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# **The Effects of Insecurity on Lifetime Happiness**

**Kaden Palmer**

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# **The Effects of Insecurity on Lifetime Happiness: A Review of the Literature and a Study**

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### **Abstract**

In the contemporary landscape of social media, insecurities intertwine with all aspects of society, shaping individual perceptions and influencing lifetime happiness. This paper dives into how insecurities develop, the disorders that they are a gateway for, and their psychological effects on lifetime happiness. By interviewing four participants and reviewing published literature, this research attempts to understand self-perception, external validation, and virtual interactions in the context of happiness.

*Keywords:* happiness, social media, insecurity, narcissism, validation, screen-time

## **The Effects of Insecurity on Lifetime Happiness: A Review of the Literature and a Study**

### **A Review of the Literature**

#### ***Relevance in the Field***

Feelings of inadequacy capture every individual at some point in their lives, which is why many researchers have studied this topic. With the rise of social media, insecurities in young adults have risen exponentially, making the concept of insecurity much more complicated. It is difficult to discover the exact root of an insecure thought, making it even more difficult to study it. This research paper compiles a multitude of studies in an attempt to understand the roots of insecurity, the disorders that they can lead to, and how they affect people later on in life. Looking at the fragility of happiness, social media usage, and narcissistic tendencies will hopefully allow us to gain a complete perspective on this issue.

Social media has become a very significant part of daily lives, with teenagers using social media at an exponentially high rate. Although social media can help teenagers feel less lonely and cultivate friendships, too much social media use can impact self-esteem negatively. This can lead to poor mental health and insecurity, two things that make healthy long-lasting relationships much more difficult to achieve. Recently, a lot of awareness has been spread regarding social media use and mental health in teens. This literature review serves the purpose of examining the existing research on this topic, and finding links between social media usage, low self-esteem, narcissism, and insecurity.

#### ***An Overview of Social Media, Self-Esteem, and Happiness in the Literature***

The “Social Media and Low Self-esteem”, Sophia Auld (2019) dived right into social media usage in teenage communities. The author argued that social media has benefits to make

teenagers less lonely; however, the negative impacts outweigh the positive ones. Auld mentioned a study conducted by JAMA Psychiatry that links high school social media norms with depression in teenage subjects. Bullying, lying, and self-obsession are all effects that social media has on children. In this article, the author stated that school counselors are flooded with students seeking mental health, particularly in relation to high screen time. Although studying mental health in teens is a developing concept, it is still extremely important and should be heavily researched in the near future.

Auld also wrote about a study conducted by Dr. Martin Graff, a professor that presented his findings at the British Psychological Society. In his study, Graff sent a questionnaire to 340 participants regarding the ways that people feel when they receive likes on social media. The findings revealed that receiving likes leads to no long-term happiness. Subsequently, the study stated that if an individual is feeling down, social media likes are unlikely to improve their mood. The point of this experiment was to prove that social media can affect the brain, but it is typically more negative than positive. Comparison to others is extremely dangerous, and not worth the short-lived dopamine rush that people get when they receive likes.

Another study that examined social media in relation to mental health was "Bedtime Use of Technology and Associated Sleep Problems in Children", by Caitlyn Fuller (2017). Although this study did not specifically mention insecurity and its effects on happiness, it is important to understand another negative effect of social media on children. In this study of 234 children, a strong correlation was found between poor sleep quality and excessive nighttime phone usage. This study also tied obesity to a lack of sleep, which is another root of insecurity in teens. All aforementioned studies explore different sides of the multifaceted issue of social media and mental health. Although this topic is still expanding and being studied, it is important to have a

fundamental understanding of the basics in order to comprehend children's emotions.

### ***Links Between Narcissism and Insecurity***

Typically when somebody mentions narcissism, one thinks of an individual with an inflated sense of self. "Narcissists' perceptions of their personality and reputation" by Carlson et al. (2011) explored an alternate perspective on narcissists. The authors claimed that narcissists are fueled by low self-esteem and feel the need to make up for what they don't have in order to be positively perceived by others. Results of this study found that narcissists think that they are viewed by others positively, when in reality they are not. The authors also argued that narcissists struggle to maintain long-lasting relationships since they think that they are better than everyone else. The topic of narcissism is complicated, and every individual is different; however, almost all of them seek external validation and chase respect from other people. Low self-esteem and insecurity are highly related, and a combination of the two can lead to narcissism in teenagers and emerging adults.

Furthermore, "Narcissism Driven by Insecurity, Not Grandiose Sense of Self," a paper written by Helena Palmieri (2021), and published by NYU. Palmier expanded on and explored the connection between narcissism and insecurity even further. This study found that narcissists are not confident at all and that their behavior can be explained solely through coping with inadequacy. The author also examined social media posts and a metric, which the author created, called FLEX, a measure of social validation, self-elevation, and social dominance of an individual. This study confirmed that social validation and self-inflation correlate with narcissistic tendencies. A subtype of narcissists known as "vulnerable narcissists" act in this manner, and truly have fragile egos.

Additionally, Riitta Vornanen et al. (2009) analyzed insecurity in Finnish teenagers in

their study “Insecurity of young people: The meaning of insecurity as defined by 13-17-year-olds.” Their focus was on how children define insecurity and establish the fact that young people are “active agents” and have control over their own lives. The authors claimed that instead of judging children’s behavior, we should instead attempt to understand their perspectives to provide helpful advice. By doing this, adults will have a much easier time understanding their thought processes, and analyzing where things are going right or wrong. These children grouped insecurity into three main categories: The inner circle, the social circle, and the outer circle. The inner circle pertains to insecurity derived from personal emotions and experiences. Although this may seem like an obvious source of insecurity, it is still impressive that children were able to identify the stem of their problems. The social circle is probably the most evident source of insecurity; dealing with feelings of inadequacy that come from other people. Social interactions can cause insecurity in many different contexts outside of just simple bullying. The outer circle is a realm in which insecurity arises from socioeconomic status, violence, and external factors that are out of the individual’s control.

### ***Fragility of Happiness***

“Fragility of happiness as a predictor of insecure attachment”, a study of late teens conducted by Senkul Sethia (2022) examined the direct relationship between the fragility of happiness and unhealthy/insecure attachment styles. The term “fragility of happiness” can be defined as an aversion to the expression of happiness because an individual believes that being happy causes bad things to happen. The fear of happiness, or cherophobia, is an anxiety disorder. Insecure attachment styles were linked to the fragility of happiness in subjects, further explaining failed long-term interpersonal relationships. Another interesting thing that the study found was that subjective well-being negatively correlates with the fragility of happiness. The better one feels they are doing, the less fragile their happiness will be. True genuine happiness is not



affected by fragility – only temporary happiness.

### ***Conclusion***

As insecurity plagues modern society, it is crucial to understand both the roots and long-term effects that it has on members of our communities. The number one preventable cause of insecurity is the comparison of oneself to other people, which has grown exponentially with the rise of social media platforms. As Auld (2019) and Fuller (2017) demonstrated, social media is extremely dangerous to developing brains, as it can implement feelings of inadequacy without being recognized quickly. Moving past the root of insecurity, researchers find that there is a multitude of mental health disorders that surface from low self-esteem. It is universally recognized that depression and anxiety are directly related to insecurity, however, many people don't make the same connection with narcissism. Contrary to popular belief, studies by Vornanen et al (2009) and Palmieri (2021) showed that narcissism has never been about an inflated ego, but rather an extremely low self-esteem. These studies shine a light on an important global issue, one that many fail to accept is even real.

### **A Study of Insecurity, Happiness, and Social Media Use**

#### ***Introduction and Personal Statement***

All throughout middle school and high school, I felt that I was overly concerned with my appearance, and more importantly how I was perceived by others. I understand that this feeling is somewhat universal and “normal”; however, I don't think people understand how harmful this way of thinking truly is on a developing mind. I moved around a lot and subsequently had to make new friends in completely different areas. I found myself trying to fit into different cliques at new schools, leading me to change the way I acted in order to gain some type of approval or validation from other people. Looking back on that stage of my life, it is completely

understandable that I was insecure, especially while making so many first impressions. What I noticed is that even after I was socially accepted by the people around me, I would still alter the things that I would say in order to further integrate myself into the group. As a 13-year-old, it was impossible to understand how harmful this would later be to my mental health. These habits carried into my early years of high school, and I eventually realized that I was not being myself. I was living behind a facade in fear that I wouldn't fit in anymore. This made me constantly question my outfit choices and my appearance, and I would look at myself through a third-person lens, picking apart my own insecurities. During the past couple of years, I still get small waves of insecurity, especially when in new settings by myself. Now that I have matured mentally, I can control these feelings and understand that they are not valid, but it is still confusing to me why I feel insecure at all. Knowing that thinking this way is harmful to my mental health, why would I still care about what other people think about me? This question is one that my research paper aims to help me understand.

### ***Methodology***

The goal of this study was to figure out the role that insecurities play in lifetime happiness in individuals. There was also an interest about the role that social media plays in insecurity. This study explored these topics by analyzing in-person interviews and asking the following questions (details available in the Appendix B). Four interviews were included in this study (see Appendix B for details). This study analyzed similarities between answers and found correlations between multiple factors. For example, parenting styles, social media, and socialization all played different parts when considering an individual's insecurity. The subjects of this study were college students between the ages of 18-22.

## ***Results***

Although there were only four participants in this study, it was possible to collect a diverse set of insightful answers. For some questions, the participants all agree with each other. For example, all participants believe that social media does in fact increase insecurities in society. This unanimous answer was expected, due to the unrealistic beauty standards that all of the participants mentioned. When questioned about their personal insecurity levels, two considered themselves insecure and two did not. One interesting observation is that all four of them used to be insecure, meaning that some people grew out of it. Most participants said that they felt insecure when meeting someone new, with an emphasis on making a good first impression.

All participants believe that insecurity affects everybody equally, as opposed to being gendered. Three participants observed that men often hide their emotions due to the social stigma surrounding masculinity. One participant articulated this idea well, saying “I think we believe it to be gendered because the feelings of men have been shunned by society” (Participant B). At some point in their lives, all of the participants refrained from doing something that they wanted to in fear of being judged. Most of the participants thought that their lives would be better without social media, with two of them mentioning that they feel more productive as a result of reduced screen time. On top of this, three participants believe that social media could boost social anxiety, but that it isn't directly caused by it.

## ***Discussion***

By only interviewing four people, it is difficult to apply my results to a bigger population. Just because all of my participants believe a certain thing does not mean that the entire population believes that.

Unexpectedly, all of the participants felt valued and supported in their homes growing up,

a factor that could skew my results. One of the initial hypotheses was that households where children are neglected and overly critiqued would produce insecure children, however, none of the participants fit this criteria.

Due to the interviews being face-to-face, some participants may hesitate to be fully transparent with their answers. To get a completely honest response, An approach to make the answers anonymous would have been better. Although these interviews could have been conducted online, the face-to-face approach allowed participants to open up, and tell a story with their answers. Whether these answers were expected or not, it was very interesting to see other perspectives on the same issues that I as the author of this study have dealt with. It was comforting to know that I share similar experiences to my peers, and interesting to find out the participants' various opinions when questioned on different topics.

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## Appendix A

### *Informed Consent Form*

I, Kaden Palmer, am a student at the University of California, Merced. I am majoring in psychology and I'm doing a research study on insecurity and happiness. I would like to invite you to participate if you would be willing to answer a few questions. I am especially interested in learning more about the causes of insecurity, and what disorders they can lead to.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to change your mind at any time. If you agree to participate, it will involve an in-person interview. I expect this to take approximately 10-15 minutes. Your questionnaire will be anonymous and I will not share it with UC Merced or anyone else. I will be the only person to review any information you provide and your answers will be deleted after my project has been written.

There are no anticipated risks to your participation and you will receive no benefits except the satisfaction that you have helped inform the field of psychology. If sharing your experiences brings up bad memories or strong feelings at any time, you may stop filling out the form.

If you have any questions about this study or your participation, please email me at the address listed below. If you are over the age of 18 and agree to participate in my research, please sign this informed consent form.

Sincerely,

Kaden Palmer  
kadenpalmer1@gmail.com

I have read and understand the above and agree to participate in the study.

## Appendix B

### *Interview Questions and Responses*

#### *Demographic Questions.*

1. How old are you?
  - a. 20
  - b. 22
  - c. 19
  - d. 19
  
2. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Male
  - c. Female
  - d. Female
  
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - a. Hispanic
  - b. Persian
  - c. White
  - d. Russian
  
4. Do you use social media?
  - a. Yes
  - b. Yes
  - c. Yes
  - d. Yes

#### *Open Response Questions.*

1. Do you think that social media has increased insecurities in society? Why or why not?
  - a. Yes, I think we as a society compare our lives to other people, and we only see the highlights of other people's lives, making theirs seem desirable.
  - b. Yes, because it sets unrealistic standards that don't depict reality.

- c. Yes, I do, because there is a stigma around social media and if you compare yourself to someone who is perceived to be better off on social media, it isn't true. You are comparing something fake to your reality.
- d. Yes because there is a certain standard people see as fit, and anybody who doesn't match that beauty standard sees themselves as ugly.
2. Are you a relatively happy person? Where do you get most of your happiness from?
- a. I am pretty happy, I get most of my happiness from making music and pursuing my hobby. Getting good grades also gives me happiness
- b. Yes I am, I get happiness from exercise, spending time with friends, and watching basketball.
- c. I would say I am relatively happy. I enjoy doing things that make my inner child happy, and hanging out with my cat.
- d. Yes I am. Spending time with people.
3. Do you feel like you are an insecure person? Why or why not?
- a. Not really, but I used to be. I am pretty carefree in the way that I act, I'm not super judgemental, and also don't care about what other people think about me.
- b. A little bit, yeah. I constantly think about what other people think of me.
- c. Yes extremely, I was bullied heavily in middle school, and that has affected me long-term.
- d. No. I used to be but I think I grew out of it.
4. Do you compare yourself to other people in a negative way? Why do you think you do or don't?



- a. Occasionally, I want to see myself in a better position and I use it as motivation to push myself harder.
  - b. No, I do not, I used to but I grew out of it.
  - c. Yes, I do, specifically when it comes to working out. I feel like I am behind where I should be, especially looking at other gym influencers on social media. I feel like I should be on their level even though they have been working out for much longer. I think my jealousy attaches to insecurity, and they tag team in my brain.
  - d. No, but I used to.
5. Do you feel anxious about one of your insecurities while meeting someone new? If yes, why?
- a. When I meet someone new, I try to be calm and original and try not to put out a fake persona. I sometimes think about minor things like droopy eyes or something on my face, but only small stuff.
  - b. Yes I do, when I go into a social situation, I feel the need to make a good first impression. The relationship is dictated by that first impression and I get caught up with how people view me in that situation.
  - c. Yes, because a big insecurity of mine is that I am annoying. When I meet new people I hold back and try to be quiet a lot of the time, even though that's not who I am. That insecurity makes it so that I am not real when I meet new people.
  - d. No. I don't really think about that stuff when meeting someone new.
6. How much of your happiness comes from other people? Does being validated by somebody else mean more to you than validating yourself?

- a. Not too much, probably 50%. I feel that external validation is sometimes forced, and I question people's motives when they try to validate me too much. When I work hard and people validate me, I feel seen by other people.
  - b. I would say about 25%. I think that external and internal validation is pretty equal to me.
  - c. I would say 70%. Specifically my significant other. Yes, it does, because I can't see myself from an outside perspective, so they are seeing me for who I am instead of my insecurities. If they appreciate that, it means more than what I think of myself.
  - d. Probably 10-20%. Not always, most of the time no, but it does boost my confidence more if I get validated by someone else.
7. Did you grow up in an environment where you were valued and supported, or did you feel neglected and critiqued? Please elaborate.
- a. I grew up in an environment that was very supportive, but also very critical. A lot of things that I did needed to be critiqued for me to become who I am today. I wouldn't have the opportunities that I have today if my parents were not strict.
  - b. I grew up in an environment where I was valued and appreciated.
  - c. Half and half. At my mom's house, I felt very appreciated and supported, especially with academics. On my dad's side, I felt very neglected. Everything that I would talk about and feel passionate about would get shot down.
  - d. Valued and supported. I was always supported by my family no matter what, but I was also critiqued on aspects of how I looked by my own parents.
8. Do you think that insecurity is gendered or do you think that it affects everyone equally? Please elaborate.

- a. I don't think that there are limits to insecurities, it affects everyone equally. I think that guys get insecure and hide it due to the stigma around men being strong and masculine. Men don't put themselves out there so they don't get perceived as feminine. For example, when guys cry, people make fun of them instead of helping them out. I think that seeing men being happy on social media contributes to more women thinking all men should act that way. If he does not act a certain way, people think that man should not be valued as a person.
- b. I think that insecurity affects everybody equally. I think we believe it to be gendered because the feelings of men have been shunned by society. We have been taught to internalize our emotions.
- c. I think it affects everyone equally. I think it is portrayed differently throughout the genders. Men have a stigma for being strong while women can be open. Men don't talk about their insecurities as much, but I think it is the same where we all feel it.
- d. I would say they are probably the same.
9. Have you ever refrained from doing something that you wanted to because you were scared of people judging you?
- a. I have in the past, but not anymore. I have grown as a person and seen that not seizing opportunities has led me to regret things in life. I lost lots of offers from musicians because I didn't want to be pushy, but you need to put yourself out there to be successful. If you care too much about what other people think about you, you are too self-conscious to succeed and chase your dreams.
- b. Yes I have, I refrain from going out or engaging in social settings because of it. c. Yes, I have. Other people's perspectives and how they view me matters a lot, so I refrain from

doing things that really make me happy. My insecurity reflects on how I act because I don't want to be seen as a child or something, even though making my child self happy makes me happy.

d. Not recently, but probably when I was younger for sure.

10. Do you think that you would be a happier person without social media? Why?

a. It depends: I think without social media my life would be better to some extent, but I wouldn't be able to be inspired by other people. Being on social media allows me to creatively experiment. I think people shouldn't use social media for five seconds of gratification, and instead use it only for positive usage.

b. No, I think I would be the same.

c. 100%. I have limited my screen time before and I feel like I engage more with my environment. When I am on social media I compare myself and am stuck on my screen, not in reality. Based on my experiences, I have better days when I'm not on social media.

d. Yes I think I would be, because I think it is a waste of time. It takes away valuable time that you could be doing something more productive. It also has negative impacts on people's social standards.

11. Do you feel like you have social anxiety? If yes, do you think any of it is associated with social media? What else do you think causes it?

a. Not really, I just have somewhat of a fear of being too direct or blunt. I feel that can't match the vibe of other people, and I want to make a good first impression. I don't think it's caused by social media directly, but it could be related to some degree. I remember when I was a kid, before social media, I had to present in front of the school and got

social anxiety. I think that social media can highlight social anxiety because you see all of these positive things in other people's lives.

b. I have social anxiety but I don't think it was caused by social media. When I grew up I wasn't around a lot of people, I would be home alone a lot. When I play basketball, it would usually be by myself. I feel like my parents isolated me a little bit.

c. Not as much anymore, moving to college really made me come out of my shell in a way that I don't hide myself. I had very bad social anxiety when I was younger, especially in middle and high school. It has gotten extremely better since moving to college. I think social anxiety comes from outside of social media.

d. No, I don't, but I do think that people with social anxiety could stem from social media.