Does Social Media Enhance Leon Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory?
Ashley Herceg – Ms. Naylor – Introduction to Social Psychology

What is Social Comparison Theory?
Originally developed by American Social Psychologist, Leon Festinger, Social Comparison Theory is the comparison between oneself and others that impacts one’s behavior. In 1954, he hypothesized that our need to compare ourselves to others is rooted from evolutionary times in which we have the need to protect ourselves and assess threats (Webber, 2017). Most of the time people compare themselves to individuals they most identify with. For example, sex, occupation, appearance, age, etc., these are all factors people find relationships with (Beasley, 2018).

Does Social Media Increase Social Comparison?
Whether it is to boost our self-esteem, motivate us, or look at how we “should” be living, social media makes it easy for us to compare ourselves to others. Festinger’s theory on social comparison shines through in this new era of technology. Social Media enables us to view highlight shots of everyone’s glorious lifestyles. However, what we don’t see is the behind-the-scenes action. Giving everyone else the picture-perfect life, it is easy to compare our drama-filled, tragic, and dull lives to someone who seems like they have it all. Overall, social media does play a role in Festinger’s theory. However, it is not 100% conclusive. There are many other factors that could be involved: an individual’s mood, their gender, their financial standing, etc. For most of the studies done, there has been a positive correlation, but it must be noted that the age range taken for those studies was between 16-25 (Nesi & Prinstein, 2018). Therefore, many people are unaccounted for. As more research is conducted, studies might find there to be a definite enhancement of social comparison due to social media use.

Impact on Mental Health
There is evidence that social media may have a direct a relationship with depressive symptoms. A study was done with 619 students (57% female) in the 8th – 9th grade age range. The students completed questions about their technology habits and their mental well-being. The results showed a significant correlation between technology use and depressive symptoms. However, there needs to be further investigation due to other factors that could be involved (Nesi & Prinstein, 2018).

A study was conducted connecting social comparison and Facebook usage. The results showed a positive correlation, suggesting that individuals who spent more time on Facebook had a larger habit of comparing themselves to others (Vogel et al., 2015). Another study done that used Facebook showed that women in particular, compared appearances of others, giving them negative feelings towards their face, hair, and skin (Tanney, 2015).

Reference