among millennial SNS users, network centrality and social reward were strongly associated; meaning users with more central network positions had greater access to belonging, recognition, and meaningful connection. The research points to tighter peer networks creating more meaningful connection opportunities (Park et al., 2021), while users with less central network positions may find their social needs unmet. Lack of social needs being met threaten their sense of belonging and psychological well-being. Uses and Gratifications Theory suggest that while millennials actively seek connection on SNS to fulfill social needs, the hierarchical nature of these platforms means that access to meaningful connection is unevenly distributed (Katz et al., 1974).

Oksa et al. (2021) found that among millennial SNS users, greater social connectivity brought greater demands for availability and responsiveness. The expectation of constant connectivity caused users to feel emotionally drained and experience technostress and burnout (Oksa et al., 2021). The findings identify that connection on SNS is not just an opportunity but

also a social obligation enforced by peer networks and group norms, one that carries significant well-being costs for Black Americans and millennials who feel pressured to maintain constant digital connectivity.

Cultural/Racial Perspective

Black Americans have cultivated unique forms of connection on SNS, rooted not just in individual social needs but in collective cultural identity, solidarity, and resistance. For Black Americans, SNS serve as a means of challenging stereotypes, bias, and racial injustice (Klassen et al., 2021). Through posts, hashtags, and viral campaigns, Black Americans have organized protests, amplified marginalized voices, and ignited social justice movements (Klassen et al., 2021). SNS have become a critical platform through which Black voices are amplified, Black experiences are validated, and Black communities are strengthened through shared struggle and resistance (Mastantuono, 2023). Uses and Gratifications Theory suggest that Black Americans actively select SNS not only to fulfill individual social needs but to satisfy collective cultural needs for community, affirmation, and solidarity (Katz et al., 1974).

Black Twitter provides a safe space for Black Americans to forge meaningful connections with community. Without the judgement of interruption of those who do not understand Black history, tradition, trauma, plight, joy and culture, Black Twitter provides sanctuary (Klassen et al., 2021). Beyond community connection, Black Twitter also serves as a critical source of information and shared experience; according to a report by the American Press Institute, Black Americans under age 40 get news from SNS at a higher rate than White peers (Loker, 2023). This suggests that for Black millennials, SNS connection is not merely social, it is also informational, cultural, and communal; serving needs that extend far beyond what general SNS platforms were originally designed to fulfill. The unique forms of connection

Black Americans cultivate on SNS are from broader themes of comparison and identity—together, these three themes reveal the complexity of how SNS shape the self-esteem, identity, and wellbeing of Black Americans and millennials.

The examination of social comparison, identity, and connection across psychological, sociological, and cultural perspectives acknowledges that SNS are a multidimensional space for Black Americans and millennials. These platforms simultaneously function as tools for empowerment and sources of psychological harm. Comparison on SNS affects self-esteem through upward comparison, approval-seeking, and racialized beauty standards, creating a harmful environment for vulnerable users. Identity on SNS is simultaneously affirmed and threatened while Black Americans construct and defend racial identity in digital spaces; navigating racism, appropriation, and exclusionary beauty norms. Connection on SNS fulfills collective cultural needs but also produces FOMO, loneliness, and burnout. This analysis reveals that the psychological, sociological, and cultural facets of SNS use are deeply interconnected. By addressing the gap in research on the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem among Black Americans and millennials, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms shape the wellbeing of historically underrepresented populations. As SNS continue to evolve, so too must our understanding of their impact on those voices, identities and communities are most at stake

Ethical Implications

If this problem remains unresolved, Black American millennials will continue to be underserved by mental health research and practice. Given that Black Americans already face disproportionate mental health challenges (Pederson, 2023; DeAngelis, 2024), the absence of targeted research on SNS and self-esteem within this population leaves a vulnerable group

without the culturally responsive support they need. Without proper evidence, clinicians and mental health professionals are ill-equipped to design interventions that address the unique SNS- related mental health needs of Black American millennials. Ethically, the continued exclusion of this population from research perpetuates systemic inequities in mental health care that disproportionately harm those who are already marginalized.

Black Americans have historically been underrepresented in scientific research; a pattern attributed to distrust of the medical and scientific community, poor access to primary care, failure of researchers to recruit Black individuals, and language and cultural barriers (Jean-Pierre, et al, 2025). Even with federal government mandates in place to ensure the inclusion of women and minorities in all federally funded research, Black Americans continue to participate less frequently when compared to Whites (National Institutes of Health, 2021; Scharff et al., 2010). This history of exclusion is not merely a methodological limitation; it is an ethical failure rooted in systemic racism that has left entire communities without the research evidence needed to support their wellbeing. This legacy of exclusion means that their unique SNS-related mental health needs remain unaddressed; perpetuating a cycle of harm that disproportionately affects those already marginalized.

The continued reliance on White adolescent samples to draw conclusions about SNS and self-esteem skews research and assumes universal experiences across race, age, and culture. Generalizing these findings to Black American millennials violates the principle of justice in research. Research must not systematically exclude populations, particularly those who bear the greatest burden of the problem being studied. Jean-Pierre et al. (2025) argue that the principle of justice requires Black communities to have meaningful opportunities to participate in research and benefit from the knowledge it produces. Call et al. (2023) further contend that

underrepresentation of racially minoritized populations weakens the psychological evidence base and limits the confidence with which can be applied to those communities.

SNS platforms are not neutral spaces; their design features and algorithms have been shown to prioritize Eurocentric standards through built-in beauty filters, content moderation practices, and algorithm bias. Laverne and Cambre (2020) found that many SNS beauty filters automatically lighten skin, thin bodies, and narrow noses; encoding racialized beauty standards directly into platform design. Without research evidence on how these features specifically harm Black American millennials, this population remains without the knowledge or resources needed to protect their wellbeing in digital spaces. Platform designers therefore bear an ethical responsibility to understand and address the specific harms their platforms cause to Black American millennials; research is necessary for accountability. Collectively, the ethical implications reveal that the failure to research SNS and self-esteem among Black American millennials is not merely an academic oversight, but a moral failure that perpetuates harm. Addressing this gap is not optional; it is an ethical imperative.

Policy Recommendations

In order to address the research gap identified in this paper, federal funding agencies should mandate the inclusion of Black American millennials in federally funded SNS and mental health research (National Institutes of Health, 2021). Such mandates would create targeted funding streams that incentivize researchers to examine SNS usage and self-esteem superficially within Black American millennial populations. Existing federal mandates, while well-intentioned, have proven insufficient; lacking the specificity and enforcement mechanisms needed to ensure meaningful inclusion of Black American millennials in SNS-related research (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025). Institutional review boards should additionally require researchers to

justify exclusion of racial minority populations from study samples, ensuring that the principle of justice in research is upheld (Call et al., 2023). These policy changes would ensure that Black American millennials are meaningfully represented in SNS and mental health research.

SNS platforms must be held accountable for the racial harm their design features cause. Regulatory bodies should require platforms to audit and remove racially biased beauty filters and features that encode Eurocentric beauty standards directly into platform design (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Boutté et al., 2025). Additionally, platforms should provide clear disclosures when images have been filtered or digitally altered. Given that social media has a significant impact on perceptual, affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of body image (Fardouly, 2020), it is essential that platforms take responsibility for educating SNS users about the psychological impact of filtered imagery rather than allowing racialized beauty standards to go unchallenged. Furthermore, platforms should strengthen content moderation policies to protect Black users from racism and harassment. A policy change would help to create safer digital spaces where Black identity can be expressed and celebrated without threat (Klassen et al., 2021). These platform policy changes would support the wellbeing of Black American millennials, who engage with SNS daily and are disproportionately harmed by their racialized design features.

Digital literacy programs represent a critical policy intervention for Black American millennials navigating the psychological and cultural complexities of SNS. Schools, community organizations, and faith communities should share in implementing programs that educate members about the benefits and risks of SNS usage. Research supports the need for such interventions; Hunt (2018) found that limiting SNS usage directly improves wellbeing and reduces loneliness. Equipping Black American millennials with knowledge and tools to navigate

SNS critically and intentionally would be a meaningful step toward protecting their self-esteem, identity, and wellbeing.

Addressing the complex relationship between SNS and self-esteem among Black American millennials requires coordinated action across multiple levels. Firstly, research institutions must invest in targeted studies that examines the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem among Black American millennials. SNS platforms must also create policies and design features that protect their use, with particular attention to Black American millennials, who engage with these platforms at disproportionately higher rates (Rideout & Watkins, 2019). Lastly, digital literacy programs that focus on the harms, risks and benefits of SNS usage should be accessible Black communities.

Summary

Existing literature establishes that Black Americans and millennials are among the most active SNS users (Pew Research Center, 2021). Research consistently finds that SNS use is associated with declines in self-esteem, particularly when users engage in upward social comparison; exposing themselves to curated representation of others' lives, achievements, and appearances (McComb et al., 2023). For Black Americans, high self-esteem is rooted in positive racial identity, which serves as a protective factor against the psychological harms of discrimination and bias (Hughes et al., 2015). However, SNS simultaneously strengthen and threaten Black identity and self-esteem. Often SNS are functioning as spaces of cultural affirmation and community building while also exposing Black users to racism, Eurocentric beauty standards and appropriation (Olayinka et al., 2021; Boutteé et al., 2025).

Research has predominately focused on White adolescent populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding how SNS use affects Black American millennials. Despite

being among the most active SNS users, Black American millennials remain significantly underrepresented in research. Through the lens of social comparison, identity, and connection this paper investigates how SNS usage shapes the self-esteem and wellbeing of Black American millennials; a population whose unique digital experiences are largely overlooked by existing research.

Social comparison, examines how Black Americans and millennials evaluate themselves against others on SNS. Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals naturally evaluate their abilities and self-worth by comparing themselves to others; a process significantly amplified on SNS where curated representations of others' lives are constantly visible (Festinger, 1954). Upward comparison on SNS was associated with negative effects on body image, mental health and self-esteem; particularly among users whose self-esteem depended on others' approval (McCobm et al., 2023; Stapleton et al., 2017). SNS function as hierarchical social structures in which users seek likes and approval as social gratification, continuously exposing themselves to comparison in pursuit of social reward (Andreassen et al., 2017; Park et al., 2021). Racialized filters assist in deepening appearance dissatisfaction and self-esteem decline of Black millennial SNS users (Olayinka et al., 2021; Boutteé et al., 2025; Lavrence & Cambre, 2020).

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive their self-concept through both personal and social identities; meaning that for Black Americans, group membership strengthens self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The pressure to present an idealized self on SNS creates tension between authentic self-expression, and curated self-presentation (Bunker et al., 20204). When racial identity is publicly attacked or invalidated, the sociometer defines it as social rejection, and causes a decline in self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Klassen et al.,

2021). Group norms and peer interactions on SNS either strengthen or threaten racial identification; determining whether SNS serves as a s safe space for identity affirmation or hostile environment that marginalizes Black voices (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Park et al., 2021). SNS serve as spaces of cultural identity construction for Black Americans through movements like #BlackGirlMagic that help to strengthen cultural identity (Olayinka et al., 2021), while racism and appropriation threaten it (Klassen et al., 2021).

Connection examines how Black Americans and millennials seek and maintain community on SNS. Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that individuals actively select and use media to fulfill specific psychological and social needs, including connection, information, entertainment, and social reward (Katz eta al., 1973). FOMO and loneliness can create feelings of inadequacy that threaten self-esteem, particularly among users who measure their sense of belonging through likes, followers, and online validation (Sharma et al., 2023, Teo et al., 2015). Network position and social capital on SNS determine whose need for belonging is fulfilled; creating hierarchies of connection that disadvantage those with fewer followers or less visibility (Andreassen et al., 2017). Through SNS, users can engage in connection that extends beyond individual social needs rooted in collective solidarity, community building, and cultural resistance (Klassen et al., 2021: Mastantuono, 2023).

Black American millennials have historically been excluded from scientific research; a pattern rooted in systemic racism that has left entire communities without the evidence needed to support their wellbeing (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025; National Institutes of Health, 2021). SNS additionally bear an ethical responsibility to audit and address the racialized design features that disproportionately harm Black American millennials (Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Bouteé et al., 2025). Ethical implications reveal that leaving this problem unresolved is more than an

academic oversight; it is a moral failure that perpetuates harm, deepens inequity, and leaves a vulnerable population without the knowledge that is deserved.

Research institutions must invest in targeted funding that mandates the inclusion of Black American millennials in SNS and mental health research; ensuring that research is fair, equitable, and representative of those whose affected by the problem (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025; National Institutes of Health, 2021). SNS must take accountability for racialized design features that disproportionately harm Black American millennials, and communities must implement digital literacy programs that educate members about the harms of comparison, threats to racial identity, and the barriers to authentic connection that SNS environments create (Hung, 2018; Sharma et al., 2023). Together, these policy recommendations represent a necessary response that ensures Black American millennials are no longer overlooked by the research, SNS platforms, and institutions that shape their daily lives.

This paper has examined the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem among Black American millennials through the lens of social comparison, identity, and connection. The evidence presented illustrates how social comparison, identity, and connection shape their digital experiences in ways that are empowering and harmful. As SNS continue to evolve, so too will the effects, risks, and benefits of their use. It is essential that researchers, platform designers, and policymakers ensure the wellbeing of Black American millennials as they continue to keep pace with everchanging digital spaces.

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