Social Class, Social Capital, and Social Comparison on Social Media among Young

Adults in Thailand

โดย

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งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาพฤติกรรมการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์กับการเปรียบเทียบทางสังคมของกลุ่มผู้ใช้งานวัยรุ่นไทย โดยมุ่งเน้นศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างชนชั้นทางสังคม (Social class) ทุนทางสังคม (Social capital) และการเปรียบเทียบทางสังคม (Social comparison) บนสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ในกลุ่มวัยรุ่นไทย งานวิจัยเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพผ่านการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก (In-depth interview) จากผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยทั้งหมด 15 คน ซึ่งแบ่งออกเป็นกลุ่มชนชั้นล่าง (LC) ชนชั้นกลาง (MC) และชนชั้นสูง (UC) กลุ่มละ 5 คน

ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าสื่อสังคมออนไลน์สามารถเพิ่มการเปรียบเทียบแนวนอน (Horizontal comparison) ในกลุ่มเพื่อนสนิท และสมาชิกชุมชน ซึ่งส่งผลเสียต่อความนับถือตนเองหรือการเห็นคุณค่าในตัวเอง (Self-esteem) ระดับความเครียด (Stress) และทำให้เกิดภาวะซึมเศร้าระดับเล็กน้อยถึงปานกลาง (Mild to moderate depression) ในทุกชนชั้นทางสังคม ผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยมักจะเปรียบเทียบเรื่องมาตรฐานความงาม การเงิน ความสามารถ ผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการศึกษา และวิถีชีวิต ซึ่งนำไปสู่ปัญหาสุขภาพจิต

ความรุนแรงของผลกระทบเหล่านี้แตกต่างกันไปตามระดับของการเปรียบเทียบและภูมิหลังทางสังคมและทุนของครอบครัวของผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัย งานวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าทุนภายในครัวเรือน (Bonding capital) ในกลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วม LC ไม่สามารถสนับสนุนทรัพยากรอย่างเพียงพอจากสมาชิกที่มีลักษณะหรือพื้นฐานคล้ายคลึงกัน ส่งผลให้เกิดความรู้สึกไม่เป็นที่ยอมรับ ความนับถือตนเองลดลง และเกิดภาวะซึมเศร้าระดับเล็กน้อยถึงปานกลาง ในขณะเดียวกัน ทุนภายในชุมชน (Bridging capital) มีอิทธิพลต่อการเปรียบเทียบแนวนอนในกลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วม MC บนสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ ซึ่งโปรไฟล์สะท้อนให้เห็นถึงพลวัตการแข่งขันที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความทันสมัย ชื่อเสียง และความนิยม เนื่องจากตำแหน่งกึ่งกลางของชั้นโครงสร้างทางสังคม กลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วม MC จึงมีลักษณะท้าทายลำดับชั้นแบบดั้งเดิม และเป็นตัวแทนของกลุ่มที่เกิดใหม่และมีฐานะร่ำรวยขึ้น ในทางกลับกัน ทุนภายนอกชุมชน (Linking capital) ให้ประโยชน์ทางทรัพยากรอย่างมากกับผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัย UC ที่ใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์เพื่อแสดงวิถีชีวิต (Lifestyle) ที่สวยงาม หรูหรา และสง่างาม

กล่าวโดยสรุปงานวิจัยนี้โต้แย้งว่ามโนทัศน์ของชนชั้นทางสังคม ทุนทางสังคม และอัตลักษณ์ของปัจเจกบุคคลมีความเชื่อมโยงกันอย่างซับซ้อน ในแง่ของวิธีที่ผู้เข้าร่วมจากชนชั้นทางสังคมต่าง ๆ เปรียบเทียบทางสังคมบนสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ อย่างไรก็ตาม งานวิจัยเสนอความจำเป็นในการทำความเข้าใจอัตลักษณ์ของผู้เข้าร่วม ความเป็นตัวตน และวาทกรรมของพวกเขาด้วยมุมมองที่ละเอียดอ่อน งานวิจัยนี้จึงเน้นการเป็นตัวแทนหลายมิติของอัตลักษณ์ของปัจเจกบุคคล ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการปฏิบัติอัตลักษณ์ที่มีพลวัตและยืดหยุ่น

คำสำคัญ: ชนชั้นทางสังคม ทุนทางสังคม การเปรียบเทียบทางสังคม สื่อสังคมออนไลน์ วัยรุ่น ประเทศไทย

Abstract

Social media has become a primary research arena for exploring its effects on everyday life practices, including well-being, mental health, and social comparison. This research aims to investigate how social class and social capital relate to social comparison on social media among Thai young adults' users. Specifically, the research focuses on the relationships among social class, social capital, and social comparison on social media among Thai young adults. Qualitative data are collected through in-depth interviews from a total of 15 participants categorized into Lower Class (LC), Middle Class (MC), and Upper Class (UC) groups (5 participants per group).

The research findings indicate that social media increases horizontal comparison among peers, intimate friends, and community members, negatively impacting self-esteem, stress levels, and causing mild to moderate depression across all social classes. Participants often compare issues such as beauty standards, finances, competencies, academic achievements, and lifestyles, leading to mental health problems. The severity of these impacts varies based on the levels of comparison and participants' social backgrounds and family capitals. The research discusses that bonding capital among LC participants offers insufficient support from homogenous community members, leading to feelings of not belonging, lowered self-esteem, and minor to moderate depression. In contrast, bridging capital influences horizontal comparison among MCs on social media, where profiles reflect competitive dynamics related to trendiness, fame, and popularity. Positioned within the middle of the class structure, MCs challenge traditional hierarchies and represent an emerging affluent urban Thai middle class. Meanwhile, linking capital provides substantial benefits to UC participants who use social media to showcase beautiful, luxurious, and elegant lifestyles.

Overall, the research argues that concepts of social class, social capital, and individual agency intricately link how participants from different social classes engage in comparisons on social media. However, it emphasises the need to conceptualise participants' agency, identity, and their own discourse with a nuanced lens. The research thus highlights the multifaceted representation of individuals' subjectivities revolving around dynamic and fluid identity practices.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the area of social media use and its effects, many scholars argue that social media can potentially cause social comparison, which may affect users' self-esteem, well-being, and mental health (Meier & Johnson, 2022; Javornik et al., 2022; Wenninger et al., 2021; Boursier et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). However, the roles of social class, social capital, and user agency are still underexplored in understanding how these factors relate to social comparison on social media. To bridge this gap, the present study aims to interrogate **how social class and social capital relate to social comparison on social media among Thai young adult users.**

Social comparison is defined as "the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self" (Wood, 1996). According to social comparison theory, comparison is a fundamental human cognition that occurs across cultures, and there are two key types of comparison: upward and downward social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Previous empirical research indicates that social media fosters upward comparison, which can be detrimental to users' self-esteem as they compare themselves with those who are perceived to be better. However, recent studies suggest that upward comparison online can also have positive outcomes, as it can inspire users to improve their lives (Wenninger et al., 2021; Meier et al., 2020). This ongoing debate raises the question of whether social media-induced social comparison negatively impacts users' mental health and well-being. Importantly, how social class, social capital, and user agency relate to social comparison on social media remains a question. Therefore, I aim to pursue this research question through a qualitative study.

According to new media studies, social media is not merely a platform for communication or information exchange; it serves as an everyday playground for young users to create, interact, and present their identities to their imagined friends through various virtual activities (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, 2014; Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Hinton & Hjorth, 2019). Additionally, social media has been identified as a creative space for cultural production, resistance, and challenges to dominant culture (Marwick, 2013; Rose et al., 2012). For instance, young Thai users may use an avatar as their profile picture that does not align with their offline gender identity, demonstrating how online platforms can challenge normative gender discourse (Chanvised, 2022). This indicates that social media is an alternative space where users can modify, imagine, and present their desired selves through technological features and affordances, such as applying filters, editing pictures, and using AR to visualize their ideal appearance in pictures and videos posted on IG Stories, IG Reels, TikTok, Facebook, and other platforms.

However, as previously mentioned, these online activities have been discussed as harmful to users' mental health and well-being, particularly for passive users, leading to issues such as social anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, and social comparison. Due to these problematic issues and their implications for human well-being, studying the relationship between social media use and mental health is crucial, not only for the users' well-being but also for various societal sectors, including society, education, politics, healthcare, and the economy. Understanding the phenomenon of social comparison on social media would be valuable for all related stakeholders, especially both users and policymakers. In summary, the research objective aligns with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015, which promote sustainable development across five dimensions. Mental health problems fall under the 'People' social dimension, aiming to ensure good health and well-being for all (United Nations, 2023). Therefore, it is beneficial to study how social media use among Thai young adults affects their mental health, particularly in social comparison concept.

1.1 Research Question:

- How do social class and social capital relate to social comparison on social media among Thai young adults' users?

1.2 Research Objective:

- To explore the relationship among social class, social capital, and social comparison on social media in Thai young adults' users.

1.3 Definition of terms:

- **Social Comparison** is social-psychological process that individuals drive to gain accurate self-evaluations. They evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others to reduce uncertainty in these domains and learn how to define the self. Comparing oneself to others socially is a form of measurement and self-assessment to identify where an individual stands according to their own set of standards and emotions about themselves (Festinger, 1954).

- **Social Capital** is the resources that are embedded within, derived from, and available through an intricate social network of relationships that an individual possesses (Putnam, 2001). Social capital describes individuals' ability to capture both the potential and actual resources embedded in their social network; thus, social capital is derived from family's resources which children receive opportunity or to realise their potentials through parent's education, wealth, occupation, taste, lifestyle, and others (Bourdieu, 1983).

- **Social Class** is defined by two key current concepts; in the first strand, the definition of class, inspired by traditional class theorists by Marx (1867) and Weber (1947, 1978), offers class as

"a social category pertaining to individuals or groups sharing comparable behaviours, characteristics and way of life" (Marx, 1967, P.23). Class is clustered by economic and resource opportunities (i.e., means of production and other materials such as income, car, land, and property). In a recent perspective on class, the second strand of class definition focuses on the processes of culture, lifestyle and taste. The concept of class is developed from the issue of economic inequalities to inconspicuous and individualised manner; thus, class is viewed as "cultural, individualised, implicit and hierarchical" (Bottero, 2004; 2014; Wright, 2005). It appears to consider other invisible forces that produce and/or reproduce social divisions by looking closely at individual practices, subjectivities, perceptions, and discourses.

- **Young adult** (or adolescence) is people who are in the period of transition from childhood into adulthood. They have rapid changes in terms of physical, mental, emotional and social aspects and have an emotional maturity (National Library of Medicine, 2015). In other words, young adults are typically defined as individuals who are in the transitional phase between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, usually ranging from the late teens through the early twenties. This period is characterised by significant psychological, social, and cognitive development, as individuals often pursue higher education, begin their careers, and establish independent identities. Arnett's theory of "emerging adulthood" (2000) is a widely recognised framework in developmental psychology that discusses this age group. There are three stages of young adult: early adolescence (ages 10-13 years approximately), middle adolescence (ages 14-16 years approximately) and late adolescence (ages between 17-19 years approximately). This study focuses on individuals in the later stages of adolescence (18-19 years) and the early stages of adulthood (19-22 years). Overall, the research participants are aged 18-22, which corresponds to those in their first to fourth years of an undergraduate degree. The selection of participants within this age group is based on their

developmental stage in psychology, particularly their tendency to compare themselves

with others, especially their peers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Social comparison on social media

Previous studies (e.g., Samra et al., 2022; Kross et al., 2013) consider that social comparison is

a key mechanism to explain the relationship between social media use and people's well-being.

Particularly, passive users are highly engaged in social comparison online, and this is likely to have a

negative impact on their well-being and mental health (Verduyn et al., 2022). A fundamental need

and motivation for being human are social connection and relation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and

social media seem to provide tools to fulfill these needs and motivations. On the one hand, using

social media likely impacts subjective well-being positively in terms of allowing more freedom to

express ideas, selves, and identities, and letting people easily interact with their friends without the

boundaries of time and place. On the other hand, there are longitudinal studies (i.e., Kross et al., 2013;

Schmuck, 2019), experimental studies (i.e., Tromholt, 2016; Mosquera et al., 2020; Brailovskaia et al.,

2020), and meta-analytic studies (i.e., Appel et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2019) that assert social media

use has a negative rather than positive effect on users' well-being and mental health. Many scholars

point out that online social comparison is a key underlying factor that destroys users' mental health

(Krasnova et al., 2013; Krause et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2020). Thanks to these critical debates, I

thus aim to examine online social comparison in the context of Thai culture, which has a hierarchical

social class and structure and a complex social norm. Although previous research studies by Thai

scholars have explored social comparison online, there is still a limited amount of research investigating other underlying cultural factors, particularly social class and social capital among youth, in relation to those online comparisons. In this paper, I aim to shed light on the relationship between social class, social capital, and young users' agency regarding social comparison on social media in Thai dominant culture.

2.2. Social media concepts: its definitions, characteristics, and effects in relation to mental health

In this section, I will provide a review of the literature on social media concepts: its definitions, characteristics, and effects of social media, as well as its links to mental health and social comparison, particularly for young passive users. The advent of new media has revolutionised the way individuals communicate, share information, and interact. Central to this transformation is social media, a subset of new media, which has garnered significant attention in academic discourse. Social media can be broadly defined as digital platforms that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content through virtual communities and networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Unlike traditional media, which is often one-directional, social media is characterised by its interactive, participatory nature, allowing users to engage in conversations, collaborate, and contribute to the content landscape. Social media has become a fertile ground for popular culture among young people due to its technological affordability, functions, and features, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X. There are many definitions of social media. One such definition describes it as an internet-based, networked communication platform that facilitates both personal and public communication through participatory culture (Jenkins & Ito, 2015). Social media predominantly allows users to access, connect, and interact with people, services, information, and opportunities that were previously inaccessible.

Social media platforms are distinguished by several key characteristics that set them apart from other forms of communication. First, they are inherently participatory, enabling users not only to consume content but also to create and share it (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This participatory culture fosters a sense of community and belonging among users, which is often cited as one of the primary attractions of social media (Jenkins, 2006). Second, social media is characterized by its immediacy; users can instantly share updates, news, or personal information, leading to real-time communication and interaction (Boyd, 2014). Third, these platforms operate on a global scale, breaking down geographical barriers and enabling users to connect with others from around the world (Wellman & Rainie, 2012). Lastly, the algorithms that drive content on social media are designed to personalize the user experience, often leading to the creation of echo chambers where users are exposed predominantly to content that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences (Pariser, 2011).

The relationship between social media use and mental health has been a subject of extensive research and debate. While social media offers opportunities for social connection and support, it also poses significant risks to mental well-being. Several studies have highlighted the potential negative effects of social media on mental health, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Kross et al., 2013; Primack et al., 2017). One explanation for these outcomes is the phenomenon of social comparison, where users compare their lives to the often idealised portrayals of others on social media, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Chou & Edge, 2012). There is evidence showed a link between greater social media use and higher scores of depressions and anxiety, poor sleep, low self-esteem, and body image concerns, particularly in teenage users (Kelly et al., 2018). Similarly, Primak et al.'s (2017) research findings indicate a relationship between the use of multiple social media platforms and increased depression and anxiety symptoms in young people aged 19-32. Additionally, Dickson et al.'s (2018) study reveals associations between screen-based activities and mental health problems in children and young people, but they conclude that more

research is needed to establish cause and effect. More recent studies, such as those by Rozgonjuk et al. (2019a, 2019b), Warrender & Milne (2020), and Javornik et al. (2022), discuss how social media use has been linked to subjective well-being in young users through technological features such as filters, AR, and commenting on body images and face profiles, especially for female users. According to these research findings, depressive and anxiety symptoms are associated with the social comparison process, and people who frequently engage in social comparisons are more likely to experience envy, guilt, regret, and defensiveness (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019).

However, on the positive side, social media can serve as a valuable tool for mental health support. Online communities and forums provide spaces where individuals can share their experiences, seek advice, and receive emotional support from others who may be going through similar challenges (Naslund et al., 2016). Social media platforms have also been used to raise awareness about mental health issues and to disseminate information about coping strategies and resources (Lerman et al., 2017). All things considered, while social media offers significant benefits in terms of social supports, connections, interaction, information access, as well as cultural production, it still amplifies a major downside, particularly social comparison. Young users often compare themselves to carefully curated images of their peers, as well as to celebrities or others who have achieved high levels of success. As a result, this can be detrimental to users' self-esteem, self-image, and overall well-being.

Social media platforms have distinct features and characteristics that shape user interactions, content dissemination, and ultimately, influence mental health. The following sections explores the unique attributes of YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, drawing on existing literature to understand their roles in shaping user experiences and mental health outcomes.

2.2.1   YouTube: The Visual Hub for Content Creation and Consumption

YouTube, launched in 2005, is a video-sharing platform that allows users to upload, view, and interact with video content. It has evolved into one of the largest social media platforms globally, with over 2 billion monthly active users as of 2023 (Statista, 2023). YouTube's primary feature is its extensive video library, covering a vast array of topics ranging from educational content to entertainment and personal vlogs. In terms of the key features, YouTube has many technological functions and characteristics for users. For instances, YouTube thrives on content generated by users, called **User-Generated Content (UGC)**, ranging from amateur videos to professionally produced content. This democratisation of content creation has allowed diverse voices to emerge but has also led to concerns about the quality and reliability of information available (Burgess & Green, 2018). Next, **Algorithm-Driven Recommendations** of the YouTube play a significant role in shaping user experiences by suggesting content based on viewing history and preferences. While this feature enhances user engagement, it has also been criticised for promoting echo chambers and radicalising content (Zhu et al., 2021). Lastly, in terms of **Community Interaction**, YouTube's comment section and community posts allow for direct interaction between content creators and viewers, fostering a sense of community. However, this feature has also been associated with cyberbullying and trolling, which can negatively impact mental health (Paolillo, 2022). To link these key features and mental health effect for users, research indicates that YouTube can have both positive and negative effects on mental health. On the positive side, it provides a platform for self-expression, learning, and community support (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). Conversely, excessive use of YouTube, particularly exposure to negative content or cyberbullying, has been linked to anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances (Fardouly et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Instagram: Visual Storytelling and Social Comparison

Instagram, launched in 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012, is a photo and video-sharing platform that emphasises visual content. With over 1.5 billion monthly active users, Instagram has become a dominant force in social media, particularly among younger demographics (Statista, 2023). The key

features of Instagram are: **Visual Content Sharing**, Instagram's focus on images and short videos allows users to curate their online personas and share aspects of their lives in a visually appealing format. This emphasis on aesthetics can lead to a culture of social comparison, where users evaluate their self-worth based on others' curated images (Chua & Chang, 2016). Next, Instagram **Stories and Reels** features enable users to share ephemeral content that disappears after 24 hours (Stories) or create short-form videos (Reels). These features encourage frequent engagement but also contribute to the pressure to constantly update one's feed (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Lastly, in terms of **Like and Comment Systems**, the like and comment features provide instant feedback on posts, creating a feedback loop that can reinforce self-esteem or contribute to anxiety, depending on the nature of the interactions (Vogel et al., 2014). In regarding of mental health implications, Instagram's visual focus and emphasis on social comparison have been linked to negative mental health outcomes, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Studies suggest that frequent use of Instagram can exacerbate body image concerns, contribute to depression, and increase feelings of loneliness (Fardouly et al., 2017). However, Instagram can also provide a platform for positive social interactions and support networks, which can mitigate some of these negative effects (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019).

2.2.3   X (Formerly Twitter): The Power of Real-Time Communication

X, formerly known as Twitter, is a microblogging platform that allows users to post and interact with short messages known as "tweets." Since its launch in 2006, X has become a key platform for real-time communication, news dissemination, and public discourse, with over 350 million monthly active users (Statista, 2023). The key features of X are **1. Character Limit:** The platform's original 140-character limit (later expanded to 280 characters) encourages concise communication and has shaped the way information is shared and consumed (Murthy, 2018), **2. Hashtags and Trends**: X's use of hashtags allows users to categorize and search for content related to specific topics, while trending topics highlight popular discussions in real-time. This feature has made X a crucial tool for social movements and breaking news

(Bruns & Burgess, 2011), and **3. Retweets and Likes**: X enables users to amplify content through retweets, while likes serve as a form of endorsement. These features contribute to the rapid spread of information but can also lead to the spread of misinformation and polarized discussions (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). To sum up, X's fast-paced, real-time nature can be both empowering and overwhelming for users. On one hand, it allows for immediate participation in public discourse and social movements, providing a sense of agency (Papacharissi, 2015). On the other hand, the platform's propensity for heated exchanges, exposure to negative content, and the pressure to constantly stay updated can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout (Nabi et al., 2013). Additionally, the anonymity of X can foster toxic behaviors, such as trolling and harassment, which can have detrimental effects on mental health (Suler, 2004).

2.2.4   TikTok: The Rise of Short-Form Video Content and Its Impact on Mental Health

TikTok, launched internationally in 2018 by the Chinese company ByteDance, has rapidly grown to become one of the most popular social media platforms, with over 1 billion monthly active users as of 2023 (Statista, 2023). Known for its short-form video content, TikTok has had a profound impact on digital culture, influencing trends, music, and even language. There are many features of TikTok, but the key characteristics and features are for examples: **1. Short-Form Video Format**: TikTok's defining feature is its 15 to 60-second video format, which allows users to create and share quick, engaging content. This brevity encourages creativity but also contributes to the platform's addictive nature, as users can easily consume large amounts of content in a short time (Anderson, 2020). **2. Algorithmic Content Delivery**: TikTok's "For You" page is driven by a highly personalized algorithm that suggests content based on user behaviour, such as likes, shares, and watch time. This feature maximises engagement but has raised concerns about echo chambers and the promotion of potentially harmful content (Zuo et al., 2021). **3. Viral Challenges and Trends**: TikTok is known for its viral challenges, where users participate in trending activities, often set to popular music tracks. While these challenges can foster community and creativity, some have been linked to risky behaviours and social pressure, particularly among adolescents (Omar & Dequan, 2020). **4.**

Interactive Features: TikTok's duet and stitch features allow users to directly interact with other users' content, creating a collaborative environment. This interactivity can enhance social connections but also expose users to negative interactions, such as cyberbullying (Baldwin, 2021). To make a link between these reviewed key features and mental health implications, the rapid consumption of content on TikTok, combined with its algorithmic personalization, can lead to both positive and negative mental health outcomes. On the one hand, TikTok provides a platform for self-expression, creativity, and community building, which can boost self-esteem and social support (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). However, the platform's addictive nature and the pressure to conform to trends can contribute to anxiety, depression, and body image issues, particularly among younger users (Vogels, 2021). The constant exposure to curated, often idealized content can also exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and social comparison (Yang et al., 2022).

To sum up, YouTube, Instagram, X, and TikTok each offer unique features that shape user interactions and have significant implications for mental health. YouTube's video-centric platform allows for deep engagement but can contribute to issues like addiction and exposure to harmful content. Instagram's focus on visual storytelling and social comparison can exacerbate body image issues and anxiety, while X's real-time communication and public discourse can lead to both empowerment and stress. Lastly, TikTok, with its unique short-form video format and powerful algorithm, while it offers opportunities for creativity, community, and self-expression, it also presents challenges related to mental health, particularly due to its addictive nature, the pressure to participate in viral trends, and the potential for negative social interactions. Understanding these platforms' distinct characteristics and their effects on mental health is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate negative outcomes and enhance positive user experiences. Hence, social media, as a component of new media, presents a complex landscape with both positive and negative implications for mental health. Its defining characteristics, such as participatory culture, immediacy, global reach, and algorithmic personalization, contribute to its widespread use and

influence. However, the impact of social media on mental health is multifaceted, with potential risks including anxiety, depression, and addictive behaviours, balanced against opportunities for social support and mental health advocacy. As social media continues to evolve, further research is necessary to fully understand its effects and to develop strategies for mitigating its negative impacts while enhancing its positive potential.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Based on the research question, **"How do social class and social capital relate to social comparison on social media among Thai young adult users?",** the study conceptualises its theoretical framework into three strands: 1. Social Comparison Theory (Leon Festinger, 1954), 2. Social Capital Theory (Robert Putnam, 2001; Pierre Bourdieu, 1983), and 3. Social Class Theory (Pierre Bourdieu, 1984), including the concepts of Capitalism and Class Struggle from traditional Marxist theories (Karl Marx, 1867; Max Weber, 1947, 1978). The following sections provide a theoretical discussion of each strand.

3.1 Social comparison theory

The theory of social comparison was first popularised by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954. Social comparison is a form of sociological self-esteem where we derive our sense of self by comparing ourselves with others (Festinger, 1954). Festinger argued that "human beings have an innate drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities" (p. 29). Individuals often use various sources of information to navigate the social world, comparing their own abilities, attitudes, social standing, and performance to others (Festinger, 1954). The main purpose of this is to reduce uncertainty about the self and to answer the questions "How am I doing?" and "What should I think and do?" (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, p. 129). This implies that social comparison satisfies human needs, especially the needs for affiliation and esteem. Social comparison is thus often related to self-esteem, self-improvement, and self-enhancement. In adolescence, social comparisons are not only related to subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction, self-

esteem, social hierarchies, mental health, but also related to self and identity development, such as identity formation, self-understanding, and perception to own abilities and achievements. Thus, social comparison in adolescents might consist more significant process than in other age groups because they need to deal with many identities development and self-understanding to achieve their life satisfaction.

In social comparison theory, there are two types of social comparison: upward social comparisons and downward social comparisons. Upward social comparisons refer when individuals compare themselves with others who possess superior characteristics. These comparisons are more likely to result in negative outcomes, such as lower self-esteem. However, they can also lead to positive outcomes if the upward comparisons motivate individuals to improve themselves or aspire to a better life. In contrast, downward social comparisons occur when individuals compare themselves with others they perceive to be in a worse situation. Downward comparisons are more likely to result in positive outcomes, such as increased self-esteem and happiness (Vogel et al., 2014; Schmuck, 2019). Nonetheless, these discussions need further exploration to understand how social comparisons can lead to positive or negative impacts in an online context, where users have the imagination, creativity, and autonomy to present their selves and identities on their profiles.

The key concepts of the social comparison process are: 1. how people select targets for comparison, ranging from upward to downward comparison targets (superior others versus inferior others), and 2. the consequences of the comparison (assimilation versus contrast). People tend to make downward social comparisons with those who are worse off or less skilled than themselves, which can raise their self-esteem. On the other hand, upward social comparisons with those who are better off can be problematic, as they may reduce self-esteem, especially on social media (Verduyn et al., 2021). In terms of consequences, assimilation occurs when the comparer's self-evaluation changes towards the comparison target, becoming more positive after upward comparison and more negative after downward comparison.

Conversely, contrast implies when the comparer's self-evaluation changes away from the comparison target, becoming more negative after upward comparison and more positive after downward comparison.

To summarise, *assimilation* involves individuals changing their behaviors to be similar to their targets, while *contrast* involves changing behaviors to be different from their targets. Upward assimilation and downward contrast are expected to improve well-being, whereas upward contrast and downward assimilation are expected to decrease it (Gerber et al., 2018). Similarly, envy can be distinguished into a more assimilative, beneficial emotion (*benign envy*) and a more contrastive, harmful one (*malicious envy*) (Crusius et al., 2020). However, there are non-diagnostic comparisons with irrelevant comparison targets (Gilbert et al., 1995). The comparison dimension is relevant to the self when the comparison target is similar or related to the self. Recent research has found that, in an offline context, individuals are likely to compare themselves to someone who outperforms them in a contrasting manner, resulting in lowered self-evaluations, envy, and deteriorated emotions (Gerber et al., 2018). Similarly, in the online space, users tend to present a positively biased version of themselves through their profiles, making upward comparisons more frequent and potentially more harmful on social media (Schreurs et al., 2021). Social comparison online can occur in various forms of self-presentation, such as users' hobbies, leisure activities, travel, work, health, fitness, or appearance, which can be posted and shared through multiple channels. Consequently, feelings of envy – "the pain caused by the good fortune of others" – can lead to low self-esteem and impair the well-being of social media users (Crusius et al., 2020; Wenninger et al., 2021). Thus, as social media becomes a dominant space for young people's everyday play, interaction, and self-curation, it would be beneficial to understand how social media use links to the ways in which users compare themselves to others, by expanding a broad range of theoretical lens: Social Class, Social Capital, and Social Comparison in Thai youth culture. To pursue the research question, the current study adopts qualitative research method: an in-depth interview, to gain an insight of data from the participants to understand how

Thai 18-young adults use social media to compare themselves to others by delving the questions of social class, capital, and other user's agencies, tastes, and discourses.

3.2 Social capital concepts and theory

Secondly, the term social capital has been broadly defined and understood within the social sciences, with a common understanding that it fundamentally pertains to social networks. Bourdieu (1983), who initially introduced the notion of social capital into sociology, views it as a resource derived from participation in collective activities within social networks, embodying commitment and trust among individuals. Capital, according to Bourdieu, extends beyond economic or social exchange motivated by self-interest; it encompasses "capital and profit in all their forms" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 241). In his framework, there are four types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. He defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 19). Similarly, Putnam et al. (1994) describe social capital as "trust, reciprocity, and shared norms," prerequisites for collective action that can overcome social dilemmas and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Portes (1998) further explains that individuals can secure benefits through their membership and position within social networks. Numerous works on social capital in recent decades have reached a consensus, viewing social capital as "the relative strength and density of ties between individuals, as well as associated network characteristics such as trust, reciprocity, and the depth of shared norms" (Putnam et al., 2004; Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Thus, a key concept of social

capital is its role as a property of groups or an attribute of individuals and the networks in which they are embedded (Kawachi et al., 2008; Lin, 1999).

It has become commonplace to categorise social capital into three components: bonding, bridging, and linking capital (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004; Burt, 2000). **Bonding capital** involves connections and interactions among homogeneous community members, such as family, friends, and neighbors, and is rooted in particularised forms of trust and reciprocity (Woolcock, 2001). This "strong tie" is crucial in early efforts to rebuild and recover livelihoods (e.g., sharing resources, housing livestock on neighbors' farms). It measures resources embedded within homogeneous social networks (wealth, status, knowledge). **Bridging capital** relates to relationships between individuals or groups who differ in socio-demographic aspects (e.g., ethnicity, culture, age) but share broadly similar social or economic status. Rooted in heterogeneous networks, social trust, and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2001; van Deth & Zmerli, 2010), bridging capital provides access to diverse resources, skills, and knowledge not accessible through bonding capital alone (Easterly et al., 2006). It is crucial for benefiting organisations and community members (Dowd et al., 2014). **Linking capital** refers to relationships that cut across power or authority gradients (e.g., connections between communities, NGOs, and state institutions), providing access to financial, technical, informational, and logistical support unavailable endogenously (Pelling & High, 2005). It plays a vital role in securing long-term investments needed to rebuild social, economic, and physical infrastructures post-disaster (Marin et al., 2015). Importantly, according to Bourdieu, he refers social capital as networks that individuals perceive to have a certain value and can use to "create additional value" in their lives. When individuals perceive these networks as their "social capital," they utilise them to strengthen internal group bonds (bonding), connect their group with other groups (bridging), which entails forming alliances with shared intentions, and finally, leverage this social capital in negotiations or challenges with groups they perceive as superior (linking) to elevate their own social standing. However, debates persist regarding the categories, characteristics, and measurements

of social capital. This implies that studying social capital in a specific society requires a flexible understanding and application, as normative assumptions about social networks, ties, and norms in both virtual and non-virtual communities remain under-explored.

3.3 Social Class concepts and theory

Thirdly, Bourdieu, in his work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (1984), explains that social capital refers to an individual's capacity to leverage the resources, both potential and actual, within their social network. Social class, in his point of view, originates from the resources available within a family – such as education, wealth, occupation, taste, and lifestyle – that enable children to seize opportunities and realise their potential. Over time, these families accumulate social capital, granting them inherent advantages over other groups in society. Bourdieu (1984) argues that this advantage contributes to varying levels of academic achievement among children of different social classes, influencing their respect, status, and position in society. Notably, individuals who seek power and status, whether through politics or other means, perpetuate societal inequality, as highlighted by Bourdieu's concept of different forms of capital – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – which encompass tangible and intangible assets passed down from parents to children. This cultural differentiation, spanning youth behaviors like mannerisms, dress, and speech patterns, underscores class, status, and power distinctions within families (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, Bourdieu's theory links symbolic power and structural inequality, emphasising how differences in class, capital, and cultural resources shape societal dynamics.

Moreover, a traditional Marxist perspective further elucidates the concept of social class. Marx (1867) defines class as a social category encompassing individuals or groups who share similar behaviors, characteristics, and ways of life (p. 23). Class primarily revolves around economic factors and resource opportunities, quantified by possessions such as income, property, land, and vehicles (Weber, 1947, 1978). Marx (1867) distinguishes classes based on ownership of the means of production and control over the labor power of others, positing a dichotomy between the bourgeoisie – who own the means of production and wield economic power – and the proletariat, who sell their labor and are economically dependent (p. 29). This division into two opposing classes, according to Marx, reflects broader societal antagonisms and economic disparities. This discussion motivates an exploration into how distinctions in youth's class and capital influence their use of social media to compare themselves with others and its implications for their mental health.

By integrating Bourdieu's theories on class and capital with classical Marxist perspectives on capitalism and class conflict, I propose an operational model of social class specific to Thailand for this research. In my earlier research conducted in Thailand, I conceptualised Thai social class into three schemes: Lower class (LC), Middle class (MC), and Upper class (UC) (Chanvised, 2022; Chanvised & Wongkoblap, 2023). In this current study, I continue to categorise Thai society into three primary classes: LC, MC, and UC, using Goldthorpe's original class framework from the West (2014), with slight modifications tailored to the Thai context. In this schema, the Thai lower class, often referred to as cosmopolitan or urban peasants (Keyes, 2014), corresponds to Marx's proletariat – they lack ownership of the means of production, relying instead on selling their labor and experiencing oppression by the ruling class. This group in Thailand typically includes working-class individuals (e.g., laborers, unskilled workers) with less than a secondary education and incomes below 20,000 baht per month. Next, the Thai middle class resembles Marx's bourgeoisie, though some have mixed social origins due to the rise of a new urban middle class, which has emerged through expanded education and professional

opportunities (Funatsu & Kagoya, 2003). This newly urbanised middle class in Thailand includes small to medium business owners, white-collar workers in private firms, and skilled artisans, typically holding secondary to bachelor's degrees and earning between 20,000 to 50,000 baht monthly. Lastly, the Thai upper class, often referred to as the elite, combines elements of Marx's bourgeoisie and aristocracy, a distinction still presents in Thailand but less so in Western models. Members of this class are associated with professions such as technical, administrative, or executive roles, including government officials and those in positions of royal or elite authority. They typically hold educational qualifications beyond a bachelor's degree and earn more than 50,000 baht per month. Overall, I define Thai social class within these three categories by applying classical Marxist theories of capitalism and class struggle, Bourdieu's concepts of class and capital, and Goldthorpe's framework of social stratification adapted for the Thai context. This classification is based on socioeconomic indicators including educational attainment, income levels, and occupational prestige.

In conclusion, the study aims to address the research question: **how do social class and social capital relate to social comparison among young Thai adults on social media?** To pursue this, the literature review and three theoretical frameworks – Social Comparison theory, Social Capital theory, and Social Class theory – will serve as analytical foundations to explain and contextualise the key themes that inform the research findings. These theoretical frameworks are employed to explore how social class manifests in Thai society and how factors such as family income, education, and occupation contribute to the social capital of youth, thereby influencing their social comparisons on social media. All in all, the study examines the differentiation of social classes based on socioeconomic status indicators (occupation, education, income of participants' parents) – categorised as Lower class (LC), Middle class (MC), and Upper class (UC) – and the variation in social capitals (bonding, bridging, and linking) to understand their connections with social comparisons (upward and downward) among young Thai users online. (Refer to Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study for details.)
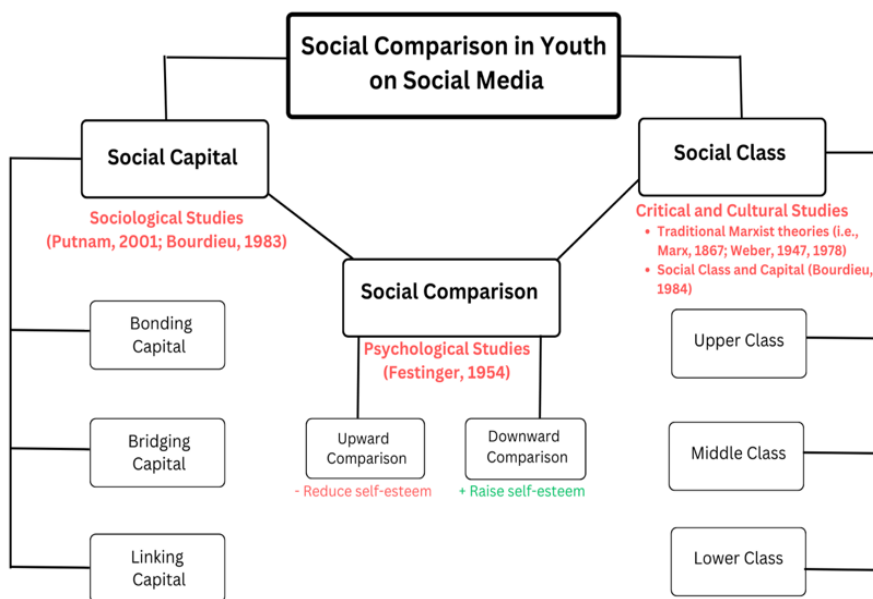
3.4. Conceptual Framework of the study

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Sampling and Participant's Recruitment Procedure

The study adopts qualitative methodology employing a purposive snowball sampling method for participant recruitment. To outline the recruitment process, initially, the researcher selects the first participant using purposive sampling, meeting specific inclusion criteria: 1) being Thai young adults aged 18-22 years, and 2) regularly using social media in their daily lives. Subsequently, the study continues recruiting additional participants through the snowball sampling technique, where new participants are referred by the initial participant based on the same criteria.

Regarding the classification of participants into social classes (Lower Class, Middle Class, and Upper Class), participants will be grouped based on social stratification using a questionnaire to collect demographic information. The grouping criteria is applied by Goldthorpe's concept of socioeconomic status (SES) ranking, which categorises social stratification by economic and social standards index, including

occupation, income, and education. In this study, parents' SES information will be used to cluster participants' social class into LC, MC, and UC, according to the reviewed Thai social stratification.

Overall, the study identifies the first snowball participant who fits these categories using a questionnaire that assesses socio-economic factors, i.e., parents' income, education, and occupation. The first referred participant is categorised as "LC," "MC," or "UC," and subsequent participants are grouped accordingly until an adequate number is recruited. According to the nature of qualitative research, the sample sizes for each group of participants may vary based on data saturation. Therefore, the purposive snowball sampling method provides flexibility in clustering participants based on their social class backgrounds.

4.1.1 Questionnaire and In-depth Interview Instruments

There are two instruments in the data collection process. The first instrument uses a questionnaire to categorise participants' social class. Although the study employs a qualitative methodology and does not rely on statistical or numerical data for presenting findings, the questionnaire helps to classify participants and visually display their demographic information, providing a comprehensive understanding of their social and familial backgrounds. The second instrument collects qualitative data through in-depth interviews, which serve as the primary research tool for the qualitative method. Specifically, the first step involves using a questionnaire with approximately 15 questions based on Goldthorpe's SES ranking criteria, i.e., occupation, income, and education, to categorise participants into LC, MC, and UC – as explained previously. The second step involves conducting in-depth interviews to gather qualitative data, aiming to explore participants' insights, attitudes, and behaviours in relation to how their social class and capital influence their social comparisons on social media. Overall, by cross-referencing demographic and qualitative data, the study will generate insights through coding, conceptualising, identifying patterns, and uncovering potential themes.

4.2 Data Collection

The data collection procedure consists of four steps. Firstly, demographic data is gathered through questionnaires to classify participants into three social class categories. Following this, participants will be invited to participate in an in-depth interview within one to two weeks, allowing them ample time to consider their consent. Participants who consent to the interview, as indicated in the questionnaire, will contact the researcher via phone or email to schedule the interview. The researcher will then arrange a comfortable time and place for the participants, such as a classroom or teacher's room during a lunch break, after school, or any convenient time. Secondly, qualitative data is collected through individual in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions, with each interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Importantly, the interviews will be conducted in Thai to allow participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences more fully, as Thai is their native language and the one they are most comfortable with. This approach ensures that the data collected is both rich and accurate, reflecting the participants' true perspectives. After the interviews, the data is carefully translated from Thai to English. The translation process was meticulously handled to preserve the original meaning and context of the

responses. A back-translation method will also be employed, where the translated English text was translated back into Thai by a qualified translator. This back-translation is then compared to the original text to check for consistency and accuracy in meaning. To ensure the validity of the translated data, the translated text is reviewed by both language experts and subject matter experts. Additionally, certain participants will be consulted to confirm that the translations accurately reflect their intended meanings. This rigorous process ensures that the translated data maintains its integrity and accurately represents the participants' original statements.

4.3 Data Analysis

There are two analytical tools used in this study. Firstly, for demographic data, Google Forms is utilised to collect and analyse the data, presenting it in graphs or pie charts. The primary purpose is not to gain insights from the demographic data but to categorise participants into social classes. This data will help support the understanding of the relationships among social class, social capital, family background, social media use, and social comparison online. Secondly, for qualitative data collected from interviews, thematic analysis is employed as the analytical framework, to identify patterns and potential themes. All notes and audio recordings are transcribed and coded using the NVivo program to identify common themes. Overall, different types of data will be cross-referenced to ensure reliability, examining similarities, differences, and overlaps to conceptualise nuanced research findings.

Here is the list of all key informants and their demographic data collected through the questionnaire, who will be interviewed for this study. All key informants are currently studying for a

bachelor's degree in the social sciences, with their ages ranging from 18 to 22 years. Specifically, there are a total of five lower-class (LC) participants: **Noey, Nan, Aey, Manow,** and **Amp,** all of whom are pseudonyms. The five research participants consisted of four females and one male. In terms of social background, their family's income is less than 20,000 baht per month, and their parents' education is below secondary school, working in labour roles such as cleaning staff, unskilled workers, and truck drivers. Next, there are five participants from the middle-class (MC) group, namely **Ying, Noon, Fah, Bambam,** and **Gift,** as pseudonyms. The MC research participants consisted of five females. Their parents are business owners, mid-level government officers, and white-collar workers who perform professional services, managerial, or administrative work, such as small to medium business owners, convenience store and restaurant owners, and managers or directors in private companies in Thailand. The family income ranges between 20,000 and 50,000 baht per month, and the parents' education level is between high school and a bachelor's degree. Lastly, **Nannie, Toptap, Bomb, Pancake,** and **Run,** as pseudonyms, are five participants recruited from the upper-class (UC) group. The five research participants consisted of three females and two males. Their parents are high-level experts, high-ranking government officials, and senior executives in world-leading companies, such as a vice president in a real estate business. Their families have an income of more than 50,000 baht per month, and the parents' education level ranges between a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Although qualitative research does not primarily focus on the number of participants, selecting five key informants per social class group is a systematic approach to achieve data saturation in this study. Also, I have excluded some data from the questionnaire as certain demographic information may have been redundant and did not equally represent the three social classes: LC, MC, and UC. Therefore, it was necessary to ensure that the data is balanced to reflect the equality of accuracy.

4.4 Research Ethics

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics of Thammasat University Social Science Research Ethics Committee, with the approval number SSTU-EC 002/2567. As explained in the

ethical form, the study adopts a purposive snowball sampling method, where the first volunteer will be approached through purposive contact. The researcher will announce to recruit the first participants through publishing the poster media located at the faculty area. The poster content will be included the message of "volunteers enter the project voluntarily and without compulsion", along with sentences, "you can choose to join the project by your own willing and you can withdraw the project in any time without the punishment or impact to your life in university", or "there is no impact or influence to your right and personal well-being at any place"; plus, the poster will explain the research's objectives, details, procedures, and benefits to the participants. After the first volunteer agrees to participate in the research project through signing a consent form, next participants will be recruited through snowball sampling technique which is referred by the first participant. The researcher will invite them through personal contacts, such as telephone, Line, or Email – to explain them the research's details, objectives, and procedures; along with providing the consent form and information sheet. In the same way, the researcher will explain about confidentiality, protection of participant's right, and asking to sign the consent, according to ethical concern.

According to ethical issues, there may be a risk impacting participants' emotions and feelings while joining the research project. For example, they may feel uncomfortable answering some interview questions. To minimize the ethical issues, the participants will be fully informed that they can withdraw from the project at any time without any impact on their rights, as indicated in the consent form and information sheet. Also, based on their willingness, they can choose to answer or skip any interview questions. Importantly, the researcher will emphasize confidentiality and anonymity of participants' data to minimize their concerns.

Chapter 5: Research Findings

In this chapter, I will address data analysis and conceptualise these as themes which become research findings. By the nature of thematic analysis, according to what the participants provided insights both verbal and non-verbal communication, these will be analysed to find patterns. Concurrently, the reviewed pieces of literature and three strands of theoretical frameworks: Social Comparison theory, Social Capital theory, and Social Class theory will serve as the analytical background to explain and contextualise the key themes that emerge.

Briefly, section 5.1, **"Overall Characteristics of Social Media Use"** demonstrates the general characteristics of social media use across the three groups of participants to explain a greater likelihood of increased comparison due to the affordances of social media, involving elements such as features, attributes, functionalities, and user competencies. This section includes evidence such as the most

frequently used platforms, the duration of social media use, and specific features or functions that lead to social comparison. Next, section 5.2, **"The Impact of Horizontal Comparison on Social Media on Self-Esteem, Stress, and Mild to Moderate Depression among Peers, Intimate Friends, and Community Members"** addresses the main research question: how does social media relate to social comparison among young Thai adults? This section provides an overview of how these individuals use social media in their daily lives and its potential effects on their mental health and well-being. Additionally, the study will provide interview data to describe a link between the characteristics of social media use by the participants and its impact on their comparisons with peers by this section.

Then, to pursue another aspect of the research question – how social class and social capital relate to online social comparison – sections 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 will address each participant's social class: **Lower Class (LC), Middle Class (MC), and Upper Class (UC),** respectively. These sections will bridge the relationships among social class, social capital, and social comparison on social media. Specifically, they will delve into the differentiation of social capitals – bonding, bridging, and linking capital – to understand how these differences relate to online social comparison.

In summary, Chapter 5 is structured into five sections. The first and second sections provide an overview of characteristics of social media use and how social comparison frequently occurs through such social media use among Thai teenagers. The subsequent sections discuss in detail how social capital influences online social comparison, offering a deeper understanding of the classed behaviours of young Thai adults on social media.

5.1 Overall Characteristics of Social Media Use

In this section, I will discuss the overall characteristics of social media use among the three groups of participants to show how such usage potentially creates more comparison due to social media affordances, such as features, properties, functions, and user capabilities. The collected data demonstrate that Instagram is the most powerful platform for horizontal comparison among peers, intimate friends, and community members. The following table shows an overview of social media use among the three groups of participants. The table explains the top 3 most used social media platforms, the duration of use, and the most popular features of each platform, which may potentially affect their emotional well-being.

Participants	The top 3 most used platform	How long (hour per day)	Popular features
1. LC	1st: **YouTube** (5 out of 5)	1st: **YouTube** (7 Hrs)	1st: **YouTube** (Home: Search)

	2nd: **Instagram** (4 out of 5)	2nd: **Instagram** (4 Hrs)	2nd: **Instagram** (Home Posting, Stories)
	3rd: **Twitter** (4 out of 5)	3rd: **Twitter** (3 Hrs)	3rd: **Twitter** (Tweet, Retweet)
		*Average: 4.7 Hrs	
2. MC	1st: **Instagram** (5 out of 5)	1st: **Instagram** (8 Hrs)	1st: **Instagram** (Home Posting, Stories, Reels, Polls)
	2nd: **TikTok** (4 out of 5)	2nd: **TikTok** (4 Hrs)	2nd: **TikTok** (TikTok Trends, Video uploading, Effects and filtering)
	3rd: **Twitter** (3 out of 5)	3rd: **Twitter** (4 Hrs)	3rd: **Twitter** (Tweet, Retweet, Hashtag)
		*Average: 5.3 Hrs	
3. UC	1st: **Instagram** (5 out of 5)	1st: **Instagram** (9 Hrs)	1st: **Instagram** (Stories, Reels, Polls, Filters and editing options, Live)
	2nd: **TikTok** (5 out of 5)	2nd: **TikTok** (7 Hrs)	2nd: **TikTok** (TikTok Trends, Video uploading, Duet, Effects and filtering, Live)
	3rd: **YouTube** (4 out of 5)	3rd: **YouTube** (4 Hrs)	3rd: **YouTube** (Home: Search, Shorts)
		*Average: 6.7 Hrs	

Table 1: The overview characteristics of social media use among three groups of participants

The table shows that LC participants use **YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter** as their top 3 platforms, averaging **7 hours, 4 hours, and 3 hours** per platform, respectively. They adopt popular features offered by these platforms; for example, they mostly watch long video content by searching on YouTube for leisure purposes according to their interests. They also scroll through the news feed and stories on Instagram. Notably, they do not usually post pictures or videos on their home page or stories, but they often view others' posts, especially their friends' profiles. They use Twitter as their third-ranked platform for news updates and stress relief by tweeting their own created texts, such as releasing bad memories and personal problems, without showing their face or personal information; specifically, they use Twitter as a private space with anonymous profiles.

Next, MC participants primarily use **Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter**, with average usage times of **8 hours, 4 hours, and 4 hours**, respectively. The characteristics of social media use between LC and MC

participants differ in terms of personality disclosure and publicity. The study's questionnaire data point out that MC participants use these three platforms with both private and public accounts to post and share their personal matters, hobbies, and lifestyles. This contrasts with LC participants, who share less remarkable or distinguishing content. MC participants frequently change their profile pictures and update their routines through **Home Posting, Stories, Reels, and Polls** on Instagram. They also use TikTok to produce and upload content showing their identities, preferences, and interests in fashion, music, and food. Twitter, the third most used platform by MC participants, is employed for **tweeting, retweeting,** and using **hashtags** to update news, follow trends, join fan communities, and follow their favourite artists and online influencers.

Lastly, UC participants' social media use is similar to MC participants in terms of sharing personal matters, lifestyles, and self-presentation, including dressing up, dining out, and joining clubs. They primarily use short video content platforms like **Instagram (1st)** and **TikTok (2nd).** However, UC participants tend not to use Twitter for news updates, revealing personal information, or chatting with friends. Instead, **YouTube** is their third-ranked platform, used to catch up on trends through review content for beauty products, travel plans, and technology or gadget items. Their time spent on each platform is similar to MC participants: **9 hours** on Instagram, **7 hours** on TikTok, and **4 hours** on YouTube. UC participants extensively use social media features to showcase their lifestyles. They are the majority group employing filters and effects to produce and edit short video content on platforms like Instagram **Stories** and **Reels,** and **TikTok Duets.** They also activate the **Live** video feature on TikTok for social interaction and connection with friends and communities. Additionally, they follow influencers or YouTubers to stay updated on trends in fashion, food, music, drama, and more on **YouTube Shorts.** This behaviour is similar to MC participants, who use these platforms for self and identity performances, revealing personal matters, hobbies, and lifestyles.

To sum up, the questionnaire data reveals distinct differences in social media use among participants from different social classes. LC participants primarily consume long video content on YouTube platform for entertainment purposes. For other platforms, they tend to view others' profiles and Stories

rather than sharing their own, indicating limited visibility and popularity in contrast to MC and UC participants, who are more likely to disclose personal details, such as face and body pictures, age, school or university names, and locations. Both groups use social media to showcase their lifestyles, hobbies, and personal matters, such as romantic relationships, friendships, and joining a club and café. Their social media presence is prominent, as they actively display their qualities, tastes, and personalities through their profiles. A slight difference between MC and UC participants is in their interaction styles. UC participants tend to use social media more critically and interactively at a horizontal level. They frequently post IG Stories, participate in dance challenges on TikTok, and use various filters and effects on IG Reels and TikTok. Their engagement with peers is high, often leading to increased horizontal comparisons through shared pictures, videos, and viral challenges. MC participants are more inclined to criticise and engage with social concerns and issues on platforms like Twitter. They use Twitter as a mobilising space to join communities focused on social awareness, such as environmental issues, LGBTQ+ rights, and social inequality, which is less common among UC participants.

In terms of time spent on each platform, the data shows that participants from all social classes use social media for more than 4 hours per day on average. Specifically, LC participants average 4.7 hours, MC participants average 5.3 hours, and UC participants average 6.7 hours per day on their top three platforms. These high usage rates may indicate Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). To properly diagnose IAD, a full assessment tool such as the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Dr. Kimberly Young is necessary (1998). The Center for Internet Addiction was founded by Dr. Kimberly Young in 1995, and she developed the diagnostic questionnaire in 1996, and it remains in use today. Although various tools have been created by numerous experts, a 2022 study from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study found that adolescents in the United States and worldwide spent an average of 7.7 hours on social media daily after the COVID-19 pandemic began (Nagata et al., 2021a, 2021b). This discussion can be applied to the average time spent by the study's participants: 4.7 hours for LC, 5.3 hours for MC, and 6.7 hours for UC. These

durations suggest a significant risk of Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), which shares characteristics with cell phone addiction or "nomophobia" – the fear of being without a mobile device (Yildirim & Correia, 2015). Both conditions can severely impact day-to-day life and mental health.

To summarise the overall characteristics of social media use among the three participant groups, video-based platforms are the most popular across all classes, with YouTube being the top choice for LC participants for entertainment purposes. LC participants tend not to share personal matters on social media platforms either YouTube, Instagram, or Twitter. In contrast, Instagram is the most used platform by MC and UC participants, who actively use features like Stories, Reels, and Live to showcase their personalities, relationships, social outings, academic achievements, and other daily activities. Instagram Stories, in particular, are heavily used by these two groups to socialise, keep up with trends, and update friends on personal activities. The platform's ability to set audience groups (private or public) for Stories makes users comfortable sharing personal activities temporarily. Similarly, TikTok is also highly popular for socialisation among peers in both MC and UC groups, with UC participants using it more extensively. This may be due to TikTok's features that allow significant customisation of body images, selves, and characters through filters and effects. These features are frequently used by MC and UC participants for dance challenges, Live sessions, and Duet singing. TikTok's affordability to modify makeup, dress, and the overall mood and tone of videos on everyday-life matters is particularly appealing. However, the study's data indicates that these features can lead to feelings of insecurity about body image and identity, as the platform tends to promote a positive and beautiful portrayal, concealing imperfections. Theme 5.5 will delve deeper into how TikTok's effects and filters contribute to high levels of horizontal comparison among UC participants, potentially leading to eating disorders, addiction to plastic surgery, and excessive concern with beauty and body image. To sum up, the discussed social media use characteristics reveal how the three participant groups utilise these platforms to connect with friends and communities online through various engagement features.

While social media can help mitigate stress and loneliness, it can also lower self-confidence and self-esteem and increase horizontal comparisons among peers, contributing to psychological distress.

5.2 The Impact of Social Media on Horizontal Comparison and its Effects on Self-Esteem, Stress, and Depression Across All Social Classes of Participants

Social media is a space where teenagers post and share their pictures, videos, and statuses for subjective purposes such as self-presentation, social identity performance, social connection, entertainment, getting news, and finding job opportunities. In section 5.2, evidence collected through in-depth interviews shows that social media can potentially increase horizontal comparison among peers, intimate friends, and community members, which can negatively affect self-esteem, stress, and lead to minor to moderate depression. According to social comparison theory in psychology, it is normal for individuals to make comparisons between themselves and others with the purpose of self-enhancement

and emotional well-being (Festinger, 1954). However, various levels and categories of comparisons may have positive or negative impacts on well-being and mental health. Based on data collected from participants' in-depth interviews, evidence suggests that social media significantly impacts their mental health. It can lead to mental health problems as social media stimulates horizontal comparison among peers, intimate friends, and community members who are perceived as similar and having a homologous social background in terms of education, income, taste, lifestyle, and social status.

The following are substantial pieces of interview responses from participants across all social classes, illustrating how social media leads to horizontal comparison in their daily lives.

Me and my friends, we are so different. I have no time and money to hang out with my friends. While my friends go out for dinner, get good internship opportunities, or plan to get high-paying jobs at big companies, I have to stay at home because I need to take care of my family. I don't feel jealous, but I feel sad for myself. It's not because I'm not good enough to find those things, but I have no chance to get them. I don't have enough money even to take a bus to university. Sometimes I need to just stay at home to save money for my mom. We have very bad circumstances and memories at home. I might feel nothing if I didn't see my friends posting about their opportunities at university. They post about their internship experiences, hanging out with friends, and joining faculty activities. I don't have those things. Even just joining faculty activities is impossible for me because it costs money, like travel expenses. – **Noey, Lower class (LC)**

I am a content creator on Instagram (IG), and my content focuses on sharing tips and techniques for studying in school and university, called "Studygram." I have about 10k followers on my account. I often compare myself with people who are slightly above me but not too high. For example, when I see other content creators with similar

characteristics or content to mine, I feel annoyed and a little bit angry. If those creators have fewer followers than me, that's fine. But if I see they have higher engagement, more likes, or more comments than me, I feel bad about myself. It reduces my self-confidence, and I blame myself, thinking, "Why don't I get high engagement like that? Are my contents so bad?" This affects me more because I know who they are: they are my old friends from high school. We have the same type of interests, similar characteristics, we are the same age, and we know each other very well. That's why when they are more successful on IG, it makes me stressed. I don't compare myself to those with lower profiles because I think it will achieve nothing. I don't understand why we need to compare ourselves to those below us – it means nothing to me. But comparing ourselves to others who are slightly higher (but not too high, like celebrities) and have the same background will definitely have an impact. However, I also use this comparison as positive energy. I think they can be role models for me to follow. – **Ying, Middle Class (MC)**

I used to hate and be bored with my face and body. When I post my pictures and videos on IG, I get many compliments, like "You are so beautiful," "Wow, you have long legs!" and "You look like a model!" These make me feel so good and proud of myself. But after some time (like 2-3 days), I usually delete those pictures and videos. This is because I start to hate and be bored with my face and body in those pictures. I don't think my pictures are beautiful anymore – the mood and tone of the pictures seem the same, not interesting or attractive. This happens to me often. I know it is not good to think like this, but I don't know how to stop these bad feelings. It's like I don't love myself.
– **Toptap, Upper Class (UC).**

As we can observe from substantial pieces of evidence above, the participants' spoken expression explicitly shows that social media, particularly Instagram, negatively affect to their emotional well-being,

such as stressful, annoyed, sad, as well as reducing self-confidence and self-esteem. Individuals make all kinds of judgments about themselves and analysing the self in relation to others: however, I observe that the participants have the comparison processes with horizontal level, especially their peers, intimate friends, and community who have a similar social background. Horizontal comparisons are conceptualized as perceived similarity with one's peers for the purpose of self-evaluations and self-enhancement (Festinger, 1954). As being observed evidently, the participants mostly compare themselves with friends or classmates in university who have a tight relationship in terms of intimacy, similar field of interest, taste, job seeking, and lifestyles, for example, as stated by **Noey (LC),** *"Me and my friends, we are so different...While my friends go out for dinner, get good internship opportunities, or plan to get high-paying jobs at big companies, I have to stay at home because I need to take care of my family".* Similarly, **Ying (MC)** said that *"when I see other content creators with similar characteristics or content to mine, I feel annoyed and a little bit angry...they are my old friends from high school. We have the same type of interests, similar characteristics, we are the same age, and we know each other very well".*

According to the social comparison theory, there are mainly two types of comparison: upward and downward comparison. Upward comparison takes place when individuals compare themselves with those who they believe are better than them, while a downward comparison is the opposite way of comparative process – or to compare who are lower than them. Many psychologists and scholars (e.g., Mildawani et al., 2022; Rahimi et al., 2017) argue that these two types of comparisons have both positive and negative effects, for instance upward comparison can enhance hope and inspiration, at the same time, it can make individual envy and dissatisfaction with themselves. Downward comparison helps someone to feel grateful to the one below than them, simultaneously, scorn or despise emotion can happen. In fact, individuals might judge themselves with many levels of comparison, for examples they might have an upper comparison with their older sisters, brothers, or relatives who have more power or successful than them in the family. In the meanwhile, they might compare horizonal way with their friends in school or university,

and they might look down upon the junior or freshmen when they are senior students in university which this is a kind of downward comparison. Nevertheless, as revealed by the pieces of evidence, the participants show that they mostly compare themselves with a horizontal level. The insight is that they feel stressful and low self-esteem when they see their friends who have a close relationship are more successful than them, especially in the issues of learning outcomes (i.e., grading, or GPA), job opportunities, and other lifestyles, such as joining a club or leisure activities in the university. For instances, **Amp**, a lower-class (LC) participant, and **Fah**, a middle-class (MC) participant, stated:

> *I like to see and catch up all the time to my friends' post on IG stories. I feel like I pressure myself after I see those contents – they post about getting 'A' grade or getting a high score on the exam. This makes me so stressful. I blame myself "what am I doing right now?", "why am I not reading a book to get that good grade?* – **Amp, Lower Class (LC)**

> *I used to have a problem with my peer group. I do not talk with them for a while about the exam. They said they cannot handle with the bad feeling when they see my post. I don't know why. I just posted when I read a book in the library – it is just my daily lifestyle. I always update myself what I am doing right now on the IG Stories. But they think I put a pressure on them when I post about my reading. They feel bad to me that I do not ask them to join reading together – it is like we are competitive. They feel disappointed when they get a lower score than me. This is so bad. So, I think that IG is a comparative space about your abilities with your friends. We normally evaluate our skills, performances, and progress with others to know "which level we are". Sometimes, this makes me upset to this.* – **Fah, Middle Class (MC)**

Following these, it can be concluded that social media can increase horizontal comparison among peers, intimate friends, and community members who have a similar background in terms of education, age, character, and common interests. Regardless of social class, the data shows that most participants significantly measure their abilities, traits, and attitudes against those of their peers who are at the same level. This is because they feel more relatable when comparing themselves to classmates or university peers. The horizontal comparison process can be linked to the social-psychological tradition concerning the need for affiliation (Murray, 1938 cited in Costa & McCrae, 1988). This suggests that participants' horizontal comparison is driven by the importance of perceived belongingness, closeness, and relatedness with similar others. Therefore, comparing themselves with similar others is one of the most beneficial strategies for teens to evaluate their competence and motivate their self-development.

Specifically, 3 out of 5 LC participants **(Noey, Nan, and Aey),** 4 out of 5 MC participants **(Ying, Noon, Fah, and Bambam),** and 5 out of 5 UC participants **(Nannie, Toptap, Bomb, Pancake, and Run)** assert that assessing their knowledge, abilities, and competencies with their friends helps them find their current skill levels. They can understand the benchmark among peer groups, similar to how we use benchmarking in marketing and brand strategies. According to Festinger (1954), people rely on comparisons with others to accurately assess their own abilities, traits, and attitudes. Furthermore, the insight of data demonstrates that instances of upward and downward comparisons are notably scarce among the participants. This scarcity stems from the perception that upward comparisons, such as measuring oneself against celebrities, macro influencers, or thought leaders, are deemed excessively remote and impractical. Similarly, downward comparisons are viewed as too disconnected from their personal circumstances. Consequently, horizontal comparisons are more probable and can serve as a motivation for enhanced performance or the advancement of their skills and talents.

If we focus more on the relationship between the horizontal comparison and the participants' social class, it can be observed that LC and MC participants are likely to have a comparison with those who

are higher successful than them because they see it as a motivation for self-achievement. For instance, **Ying** (MC) said that *"I often compare myself with people who are slightly above me but not too high…I feel annoyed and a little bit angry. If those creators have fewer followers than me, that's fine"*. In contrast, there is a limited number of upward or downward comparison by the UC participants: they mostly evaluate their lifestyles with peers in horizontal level. Hence, it could be referred that UC participants are the majority group who judge themselves with their peer groups. However, the implication of social class concern will be discussed in detail in the next themes of findings, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5, respectively.

To support the above arguments by with deeper interview data, three participant groups reveal that they use social media extensively to closely monitor others' lives and personal affairs. They indicate that closely following their friends' Stories, Reels, or TikTok videos leads them to compare their own lives with those of others. While comparisons with peers in offline settings are typically limited by intimacy and proximity, such comparisons are more pronounced in online settings due to the expansive visibility social media provides. Participants can observe the lives of hundreds or even thousands of people at once through scanning Stories, Reels, and Posts. Here are excerpts from the participants' interviews as examples:

I watch YouTube all the time to relax myself in leisure time. I think this platform is not leading to any comparison because it is one-side video content posted by the YouTuber which is not me. I do not post anything, I have nothing to post, and it is just a platform to consume a long-video content from influencers or who are far away from you. We don't know to each other. However, IG Stories has a huge impact to me. This is because there are a lot of people who close to you and try to make a comparison all the time. Many times, it makes me feel depressed. During the covid-19 situation (which may link to now), I have to study online, and all of my friends have not seen each other by face-to-face. We just meet up on social media. I know their updates through their social media profiles. I admit that I feel envy of what my friends can do. There are many

questions. Why can they go out? why can they get a beauty picture? Why can I do nothing? We are in the same faculty, same place, and same knowledge level – we have lots of common things, but why we are so different from what I see on social media. – **Manow, Lower class (LC)**

I post and see others' post a lot on Instagram. I think Instagram is the most comparative platform among our generation right now because its features allow us to temporary go viral, popular, and be belonging to our community. I would say Instagram is a space that you can build your own images that you want which do not align with your own real life - who knows and cares? – **Gift, Middle class (MC)**

I admit that I post a lot of contents on IG and TikTok. It could be said that I am one of the content creators among my classmates. I do love to post and update my status, my daily life, and my daily routine. I think that IG and TikTok are the most active platform that you can connect with your friends very well because these have lots of creative features with Like, Comment, and Share buttons, Stories, Duet, Dance Challenge, Live, and many things that promote expression and build connection. Importantly, you can adjust a privacy – no need to concern about your parent's surveillance. So, I would say we can use social media creatively and safely, if we have a media literacy. This can help to minimise negative consequences. – **Pancake, Upper class (UC)**

As evidenced by excerpts from participants, social media amplify comparisons among peers, close friends, and the community, leading to negative emotions, stress, and mild to moderate depression. The focus often revolves around academic achievements, career prospects, participation in university clubs, popularity, and aspirational lifestyles, such as socialising with friends, going to clubs, and posting pictures

from restaurants and cafes, against which individuals frequently measure and compare themselves with others.

To connect this argument with a prominent theory in motivational self-regulation from psychological literature, Heckhausen et al. (2010) propose the Motivational Theory of Life-Span Development, which elucidates how individuals manage their motivation in response to situational challenges and opportunities through three primary strategies: goal engagement, goal disengagement, and self-protective strategies. I posit that the horizontal comparisons observed among participants relate to self-protective strategies, wherein individuals cognitively reinterpret their abilities, personalities, and qualifications to conserve psychological resources for personal and academic growth. Thus, comparing oneself with peers appears to be a beneficial strategy among teens to reflect on their own identities and encourage self-enhancement. Simultaneously, upward and downward comparisons can be linked to goal engagement and goal disengagement, respectively, in motivational self-regulation strategies, as suggested by Hall & Goetz (2013), and Hall (2008). Upward comparisons typically involve goal engagement, where students and teens invest effort, seek assistance, and reduce distractions to achieve their life goals (Klassen & Chiu, 2011). Conversely, downward comparison may relate to goal disengagement or lowering expectations, which may not offer emotional or motivational benefits for personal development. Based on the evidence, I observe that upward comparisons are normally to be happened among participants, as they often emulate habits, routines, and lifestyles of macro influencers or popular celebrities who appear more successful in terms of financial status, social standing, reputation, and acceptance. While such comparisons can trigger dissatisfaction or envy, they also serve as inspiration and motivation for personal development, like to have a 'role model'. Consequently, the dissatisfaction stemming from upward comparisons does not significantly impact mental health negatively, as these comparisons foster goal engagement through effort and seeking support, which are beneficial for personal and professional motivation.

To sum up, as articulated by the participants, social media heightens horizontal comparisons among peers and close friends in educational settings, leading to negative impacts on self-esteem, stress, and mild to moderate depression. Comparing oneself with others is an inherent aspect of human socialization, often serving as a catalyst for self-development and achievement. Furthermore, the research underscores the significance of social class and individual differences in social comparison processes. Subsequent sections will delve into discussions based on participants' social classes: LC, MC, and UC, exploring how each class schema influences social comparisons and how their social capital shapes such comparisons.

5.3 The Influence of Poverty and Family Issues on Horizontal Comparisons in LC's Profiles

"I'm not popular, I'm nobody, and nobody knows me online."

Based on the key theme of section 5.2, it is proposed that social media can lead to horizontal comparisons among peers, close friends, and communities, which can adversely affect self-esteem, increase stress, and cause minor to moderate depression across all participant groups. In line with this argument, I suggest that LC participants seem to be the majority group affected by these horizontal comparisons. This leads to feelings of not belonging in the community, lowered self-esteem, and minor to moderate depression. Importantly, issues such as poverty, family problems, and future concerns, including finding a job and financial stability, remain underlying concerns that can cause stress and minor to moderate depression, particularly in the LC group. Furthermore, cross-referencing the questionnaire data shown in Table 1, LC participants primarily use YouTube to watch long video content from YouTubers and other influencers for relaxation purposes. At the same time, they use Instagram (ranked second) mainly to catch up on their friends' activities, both personal and school related. It appears that they have limited posts about their own stories, content, pictures, or videos, indicating that their profiles are likely less visible and less popular. They tend to use social media to view others' profiles rather than share their own. For example,

> *I use YouTube and Instagram to just watch other people lives, not to post for myself. I follow my favorite YouTubers or Influencers to inspire myself, i.e., @Peanut Butter or @Flukkaron channel. I use them as life goals or references when I want to do something. For example, @Peanut Butter is good channel to improve your learning outcome, like a content of "study's tips" or "how to organize your work desk". I think I don't post a lot about myself on my IG's profiles because I have nothing to post. My life is so boring. I'm not popular, I'm nobody, and nobody knows me online.* — **Amp, Lower class (LC)**

> *I'm not the one who catch up social trends. I feel not being a part of my friends. Most of the people think that I quite strange. I don't wear a trendy dress, speak a trendy*

word, or slang, or even join a popular club or activity in university. I don't feel like I belong to the faculty community. I try to get an academic contest in university. I feel stressful and disappointed because of other people's success. I'm not received a prize since I think I'm not a teacher's favorite. Is it fair? People are still biased. When they post their achievements on social media, it annoys me more." – **Aey, Lower class (LC)**

I think I have a lot of things to do in the day. I need to do the part-time job to help my mom save the money. My mom and I don't have a good relationship. I don't like my mom because she cannot take care of me well. I think she wasn't ready to have a family. She doesn't have enough time to talk to me, or even take me to go out for dinner, department store, and many places that other moms can do. Dad is separated from mom; they don't live together anymore. Our family's income is getting worse. We don't have enough money to pay my tuition fee. I need to request a scholarship throughout my study in the university. Honestly, I have nothing to compare with my friends. I have no friends to hang out with. I have no money to even join the faculty's activities. This makes me lose the opportunity to make a friend, find a connection, get an internship, or maybe find a stable job in the future. These make me so sad when I see my friends get all of that. – **Noey, Lower class (LC)**

Topics or issues that make me feel sad or envious when comparing to others are 'not' about beauty, rich, or lifestyle – like going out for a luxurious restaurant and café, having a condominium or beautiful house in city, going to a concert in oversea, or getting more popular on social media. But the topics that cause me to feel sad all of time are very basic – for examples, having enough money to go to study at school, having a good time for family dinner, and I want to have close friends that we can really join, and they are not looking down on me. – **Manow, Lower class (LC)**

The excerpts above highlight that LC participants face challenges related to their family's income, financial stability, parents' relationships, and concerns about their future, such as securing an internship and finding a stable job. These comparisons with their school peers often lead to feelings of resentment, sadness, envy, and a sense of inadequacy and bad luck – emotions stemming from horizontal comparisons among peers. Specifically, these participants feel disconnected from their community, resulting in a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. This is clearly illustrated by **Amp**, who mentioned, *"I have nothing to post. My life is so boring. I'm not popular, I'm nobody, and nobody knows me online."* Similarly, **Aey** expressed, *"I don't feel like I belong to the faculty community...I think I'm not a teacher's favorite...is it fair? People are still biased. When they post their achievements on social media, it annoys me more."* **Noey** added, *"Honestly, I have nothing to compare with my friends. I have no friends to hang out with. I have no money to even join the faculty's activities."* Additionally, interview data reveals that family relationships significantly impact LC participants' feelings when comparing themselves to their peers. For example, **Noey** said, *"My mom and I don't have a good relationship. I don't like my mom because she cannot take care of me well. I think she wasn't ready to have a family...Dad is separated from mom; they don't live together anymore."* **Manow** noted that social trends and luxurious lifestyles do not primarily cause their feelings of sadness or envy when comparing themselves to friends. Instead, it is the lack of a good family relationship, close friends, affordable housing, and sufficient income for daily living that are essential for their happiness. Thus, the above evidence underscores how LC participants feel when comparing themselves with their school and university communities, with most negative emotions linked to domestic issues like family income, parental surveillance, and parents' love and care within their LC family context.

Regarding the capital and other cultural resources within their class, the interview data indicates that LC participants possess limited amounts of three types of capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. However, bonding capital is the most evident, yet still insufficient, resource they have. Literature review

defines bonding capital as the connection and interaction among members of a homogenous community, such as family members, friends, and neighbors. It represents strong ties among individuals sharing the same social background, grounded in specific forms of trust and reciprocity (Woolcock, 2001). Consequently, this capital is often used to assess the resources within homogenous social networks, including wealth, status, and knowledge. According to the data, four out of five LC participants report lacking such resources: their homogenous social networks do not adequately support or enhance their wealth, status, and knowledge. This limitation is reflected in the low levels of 'trust' and 'reciprocity' within their families, relatives, communities, and social networks at school or university. For example, the interview data show that:

My mother wants me to be a government officer. She thinks that it is a stable job to work at a civil service. But we don't know anyone there. I think to apply that kind of job needs somebody to know to bring us getting that job. Unfortunately, I have no friends, my mom doesn't know anyone on that site. My family members are unemployed – so we don't know how to apply and how to get that job. –**Nan, Lower class (LC)**

I think to be an intern needs some personal connection. The senior in the company who might be graduated in the same school or university could be the one who bring you to the company. However, I'm quite introvert and don't know anyone there. I am so sad to myself. I have no one to consult with. My mom knows nothing about this. She is just a housekeeper; she doesn't know anything. – **Aey, Lower class (LC)**

I have no experiences for any internships, student exchanges, or any field trips since I was young until now. I think my friends have been to many places – like go to school's camp, or a study trip outside of the school – like overseas, Taiwan,

Japan, or Korea. I have no chance to go there. My family cannot support these things for me - this is so poor. My parents never provide any opportunities for me. If I want to get something – like planning to get an internship or finding a job, I need to do it by myself. My life is so hard – I need to help myself everything – not like other kids. In the morning, I need to take care of my younger brother – cooking, washing clothes, and then I travel to the university, then I do the part-time job as well. I take care all my expense by my own. – **Manow, Lower class (LC)**

My dad is just a truck driver. His education is below than high school. I don't think he can advise me about learning, getting a good job, or any other social skills and opportunities – like other parents normally can do. He just said he didn't want me to be an unskilled person like him – so that he just encouraged me to finish a high education in university and hoped me to get a good salary in the future. He also said that I needed to be a leader to take care the family – like a cost for living, food, home, and healthcare for my mom and dad. This is terrible headache. Why I need to do these by my own? – **Amp, Lower class (LC)**

As previously discussed, bonding capital involves the connection and interaction among members of a homogenous community, including family members, friends, and neighbors. Four out of five LC participants (i.e., **Nan, Aey, Manow,** and **Amp**) indicate that their family members and relatives have limited connections and interactions, which do not facilitate the sharing of trust, reciprocity, and benefits. This is evidenced by their statements. For example, **Nan** noted, *"I have no friends, my mom doesn't know anyone on that site. My family members are unemployed – so we don't know how to apply and how to get that job."* **Aey** stated, *"My mom knows nothing about this. She is just a housekeeper; she doesn't know anything."* **Manow** remarked, *"My family cannot support these things for me - this is so poor. My parents never provide any opportunities for me."* Similarly, **Amp**

commented, *"My dad is just a truck driver…I don't think he can advise me about learning, getting a good job, or any other social skills and opportunities."*

As initially explained by Bourdieu (1983), capital encompasses various types of resources, including economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and educational exchanges passed from one generation to the next. Similarly, scholars like Putnam et al. (2004) and Woolcock (2001) describe social capital as a construct cultivated through resources derived from participation in collective activities within social networks, fostering commitment and trust among individuals. When applying these ideas to the research participants, it is evident that all participant groups may possess different types of capital based on their family's resources, such as education, wealth, occupation, abilities, skills, language, taste, and lifestyle. However, LC participants seem to lack the durable networks or potential resources necessary for achieving mutually beneficial outcomes. Most of them noted that their parents and family members have limited capacities, skills, and cultural resources to secure their benefits. This highlights their limited membership and position within social networks, which are confined to working-class communities with unskilled laborers or unemployed individuals. Consequently, their bonding capital in family settings and social backgrounds does not offer inherent advantages, unlike other participant groups who enjoy academic success, financial stability, well-being, and overall life satisfaction. Even though some LC participants might have strong ties with their parents, such as **Amp**, who mentioned, *"he just encouraged me to finish higher education in university and hoped I would get a good salary in the future,"* this still reinforces feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and dissatisfaction. As one participant noted, *"I needed to be a leader to take care of the family – covering living expenses, food, home, and healthcare for my mom and dad. This is a terrible headache. Why do I need to handle these on my own?"*

In conclusion, the bonding capital within LC homogenous communities and social networks shows that they continue to struggle with family relationships and domestic issues, including familial

concerns, economic problems, parental skills, and capacities, as well as other cultural attributes. Their challenges arise from a lack of cultural resources transmitted from their parents to their generation, leading to negative impacts on their emotions, self-esteem, and well-being. I argue that these insufficient resources, especially in social networks and connections among the LC group, are the primary factors they use for comparison with their peers. For instance, they do not achieve educationally like other children, lack opportunities and experiences in social activities such as traveling abroad, have parents without the skills and capacities of other parents, and receive inadequate support from family members and relatives. These factors likely lead to negative feelings, low self-esteem, and minor to moderate depression when they compare themselves to their friends at school and university.

5.4 Competitive Dynamics of Trendiness, Fame, and Popularity on Social Media Among MC Participants and Its Impact on Horizontal Comparison

"I feel bad if I don't meet those standards. On social media, my friends and I are very competitive. I need to be chic, stylish, and cool all the time on IG. I hate this but never stop."

While the main issue for the LC participants is the lack of bonding capital in their social networks and interactions among family members and relatives, which leads to feelings of sadness and dissatisfaction with their lives, the situation is different for the MC participants. They tend to possess bonding capital and potentially engage in bridging capital, connecting with individuals who have broader social and economic status. Specifically, as discussed in theme 5.3, LC participants struggle with economic and family problems due to insufficient bonding capital within their homogenous networks. In contrast, MC participants (and UC participants, who will be discussed in the next theme) possess bonding capital and elevate it to bridging capital, providing them with advantages, trust, and reciprocity among their family members, relatives, and communities.

When LC participants compare themselves horizontally regarding family and economic problems, and future concerns such as finding a job and financial stability, MC participants compare themselves to their peers not only about economic or financial issues but also about popularity and reputation. Interview data indicate that MC participants use social media extensively as competitive spaces for academic contests, beauty contests, and self and identity performances, aiming to be trendy, stylish, and outstanding. As discussed previously in theme 5.2, **Fah (MC)** said, *"IG is a comparative space about your abilities with your friends. We normally evaluate our skills, performances, and progress with others."* To support this idea, the following are examples of interview excerpts provided by the MC participants:

> *Thai people are very strict to beauty standards, particularly, we are very crazy in Korean beauty trends – for examples, a beautiful face should be like Jisoo from Blackpink, a beautiful body shape should be like Lisa, or having a fierce face and chic dress style is Jennie (like their song 'Pretty savage'). I think all these shape us to be like that. I feel bad if I don't meet those standards. On social media, my friends and I are very competitive. I need to be chic, stylish, and cool all the time on IG. I hate this but never stop.* – **Ying, Middle class (MC)**

As Thais, we are talking about other people's lives – for instances, what job you want to do? How much salary you get? When you will be married? When will you buy a house? When will you have a baby? These questions have been asked by parents, adults, and many people surrounding you. I think it's a kind of pressure that we need to get those things when are growing up. Not only about these basic needs (i.e., career, salary, money, house, marry, etc.) but also other self and identity issues related to your lifestyles – for examples, in my generation, we take a picture before eating to show the luxurious lifestyle, and the camera's point of views should not be too long or too close up – because it needs to show a hidden identity (i.e., to show a back side of your body – or show a half portion of your face – or to blur your boyfriends or girlfriend's faces). You know, all of these are the social trends that are made and remade by social media. I've heard one quote "เทสที่สร้าง ร่างที่เป็น", means that "tastes are what your build, but your inner self is who you are". I think this quote perfectly reflect people on social media. And those tastes are fake because we cannot go to a beautiful restaurant to eat like that all of time. We are not getting a beautiful dress or having a good time with boyfriends like that all of time. We can mad and we have some upset feeling, but we do not post these on our social media profiles. – **Noon, Middle class (MC)**

I am very active on social media. I check and follow news and trends all the time. I know these make me feel overwhelmed and abnormal because social media makes me a perfectionist. Posts are too perfect – like a beautiful angle of the camera, a professional editing of the picture and video. IG's Reels emphasise a beauty of being women, i.e., hairstyle, dress, make-up. It sells 'vibes' of being beautiful, fierce, and cool girls. If I use social media more than an average of myself (as I record how many hours I

use on my phone), I will stop use it. They affect my emotions and sleep. And now I see many trends that try to stop using a filter. I see many friends try to make a post more organic". – **Fah, Middle class (MC)**

FOMO affects me a lot. I constantly update trends and follow many female influencers. For those who are micro influencers, and they have same age and same education as me. It makes me feel bad about myself because I wonder why I don't have the reputation, followers, and popularity like they have. I have one example that are close to myself, @XJinnys, she has about 90K followers and a rich family background! Her picture posted and lifestyles are quite hip and cool. I know her because she is in the same school to me when I in high school, but we are just separate in the uni. Every time I see her posts I feel bad since we know each other, and we grow up together. I understand that "วาสนามันแข่งไม่ได้" – so I need to do a social media detox since I don't want to see that contents and pictures from this friend. – **Bambam, Middle class (MC)**

Junji and Gypso, Thai female actresses, make me feel jealous. I don't want to see their posts. Junji is a Thai idol, artist, and celebrity with exceptional dancing skills, and she gets a lot of engagement when she dances on TikTok or IG Reels. Her dress, facial expressions, and movements are so sexy and attractive – she looks beautiful, chic, and fierce, with impeccable makeup and stylish outfits. Why is everything in her posts so perfect? I like following her because she has something in common with me – I enjoy dancing, and my style is quite street and pop – but I know that I start to compare myself to her. Similarly, Gypso has very good abs, a perfect body shape, and is very healthy. I think she is a role model for going to the gym and taking care of our bodies. But sometimes, these portrayals seem too perfect. Gypso captures her best angle – the one where she looks good, such as showing her abs, leg, and bust. This is unrealistic. Everybody

should not be the same. We are different. I try to ignore their posts because it makes me feel bad to myself. I think spaces on IG reinforce super perfection because a short video allows you a short time to show something – so content creators need to condense everything into one beautiful thing to engage people. Sometimes, I go to YouTube to see a long video content since it can show a more realistic thing than IG's Reels. – **Gift, Middle class (MC)**

The interview excerpts indicate that MC participants often compare themselves to their friends and online influencers with similar backgrounds in age, education, style, character, and popularity. The pressure to be cool and popular, along with the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), significantly impacts the MC participants because they frequently follow and update themselves on trends and social issues more than the LC participants. This intensifies their FOMO regarding social trends and issues on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. While LC participants focus on family and economic issues due to a lack of bonding capital, MC participants, despite having these capitals, are highly competitive in staying trendy, famous, and popular, affecting their self-esteem, self-confidence, and increasing FOMO. MC participants' statements reveal feelings of jealousy, unhappiness, and sadness when they excessively follow Instagram posts and Reels. For example, **Ying** mentioned, *"I feel bad if I don't meet those standards. On social media, my friends and I are very competitive. I need to be chic, stylish, and cool all the time on IG. I hate this but never stop."* **Fah** added, *"I know these make me feel overwhelmed and abnormal because social media makes me a perfectionist. Posts are too perfect... they affect my emotions and sleep."* Similarly, **Bambam** stated, *"FOMO affects me a lot. I constantly update trends and follow many female influencers. It makes me feel bad about myself because I wonder why I don't have their reputation, followers, and popularity... @XJinnys... She has about 90K followers and a rich family background!... Seeing her posts makes me feel bad because we grew up together. I understand 'วาสนามันแข่งไม่ได้'."* This Thai idiom, trending among young Thais, means that individuals can compete with others by their competence but cannot compete by fortune

or luck. This highlights how close peer relationships lead to horizontal comparison, exacerbated by social media, causing sadness, lowered self-esteem, and reduced happiness.

However, the MC participants seem to exhibit greater media literacy and critical thinking regarding social media use compared to other participant groups. This is evident when they recognise the negative impacts and the concept of perfectionism, relating to social issues such as beauty standards, gender values, idealised identities, and social detoxes. For example, **Ying** stated the idea that Thai people exhibit a strong commitment to beauty norms, which greatly influence how they perceive themselves. Consequently, failure to align with these ideals may result in feelings of dissatisfaction within themselves. Similarly, **Noon** expressed the perspective that there is social pressure to conform to norms and values, such as having a good job, getting married, and having children as they grow up. Additionally, the quote 'เทสที่สร้าง ร่างที่เป็น' was mentioned to highlight that posts on social media are built and rebuilt to present idealised self-images. As **Noon** stated, *"I think this quote perfectly reflects people on social media. And those tastes are fake because we cannot go to a beautiful restaurant to eat like that all the time."* Moreover, the data indicates that MC participants actively engage in circulating, analysing, critiquing, and mobilising social issues on social media. For instance, **Bambam** revealed her involvement with social campaigns like #RealSizeBeauty, created by Miss Universe Thailand 2021 Ann Anchilee Scott-Kemmis, and the Trash Me Challenge – SOS Earth campaign by Maria Lynn Ehren, Miss Universe Thailand 2017. These campaigns were primarily promoted on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. **Bambam** mentioned that she is one of the social media administrators of her faculty's Facebook page at university, aiming to raise awareness about psychology and mental health in daily life. She also creates her own profile page to share messages about social movements, her own battle with major depressive disorder (MDD), and coping strategies, such as medication, self-care routines, and recognising symptoms of major depression. **Bambam** aspires to be an online influencer who advocates for mental health awareness, providing information and tips based on her personal experiences. Similarly, **Gift** explains that she prefers to follow influencers who

are sincere and critique brand sponsors. For instance, "Ink," a well-known Thai influencer in beauty or skincare products, has a genuine character and raises awareness to not be misled by excessive advertising from brands but to focus on product ingredients or original sources instead. These examples show that MC participants critically evaluate social media content and are cautious about trusting information from creators on social media platforms, such as influencers and YouTubers. Overall, MC participants discuss how spaces on social media, particularly Instagram, create powerful values and standards. These are societal perceptions that we all understand and adhere to, such as the Korean beauty standard, which prioritises having a small v-shaped face, fair skin, symmetrical eyebrows, a slim body, and double eyelids. This idea aligns with **Ying**'s comment, *"A beautiful face should be like Jisoo from Blackpink, a beautiful body shape should be like Lisa, or having a fierce face and chic dress style is Jennie."*

At the same time, MC participants seem to be aware of FOMO, social media addiction, and its negative impacts. They particularly understand the concept of an echo chamber, where social media is a place where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own views. In addition to echo chambers, MC participants consider the affordances of social media platforms, especially Instagram's features like Reels and Stories, which can create and reinforce a sense of super beauty. As **Fah** stated, *"Posts on social media are too perfect... IG's Reels emphasise the beauty of being a woman, i.e., hairstyle, dress, make-up. It sells 'vibes' of being beautiful, fierce, and cool girls."* **Gift** added, *"Gypso captures her best angle – the one where she looks good, such as showing her abs, leg, and bust. This is unrealistic... I think spaces on IG reinforce super perfection because a short video allows you a short time to show something – so content creators need to condense everything into one beautiful thing to engage people."*

These comments from the participants demonstrate that they possess genuine criticism and media literacy regarding how social media allows for one-sided stories from creators, leading to echo chambers and FOMO symptoms. They also practice social media detoxes when they perceive negative impacts from

overose. As **Bambam** said, *"I need to do a social media detox since I don't want to see that content and pictures from this friend,"* and **Fah** added, *"If I use social media more than my average (as I record how many hours I use on my phone), I will stop using it. This is because it affects my emotion and my sleep at night."* Thus, the MC participants are the only group that is aware of and practices social detoxes compared to other groups, indicating their critical and media literacy skills to detect and protect themselves from the adverse effects of social media use.

It is found that senses of intimacy and belonging to the community are crucial for the MC participants, as they are involved with bridging capitals, which are arguably beneficial for them, their community, and their families. According to the concept of social capital, bridging capital refers to connections between individuals or groups who differ in certain socio-demographic aspects (e.g., ethnicity, culture, age) but share broadly similar social or economic statuses. This type of capital is rooted in heterogeneous networks, social trust, and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2001; van Deth & Zmerli, 2010). Many MC participants reported that their parents and family members frequently connect with people who have a broader and higher social status than themselves, benefiting both the organisation and community members. For instance, **BamBam** mentioned that her mother has a network with the Rotaract Club, an international community that brings together people aged 18 and older to exchange ideas and develop leadership and professional skills with the aim of social enterprise. *"My mom wants me to join a Rotaract club in Australia because she thinks it offers an opportunity to make connections, get a job, and earn money. She knows many people there since she has visited Australia many times for work,"* **BamBam** explained.

Similarly, **Gift** shared, *"My family background is in government service. My parents try to use their influence to help me secure a job in that sector. I know Thailand still has a patronage system, which is problematic, but it's hard to change. I don't want to work in government; I want to be a freelance*

professional in my field of study. My mom still doesn't understand this." **Noon** also discussed her family's network, stating*, "My aunt often brings friends or colleagues from her workplace to our home. She says it's a good chance to get to know each other. In the future, I might need to contact them for an internship or a job after graduation. They always say if I want a job in their company, like my aunt, they can talk to the HR department."* **Fah** mentioned, *"My family runs a small to medium-sized business selling fish. My parents work together in this business. I see my dad always building good relationships with other businesspeople, as he believes it can bring support and foster collaboration within the fish seller community in Thailand."* These examples demonstrate that the bridging capital possessed by MC participants provides access to resources, skills, knowledge, and benefits for themselves and their families, which may be accessible through both bonding and bridging capitals.

To sum up, as part of the middle-class scheme in a capitalist society, MC participants have access to certain social resources and cultural capitals, such as basic needs in livelihoods, fundamental education (from secondary school to bachelor's degree), opportunities to secure internships and work experience, chances to connect with global networks, and prospects for job applications or exchange programs. These resources are often passed down from their parents' generation. Since their parents typically hold mid-level government positions, white-collar jobs, or run small to medium-sized businesses, MC participants have the potential to acquire these resources, but not entirely. They still seem to lack linking capital, which involves connections across power or authority gradients with those significantly higher in status to access a broader range of resources and benefits. This will be further discussed in Theme 5.5 concerning UC participants.

5.5 The Toxic Trend of Posting Beautiful, Luxurious, and Elegant Lifestyles Online: UC's Continued Use as a Representation of Social Capital

"Despite knowing that our culture of elegance, luxury, modernity, and posh lifestyles on social media can be toxic, I find it hard to stop participating in it myself."

The quote above presents a key theme among UC participants, who employ social media to portray an 'elegant, luxury, modern, and posh lifestyle,' distinctly favoring horizontal comparisons. They leverage social media not only for crafting their social image but also for consolidating their social and cultural resources to benefit from familial linking capital. Data collected through interviews reveals that UC participants are notably active in showcasing beautiful, luxurious, and modern lifestyles and preferences through platforms like Instagram Stories, Reels, and TikTok short videos.

Table 1 provides an overview of their social media usage characteristics, indicating that UC participants spend the most time on social media overall (averaging 6.7 hours, compared to 4.7 hours for LC and 5.3 hours for MC). Moreover, they are the only group extensively utilising various features and functions of social media to interact with friends and communities. For instance, they engage comprehensively with Instagram features such as Stories, Reels, Polls, Filters, editing options, and Live sessions. Similarly, on TikTok, they actively participate in media creation through trends, Duets, Lives, applying effects, and filters. On one hand, these extensive uses suggest proficiency in social media curation, editing, planning, and critical thinking to strategically shape their identity and desired image. On the other hand, such intense usage can lead to heightened comparison among peers and communities, affecting mental health, family support, and media literacy.

According to the data, UC participants appear to benefit significantly from their familial linking capitals, possessing abundant resources including tangible items like money, homes, cars, iPads, and other gadgets, as well as intangible assets such as education, internship opportunities, work experience, and

opportunities for overseas exchanges. These resources support their access to various privileges, particularly in terms of technological capabilities.

Demographic insights indicate that UC participants belong to social strata characterized by high levels of education, income, and occupational status, such as senior government officials, executives in leading companies, and medium to large business owners, reflecting their affluent family backgrounds. Consequently, they possess the potential to leverage their capital through extensive networks and connections across diverse communities and scales.

As discussed, UC participants use social media to showcase their 'elegant, luxurious, and modern lifestyles,' often fostering comparisons with peers, close friends, and other communities. Numerous interview findings illustrate that these comparisons have had detrimental effects on UC participants, contributing to mental health issues such as eating disorders, anxiety, and excessive concern about body image. The following excerpts from interviews exemplify their excessive social media use and its impact on their daily lives.

> *We mostly use Instagram to share our daily routines and personal activities, such as shopping, dining out, or studying at uni. I feel the need to constantly update these to stay connected with friends. It can be overwhelming and annoying – it often feels like we're just showing off our tastes and possessions to each other. I also have childhood trauma from family issues. My parents and relatives, like uncles, aunts, and cousins, often compared me unfavorably to my older sister. They would say things like, "My skin isn't as good as my sister's," "I'm fatter than my sister," or "My sister is smarter than me". "She has better grades, she is a doctor, and she is good in sports and music." This constant comparison and pressure from adults to excel academically or pursue prestigious careers like being a doctor or scientist had a*

profound impact on me. After seeing my sister's posts on Instagram or images of female idols similar to her, I once even searched for clinics offering plastic surgery or beauty treatments like Botox, fillers, or vitamins to improve my face, skin, and body. I struggle with insecurities about my appearance, possibly because I don't fit Thailand's beauty standards. When I see my friends posting about their beautiful moments, academic achievements, or other successes, it frustrates me. I wonder why we always need to showcase these "positive and beautiful views. Despite knowing that our culture of elegance, luxury, modernity, and posh lifestyles on social media can be toxic, I find it hard to stop participating in it myself. – **Nannie, Upper class (UC)**

My friends just frew to Singapore to go to Swift's concert. They say that the ticket is so cheap, and they can fly to many countries to see favorite artists because their parents can support these. Every time I see their posts, I notice that they always wear a brand name outfit with a elegant bag, accessory, and boots – which these are very high fashion and trendy. They always search and follow trends that celebrity wear, such as @kyliejenner, @kimkardashian, or @tyla on Instagram. I think sometimes it is a little bit of pressure that I need to catch up those trends and act like my friends. Importantly, space in university is like a fashion showcase. Every time that I come to classroom, I feel like we are showing our items, like lipsticks, eyelashes, painted nails, and many beauty products. – **Toptap, Upper class (UC)**

When I have posted my pictures on IG, I'm bored and hated my face and body pictures. So, I remove it after I posted, or maybe archive it in my personal space which is just for memory to myself. I don't know why this feeling happen to me, but it is so bad. After I got so many praises from my friends' comments, for examples, "ohhh you have a beautiful long leg", or "you have a very slim body shape", I start

to feel like I'm not beautiful at that much. I think the time that I posted I am confident to myself that my face and body are nice and perfect. After that – like 2-3 days, I come back to check my pictures and I feel I am not beautiful anymore; I look fat and a have strange face and body posing. I try to answer why I feel like that. The answer inside is that I feel bored with the mood and tone of the picture – it is not cool or creative anymore, and I dissatisfied to myself, like my face, my body, my fashion. I feel like I want to upgrade it all the time. This is too tired. – **Bomb, Upper class (UC)**

I feel suffer when I come to the faculty. I cannot talk to everyone when I am freshman. I am afraid that my friends are 'displeased' with me or will not 'accept' me – if I'm not joining them a hangout. I don't feel good enough when I am with them. I put a lot of afford to socialise with them. There is one time that I start to feel I need to go to see a doctor. My friends ask me to join them go to the Emquartier. I know that it is a very luxury department store. My parents give me 2,000 baht to go this place and I think that is enough for one-day hangout. But the bill for the food is over than 2,000. It is too expensive for only one meal. I start to feel nervous and anxious. After I come back home, I cry, and there are symptoms appear that shaking hands, vomiting, and very headache. My parents bring me to see a psychiatrist, and she diagnose me "social anxiety" and I need to take a medicine. You know the symptoms are so bad: every time that I heard the word of "go to school" "got to classroom" or a sort of any "university activity" which this means I need to see my friends, I feel panic, and start to be anxious. – **Pancake, Upper class (UC)**

I used to "Like" my pictures on my IG profile. If I think that myself picture is so beautiful, I prefer to 'Like' myself. It is not strange because I love myself and I

love my appearance. I post some sexy pictures to show my body and face on OnlyFan – just for fun and just for picture posting only – not for selling anything that most of the people believe. I don't think it is false or scary to let people see your body; it is an art. From that, it makes me more confident when people come to watch, and press Like for my pictures. But, sometimes I got so many bad experiences from strangers – like sex texting or a kind of sexual harassment. I know that using the OnlyFan and many social media platforms is always double-edged sword. Overall, I think I got something good rather than bad experiences, for examples, I get some fans, people know more about me, I can display my favorite art pictures, and sometimes I get close friends from there who are now keeping in touch, talking and hang outing together. Previously, I was diagnosed a major depression disorder, but now it has changed to Bipolar. – **Run, Upper class (UC)**

Based on these interview excerpts, UC participants use social media extensively to portray elegant, luxurious, and modern lifestyles. This behavior often triggers comparisons among their peers, intimate friends at university, and community members. Issues such as depression, eating disorders, and anxiety predominantly revolve around concepts of beauty, education, personal achievement, opportunities, and experiences, which reflect the tastes and lifestyles associated with the upper class.

Comparatively, social media comparisons among UC participants appear more intense than those among MC and LC participants, influenced by societal, familial, and personal pressures. In the UC group, attributes like physical appearance, taste, and education are seen as positive markers that enhance personal and familial images. Consequently, UC participants face significant pressure to maintain and enhance their family's social and cultural standing, often resulting in negative impacts, as articulated by participants. For example, **Nannie** expressed that Thai adults always put too much pressure on their children – to achieve good grades and pursue prestigious careers like doctors or

scientists. She also said, "*after seeing my sister's posts on Instagram or images of female idols similar to her, I once even searched for clinics offering plastic surgery or beauty treatments like Botox, fillers, or vitamins to improve my face, skin, and body. I struggle with insecurities about my appearance, possibly because I don't fit Thailand's beauty standards.*" Similarly, **Toptap** noted feeling pressured to conform to trends among friends and described university as a place resembling a fashion showcase, where appearances such as lipstick, eyelashes, and beauty products are prominently displayed. **Pancake** shared concerns about meeting social expectations set by her high-achieving peers, expressing fear of rejection if she didn't join social outings. She highlighted the effort required to fit in socially, reflecting the pervasive influence of social media on maintaining connections and networks within their communities.

While social media interactions reinforce positive attributes such as elegance, poshness, modernity, and fashionability, they also exacerbate mental health issues such as eating disorders, depression, social anxiety, and low self-confidence, as evidenced by numerous participants. **Bomb,** for instance, described feeling dissatisfied with their appearance despite receiving compliments, leading to self-esteem issues and negative self-perception. **Pancake** discussed her struggles with mental health due to the pressures of social expectations at university, leading to a diagnosis of social anxiety. She described feeling overwhelmed by the high social status displayed by her peers in terms of appearance, lifestyle, and daily management. **Run,** who has been diagnosed with major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder, expressed confidence in posting attractive photos on platforms like OnlyFans but acknowledged the negative impact of seeking validation through likes and comments. This behavior has contributed to mood swings and exacerbated her mental health condition. Overall, while UC participants may project confidence and success through curated social media content, the pressure to conform to societal and personal expectations exacts a toll on their mental health, manifesting in various forms of psychological distress and emotional vulnerability.

In conclusion, although UC participants use social media to maintain connections and networks, this can lead to horizontal comparisons regarding beauty, trends, intelligence, and achievements in life, education, and career to gain prestige. As previously discussed, the linking capital possessed by UC participants provides access to a wide range of physical and non-physical support from networks connecting communities, NGOs, and state institutions. According to Pelling & High (2005), linking capital involves relationships that cut across power or authority gradients, offering communities financial, technical, informational, and logistical support that cannot be sourced internally. This support plays a crucial role in securing long-term investments necessary for rebuilding social, economic, and physical infrastructure post-disaster (Marin et al., 2015). Given this context, UC participants can be seen as part of the capitalist class, owning factories, land, manpower, authorities, and other social and cultural resources such as knowledge, skills, and creativity. They connect their linking capital with a wide range of communities, including politicians, high-level government officials, advisory-level executives, and global business experts. This extensive network allows them to gather resources and connections, often showcased on social media among their community members, including school peers, parents' friends, relatives, and other class members. Therefore, linking capital in UC communities relates to the pressure they place on themselves to retain benefits and access resources. This is often displayed through social media posts about their personal lifestyles, tastes, and locations, such as attending Swift's concerts, visiting luxury cafes, restaurants, and department stores, and traveling abroad for exchanges and studies.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Competition in Beauty Standards, Finances, Competencies, Academic Contests, Lifestyles, as well as Life Chances on Social Media Among All Classes of Participants

According to the research question on how social media influences social comparison among Thai young adults, Chapter 6 aims to discuss how social media triggers social comparison across all participants classes, which section 6.1 will synthesise reviewed literature, three theoretical frameworks, and research findings from Chapter 5. Then, sections 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 will delve deeper into how social class and capital among participants relate significantly to their online comparisons and how they manage them. Conceptualised by class and capital frameworks, these sections 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 will discuss how family income, education, and occupation shape the social capital of children, influencing their social comparisons on social media. Lastly, section 6.5 is the conclusion to show the overview of research findings and discussion in further.

Social comparison, as defined in the literature, involves the process of evaluating oneself in relation to others, a universal human cognition (Wood, 1996). Festinger (1954) categorizes social comparison into upward and downward comparisons, with many variations in between. Previous studies debate whether social media prompts social comparison, either upward or downward, and its potential impact on the mental health and well-being of young users. However, gaps remain in understanding how social media specifically drives social comparison among Thai youth across different social classes, as revealed by research findings.

To address these gaps, the present study suggests that competitive displays on social media – focused on beauty standards, financial status, competencies, academic achievements, tastes, lifestyles, and life opportunities – are prevalent among all participant classes. Qualitative data indicates that higher social media usage among participants correlates with increased pressure for horizontal comparisons among peers

and intimate circles online. As shown in Table 1, UC and MC participants (ranking first and second, respectively) exhibit significantly higher social media usage (average 6.7 hours for UC and 5.3 hours for MC), utilising a wide array of popular features such as Instagram's Stories, Reels, and TikTok's Live and Dance Challenges. These intense engagements likely stimulate comparisons with peers, as discussed. Conversely, LC participants demonstrate lower social media usage compared to the other groups, potentially shielding them from judging others' lives and personal matters. However, they face fundamental challenges stemming from familial, economic, and relational issues, likely due to their limited social capital and cultural resources. Consequently, feelings of oppression, insecurity, and dissatisfaction with life may underlie horizontal comparisons related to quality of life, well-being, income, and future careers. This lack of resources among LC individuals contributes to diminished self-esteem and motivation for self-improvement, as evidenced by emotional expressions of hopelessness.

Scholars have debated the positive and negative outcomes of upward, downward, and horizontal comparisons. For instances, while upward comparisons can motivate individuals to emulate successful role models and improve themselves, they may also lead to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Lockwood et al., 2002). Conversely, downward comparisons are viewed as enhancing subjective well-being and self-esteem by highlighting one's relative advantage over others, although they too can have negative effects under certain circumstances (Hakmiller, 1966; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981). At the same time, horizontal comparisons, which involve comparing oneself with similar others, have been linked to psychological benefits such as improved academic performance and social support, though they can also provoke jealousy and discouragement (Freema et al., 2007; Van Ryzin et al., 2009).

As such, empirical findings to date on the psychological benefits of those comparisons vary and require further investigation, particularly within the context of Thai young adults who use social media extensively in their daily lives. Additionally, the extent to which the participants' class and capital relate to how they strategically compare themselves with similar others on social media has yet to be examined.

Next, I will discuss two strands of how three classes of participants strategically compare themselves horizontally with their peers in response to 'beauty, talents, skills, and lifestyle' in more detail.

Firstly, I agree that upward, downward, and horizontal comparisons can lead to a wide range of effects, from positive to negative, as discussed by previous scholars. Previous empirical research suggests that social media causes upward comparisons, which are problematic for users' self-esteem as they compare themselves to those who are better off (Wenninger et al., 2021; Meier et al., 2020). This aligns with the present research findings where LC and MC participants often compare themselves with more successful individuals, using positive traits from 'role models' to improve their beauty, academics, and social skills. In contrast, UC participants primarily engage in horizontal comparisons, judging themselves against peers on matters of elegant beauty, luxurious lifestyles, and social images to maintain their family's bridging capital and cultural resources, such as education, competencies, and life chances.

To illustrate LC and MC participants' upward comparisons, **Amp (LC)** said, *"I follow my favorite YouTubers or Influencers like @Peanut Butter or @Flukkaron channel to inspire myself. I use them as life goals or references when I want to do something... @Peanut Butter has great content for improving study outcomes, like study tips or how to organize your work desk."* Similarly, **Ying (MC)** mentioned, *"I am a content creator on IG...I compare myself with people slightly better than me. If they have higher engagement, likes, or comments, I feel bad about myself... But I use this comparison as positive energy. They can be role models that I need to follow."* These perspectives imply that while upward comparisons can induce negative emotions like sadness and envy, they also offer positive characteristics from role models to boost self-motivation for improving talents and abilities.

Since previous research indicates that social media causes upward comparisons detrimental to users' self-esteem, I propose that social media fosters a wide spectrum of comparisons. According to the data, participants tend to engage more in horizontal comparisons than upward or downward ones. Previous

scholars link horizontal comparisons to a sense of belongingness and closeness with similar others, which can lead to positive outcomes like academic success and enhanced social and cultural skills (e.g., relationships, teamwork, communication). However, they can also cause negative feelings of discouragement or being overwhelmed when gaps in potentials and abilities are perceived. Thus, I argue that beauty standards, finances, competencies, academic contests, tastes, lifestyles, and life chances are competitive on social media across all classes. Horizontal comparisons among the three groups of participants are highly related to issues of beauty and socio-economic matters, reflecting their social and cultural capitals, such as interaction, collaboration, and networking skills.

Therefore, it can be concluded that while various types of comparisons occur online, horizontal comparison is the most challenging among the research participants due to their need for belongingness, closeness, and affiliation. Upward and downward comparisons are rare and often perceived as too distant or unrealistic to significantly affect the participants. The lack of a personal connection with macro influencers or celebrities means these types of comparisons do not typically impact their mental health. The wide gap in status makes upward or downward comparisons less likely to affect their well-being compared to horizontal comparisons.

This argument is supported by scholars who suggest that comparisons are most impactful when the target is relevant or similar to oneself. Gilbert et al. (1995) explain that comparisons with non-relevant targets are less diagnostic. Research shows that people tend to compare themselves with those who outperform them, leading to lowered self-evaluations, envy, and negative emotions. Conversely, comparisons with those who are worse off can boost self-esteem (Gerber et al., 2018). Recent studies indicate that social media users present a positively biased version of themselves, making upward comparisons more frequent and harmful (Schreurs et al., 2021). This aligns with the present research findings, which show that increased social media use across all participant classes leads to more comparisons due to features like photo filters and profile editing tools. These tools facilitate various forms

of self-presentation, such as posting pictures, videos, statuses, emojis, and stickers, which can provoke social

comparisons. Consequently, feelings of envy from excessive social media use can impair self-esteem and

well-being, as argued by scholars like Crusius et al. (2020) and Wenninger et al. (2021). Therefore, the way

participants use social media often leads to horizontal comparisons, causing issues such as low self-esteem,

insecurity, social anxiety, and depression. These issues manifest in symptoms like feelings of inadequacy,

unstable relationships, impulsive behaviors, and related mental health problems such as narcissism,

paranoia, and addictive or dependent personalities. The next strand will discuss in detail how participants'

social class and capital influence these horizontal comparisons.

Secondly, addressing the research gap, I propose that users' social class and capital, as well as their

agency and discourse, serve as the foundation for how they engage in horizontal comparisons on social

media. To revisit the concepts and theories of social class and capital, the concept of social class has been

extensively discussed, beginning with traditional Marxist theory. Marx (1867) defines class as a social category

for individuals or groups sharing similar behaviors, characteristics, and lifestyles. While class is often

discussed in terms of economic and resource opportunities, such as income, property, and assets (Weber,

1947, 1978), Marx further distinguishes classes based on ownership of the "means of production" and control

over others' "labor power." He stated, "society as a whole is increasingly splitting into two great hostile

camps, two great classes facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat" (p. 29). Applying this to the

participants, I categorised them into Lower Class (LC), Middle Class (MC), and Upper Class (UC) following

Marx's, Bourdieu's, and Goldthorpe's class schemes – as explained by chapter 4.

In connecting social class with social capital, Bourdieu (1983) introduced social capital as a network

of relationships that individuals derive from participation in collective activities. He defines social capital as

"the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or

less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 19). Various forms of capital,

such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, are widely recognized (Putnam et al., 1994; Woolcock,

2001). Social capital is understood as the strength and density of ties between individuals, encompassing trust, reciprocity, and shared norms (Putnam et al., 2004). This concept links to how each class of participants engages in horizontal comparisons on social media, influenced by their family's social class and capital.

Furthermore, studies by Samra et al. (2022) suggest that social comparison is key to understanding the relationship between social media use and well-being. Verduyn et al. (2022) and Kross et al. (2013) found that passive social media users engage heavily in social comparisons, negatively impacting their well-being. Social media can fulfill fundamental human needs for social connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). While some research argues that social media positively impacts well-being by allowing freedom of expression and interaction, others highlight the negative effects due to social comparisons online (Krasnova et al., 2013; Krause et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2020). Given the research gap, this paper aims to shed light on the relationship between social class, social capital, and social comparison on social media within Thai dominant culture. I would like to argue that there is still a room for nuanced lens showing that users can be both affected positive and negative impacts from the comparison. It is not clear-cut that social media use is harmful to self-esteem or well-being. Rather, social media use behaviors, social class and capital, and individual agency and discourse interact to influence social comparisons. To explain this, LC participants' comparisons regarding economic stability, family relationships, and other issues reflect a lack of social and cultural capital from family resources. In contrast, MC participants, with more bridging capital, are more connected with wider social networks, keeping them updated with social trends and issues – as demonstrated evidently by the data of 'FOMO' symptoms in the MC group. UC participants, with substantial linking capital from family resources, compare themselves with peers of similar social status, often leading to radical mental health issues such as eating disorders and addiction to plastic surgery. By showing elegant, luxury, and modern lifestyles on social media, the UC participants receive opportunity and realise their potentials through their family's class and capital, such as parent's wealth, education,

and social and job status. Thus, as Bourdieu (1984) suggests that social capital encompasses individuals' ability to access resources within their social networks, UC participants utilise their social and cultural resources, derived from family and state institutions, to benefit their lives. The following sections 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 will discuss each participant group in relation to bonding, bridging, and linking capital, specifically.

6.2 The Impact of Bonding Capital on Social Comparison among LC Participants on Social Media

This section focuses on the relationship between bonding capital and social comparison among LC participants on social media. According to the research findings, 'financial problems' and 'family support' are the primary comparison issues for LC participants due to their limited social and cultural resources within bonding capital. Bonding capital refers to the connections and interactions among individuals within a homogeneous community, such as family members, friends, and neighbors. This type of capital relies on specific forms of trust and reciprocity, as outlined by Woolcock (2001). Known as 'strong ties,' this form of capital is crucial in helping individuals rebuild and secure sources of income, such as sharing production resources or housing livestock on nearby farms. Consequently, bonding capital often serves as an indicator of the assets within similar social circles, including wealth, status, and expertise.

Given this explanation, LC participants appear to possess bonding capital with limited benefits. Their opportunities to acquire additional capital, particularly bridging or connecting capital, are constrained compared to other participant groups. This restriction suggests that LC participants are likely to be oppressed by the unequal distribution of resources controlled by the ruling class, reflecting ongoing social class tension in Thai society. Thus, social class significantly impacts the everyday lives of LC participants, particularly concerning self and identity negotiation. This, in turn, influences how they compare their lives in terms of financial status, family support, life opportunities, and quality of life with their peers on a horizontal level. In other words, I suggest that the unsatisfied lives in LC participants group – as reflected by symptoms of minor to major depression and many mental health problems – are a resistance toward an oppressive nature of the more powerful groups in Thai society.

According to the Marx's class theory, the LC participants appear to be defined as 'proletariat' who are subordinated to the bourgeoisie. The class oppression can habitually cause a class struggle

among three groups of class among lower, middle, and upper. Due to this, it cannot be denied that the LC participants might be the group that is unconventional to social values and hegemonic norms, and they might challenge to such discursive practices enacted by the ruling class. They might feel unenjoyed with beauty fashion, dress, music, social trends, and social discourses governed by superordinate class.

I would like to emphasise a discussion from my previous research study. A recent Thai study (Chanvised, 2022) found that self-presentation and gender negotiation among Thai youth on social media imply that social class is an underlying factor related to girls' struggles with gender matters. Due to the impact of prevailing cultural and traditional female values in Thailand, young Thai women seek alternative spaces, such as social media, to resist traditional values and gain more agency in sexual expression. This argument aligns with findings from numerous Thai academics in the realms of gender, self, and identity research. Their studies indicate that Thai adolescents use social networking platforms to construct their preferred gender identities, sexual desires, and overall self-expression (Boonmongkon et al., 2008, 2013).

To establish a connection with these findings, the constraints imposed by the financial resources of LC participant families lead to a sense of despondency within this particular class category, resulting in a more pronounced vulnerability to diminished self-worth compared to other social strata. As demonstrated by the data in chapter 5, section 5.3, LC participants often express feelings of resentment or insignificant person in online, stating, *"I'm not popular, I'm nobody, and nobody knows me online."* They use social media primarily to view other profiles but feel hopeless about curating their own, as seen in their discreet and infrequent posts. Unlike other groups that share various aspects of their lifestyles, tastes, and perspectives, LC participants tend to conceal their identities and lives on social media.

In the contemporary Thai context, political and social tensions reveal a complicated hierarchy and social structure, as well as ongoing class struggles between dominant and subordinate groups (Thongsawang

et al., 2020). Thai scholars argue that the social system in Thailand creates a complex society characterized by various forms of oppression among different social classes (Keyes, 2014). This intricate hierarchy contributes significantly to social discord and class conflict, particularly in political matters from 2006 to the present (Thongsawang et al., 2020). These literary works highlight the significant influence of social class on the daily practices of individuals in Thailand, especially regarding how young adults express their identities within societal pressures and power dynamics.

However, I would like to highlight a nuanced perspective on Thai young adults' subjectivities and agency in social comparison and social media use. I suggest a complex, embodied understanding of participants' subjectivities as contingent and fluid practices of identity, rather than simply dichotomizing between agency (the power of the participants) and submission (participants as passive victims). In summary, the way LC participants evaluate and compare their lives with others on social media negatively impacts their mental well-being, leading to feelings of depression, diminished self-esteem, and various psychological difficulties. This phenomenon represents a level of intricacy related to the subjective perceptions of individuals, which is a dynamic and ambiguous process of shaping one's identity; additionally, it encompasses considerations of social status and affiliations within different social classes and networks derived from bonding capitals in the LC community, as I have argued.

6.3 The Role of Bridging capital in Shaping Social Comparison Behaviours among MC Members on social media

This section emphasizes the role of bridging capital in influencing social comparison behaviors among MC members on social media platforms. I have identified 'FOMO, being in trends and popular, and mobilising social issues' as key characteristics of MC participants due to their mobility and diversity in class and bridging capital. Bridging capital, as reviewed in the literature, refers to connections between individuals or groups with differences in socio-demographic factors such as ethnicity, culture, or age, but with a shared social or economic status. This concept is derived from diverse networks, social trust, and generalized mutual exchange (Putnam, 2001; van Deth & Zmerli, 2010). By providing access to various resources, expertise, and information that may not be accessible solely through bonding capital (Easterly et al., 2006), bridging capital is crucial for the progress of both organizations and their community members (Dowd et al., 2014).

To briefly review about middle class in Thai social system, social conflict emerged within the political arena in 2006, marking a division between The Yellow Shirts faction, mainly composed of the Bangkok middle to upper classes, the military, and the royal and bureaucratic elites, and The Red Shirts group, originating from the rural areas in the North and Northeast. The latter group consists of peasants, cosmopolitan villagers, and migrant workers with rural ancestry (Keyes, 2014). Nevertheless, a new urban middle class has arisen and grown in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, exhibiting social coherence, cultural and intellectual dominance, and rising political influence (Takashi, 2004). According to Funatsu and Kagoya (2002), this emerging urban middle class is a result of educational expansion and the progress of professional careers, contrasting with the traditional class characterised by lower education levels and occupations such as small business owners or skilled labourers. The combination of educational growth and career advancement has endowed the new urban middle class with greater cultural and intellectual

dominance than before, leading to a successful transition of this cultural hegemony into political power within society.

Described as a manifestation of the new bourgeoisie, the emerging urban middle class in Thailand coexists with the industrial working class and cosmopolitan rural population, as noted by Walker (2012). This new social class has the potential to disrupt the longstanding hierarchical structures of Thai society and obsolete feudal class distinctions, as highlighted by Keyes (2014). This disruption aligns with a growing resistance against prevailing systems, hegemonic norms, and deeply ingrained cultural values. As my previous research highlighted, although the conventional social hierarchy in Thailand is characterised by a rigid structure, there exists potential for defiance among the younger generation, providing an avenue for dynamic cultural exhibitions through which youths can articulate their individuality and sense of self, and this phenomenon has predominantly occurred within the realm of social media platforms. (Chanvised, 2022).

To integrate the concept of the newly affluent urban Thai middle class with bridging capital, I suggest that MC participants exhibit greater fluidity and dynamism in their cultural preferences. As outlined in the data analysis in chapter 5, the social media usage patterns of MC participants are instrumental in mobilising social issues, advocating for cultural diversity, and representing lifestyles and trends. This is exemplified by the statement in section 5.4, *"I feel bad if I don't meet those standards. On social media, my friends and I are very competitive. I need to be chic, stylish, and cool all the time on IG. I hate this but never stop."* MC participants show the most pronounced FOMO symptoms due to their social media consumption, as they have the opportunity to connect and interact with people of broader social and economic status, thanks to the bridging capital within their family class. Bridging capital provides them with crucial benefits within their organization and community, fostering trust and reciprocity among family members, relatives, and friends. Overall, as members of the newly emerged affluent urban Thai middle class, there may be possibilities for them to challenge and exert pressure on the boundaries of

the traditional hierarchies, as they represent a demographic that strives to achieve certain benefits connected with the historical aristocracy in Thailand. Consequently, they embody a sense of resistance and autonomy, allowing for freedom and social and cultural agency. Specifically, the Thai middle class seems like Marx's bourgeoisie definition, but some of them might have divergent social backgrounds owing to the emergence of the new urban middle class concept. I thus consider that they are the group who have diversity and mobility in lifestyles, tastes, social values, as well as their own discourses since they have mixed social origins and are in between lower to upper class scheme in society.

6.4 Linking Capital and Social Comparison in UC Participants' Social Media Behaviours

This section will delve into the connection between linking capital and social comparison among UC participants on social media. I propose that UC participants demonstrate their desire to maintain their social status by posting elegant selfies and luxurious video content on platforms like TikTok. In Chapter 5, section 5.5 provides a clear overview of UC participants, stating that *"elegance, luxury, modernity, and posh lifestyles on social media can be toxic; I find it difficult to stop participating in it myself."* They are the most active group in engaging with and responding to social media posts among their peers, leading to significant comparisons horizontally. This behavior significantly impacts their mental health, contributing to issues such as eating disorders, anxiety, and excessive body image concerns.

Importantly, I consider that displaying their luxurious lifestyle and posting selfies that highlight their faces and bodies can be interpreted as a form of narcissism. Previous research suggests that social media users often post selfies seeking admiration through 'Likes,' 'Comments,' and other forms of engagement, which can enhance feelings of pride and self-admiration (Verduyn et al., 2022; Wenninger et al., 2021). Additionally, studies indicate that when users 'Like' their own selfies or interact with their posts through comments, shares, and tags, it reflects narcissistic tendencies (Wickel, T. M., 2015; Lee & Sung, 2016). These actions serve as avenues for seeking self-admiration and boosting self-esteem. This notion is exemplified by **Run,** a UC participant who admitted, *"I used to 'Like' my own IG pictures. If I thought my picture looked great, I'd 'Like' it. It's not strange; I simply love myself and my appearance… It boosts my confidence when people view and 'Like' my pictures."* While such actions can positively influence self-development and self-esteem, excessive preoccupation with body image and constant comparison with others may lead to negative impacts, as experienced by **Run.** Her social media engagement resulted in gaining fans and friends from her OnlyFans profile and the ability to showcase her favorite artwork. However, it also led to major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder due to negative experiences.

Previous scholars have observed that while individuals on social media often post and 'Like' their own selfies and profile pictures to enhance their self-esteem, they tend to avoid engaging with similar content from close acquaintances or those with comparable backgrounds and abilities (Biolcati & Passini, S, 2018). This behavior is rooted in the potential for jealousy and its negative impact on self-esteem. Specifically, individuals tend to steer clear of comparing themselves publicly with peers who possess superior skills, especially on platforms like social media where such comparisons can lead to feelings of inferiority. Instead, they are more inclined to draw motivation from and compare themselves with renowned figures or celebrities whom they do not personally know, viewing them as role models for personal development. Conversely, if these role models fail to meet expectations, individuals may unfollow them and redirect their attention to more comparable figures.

As discussed in Chapter 5 of my research, UC participants appear to engage significantly in horizontal comparison online, influenced by their social media behavior and their possession of linking capital, which preserves their social class advantages such as educational and personal achievements, financial status, and other life successes. A recent study I conducted on social media use and depression among Thai adolescents revealed that depression is not merely an individual issue but also a social one, influenced by social pressures and structural inequalities embedded in capitalist societies (Chanvised & Wongkoblap, 2023). Specifically, the study highlighted that Thai upper-class youth exhibit the lowest levels of depression (Level 1-2) and rarely express negative emotions online, as they perceive online expression as a means of accruing social capital. This finding supports the notion that the elite class in Thailand continues to benefit from their social and cultural assets.

To sum up, my aim is to expand on the idea that UC participants from Thailand's elite class possess linking capital, which signifies connections across various spheres of influence, including interactions between societies, non-governmental organizations, and governmental bodies. While they display their 'elegant, luxury, and modern lifestyles' on social media, a behavior that fosters comparisons among peers

and can potentially impact mental well-being negatively, they also leverage familial and social connections to safeguard their standard of living and opportunities. This distinguishes their situation from that of other participant categories.

6.5 Conclusion

According to the research question, **how do social class and social capital relate to social comparison on social media among Thai young adults' users?**, the research findings found that social media fosters heightened levels of horizontal comparison among peers, close acquaintances, and the broader community, a phenomenon that has the potential to exert adverse impacts on individuals' self-esteem, stress levels, as well as precipitate minor to moderate symptoms of depression. The research data indicates that participants across all classes tend to evaluate and assess various aspects of their lives, such as their lifestyles, preferences, standard of living, skills, and potential opportunities, in relation to their peers who share similar socioeconomic backgrounds, namely income, educational attainment, personal attributes, and outlooks. The concepts of homogeneity, belongingness, and closeness play a significant role in the social-psychological tradition related to the need for affiliation in the context of young individuals engaging in horizontal comparison processes, as proposed by the theorist Murray (1938), and by Xu et al. (2014), an update study of Murray's needs. I concur with this discussion as we can see evidence from the research participants who mostly used to judge and compare themselves with their peers due to the proximity and relatedness. In other words, it can be posited that a greater level of closeness may result in an increased propensity for horizontal comparison on social media among the participants across three social strata.

In terms of comparing issues in the discussion on the differentiation of individuals' social class, research results indicate that poverty and familial challenges, including interpersonal relationships, emotional support, and economic security, predominantly trigger horizontal comparisons in the social media representations of LC participants. Specifically, they seem to be the majority group who compare their lives with their peers in issues of qualities of life, life opportunities, as well as future careers. I argue that these individuals have been impacted by horizontal comparisons, resulting in a sense of exclusion from the community, diminished self-worth, and the development of mild to moderate depression. This

phenomenon can be attributed to a lack of social capital and cultural assets, unlike the two other groups under consideration. I still maintain that they are constituted a subordinate social class reliant solely on 'bonding capital', characterized by connections within their homogeneous social circles including family, friends, and neighbours. It could be argued that this form of capital does not offer them sufficient resources in terms of life opportunities, career advancement, and overall financial security.

Next, MC participants show significant interest in aligning themselves with current trends, seeking popularity and fame on various social media platforms. The manifestation of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) symptoms within this demographic is notably intense, consequently resulting in a prevalent practice of horizontal comparison. Due to occupying an intermediate position within the societal class structure, participants in the middle class have varied social backgrounds since they straddle the continuum from the lower to the upper class in society; they thus exhibit a range of diverse, dynamic, and flexible characteristics, perceptions, and attitudes. On the one hand, as previously discussed, most of the MC participants are Thai newly urban middle class that has emerged by educational expansion and advancement of professional careers, which allow them to possess the cultural and intellectual hegemony and political power more than they could achieve in the past (Funatsu & Kagoya, 2003). Their status as part of the newly urban middle class affords them access to ample social resources and bridging capitals, thereby granting them enhanced opportunities within the strong connections of a heterogeneous network. This valuable capital enables them to actively engage in and derive satisfaction from their social circles by adhering to prevailing social norms, seeking popularity, and fostering connections with those possessing bonding capitals. On the other hand, a segment of this group remains entrenched within a socio-economic framework associated with the lower class; hence, they continue to exhibit a sense of resistance towards socioeconomic disparities and dominant ideologies imposed by the elite, as they aspire to elevate their socio-economic status. Therefore, the

strategies employed in their social media engagements can exemplify their mobilization of social issues and stimulation of non-traditional norms within society.

Lastly, the research findings found that UC participants post their *'beautiful, luxury, and elegant lifestyles'* on their social media profiles due to a purpose of keeping their capitals in their family' class and cultural resources. I argue that they own linking capitals, which are networks that provide them a wider opportunity within strong ties of broad network, social trust and reciprocity from groups of authority gradients, such as NGOs and state institutions (Putnam, 2001). This is a sort of long-term investment that can build and rebuild social, economic, and physical infrastructure among the community members to exchange a range and scale of financial, technical, informational, and logistical support to each other's (Pelling & High, 2005). Therefore, this type of linking capital has the potential to enhance the satisfaction of UC participants, encouraging them to remain engaged and entertained within their social circle by embracing current social norms, attending widely popular events, and intertwining the connections through capturing moments at coffee shops, luxurious restaurants, and trendy locations; additionally, the act of sharing this content on social media can instigate a horizontal comparison among the members of UC participants.

In conclusion, I assert that using social media can potentially lead to horizontal comparisons among peers, intimate friends, and homogenies community due to the belongness and closeness in psychological need. However, social class and capital are underlying foundation to understand how each users judge and compare themselves with others owing to the impact of types of capitals they possess: bonding, bridging, and linking. I still concur with a discussion from my recent research study noted that to express mental health issues on social media is not just an individual problem; it is a social problem due to social pressure and capitalist oppression embedded in social structural problems (Chanvised, & Wongkoblap, 2023). Consequently, to understand how and why each class of participants

post and compare themselves with their peers on social media, arguably leading to mental health problems, could be conceptualised through a more nuance lens and ambiguous concept. There is a need for the development of novel and intricate methodologies to comprehend the agency and resistance exhibited by young social media users in the realm of contemporary Thai society. A crucial aspect highlighted is the necessity to conceptualise participants' agency and resistance within the framework of social class, capital, sexuality, race, cultural distinctions, as well as their own identities and discourses. The research argument aims to propose a multifaceted representation of individuals' subjectivities that revolve around temporary and fluid identity practices, rather than simplistic dichotomies between agency (empowerment) and submission (victimization). Therefore, it is not possible to make broad generalizations about all individuals from lower class (LC), middle class (MC), and upper class (UC) backgrounds in Thai society acting in a uniform manner; there remains space for them to demonstrate nuanced practices based on their own identities.

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