The International Journal of
INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Research Paper

Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Body Image: A Study on Adolescent Girls

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the influence of social media on the body image of adolescent girls. Twenty adolescent girls, aged 13-16, were selected from a school in north-west Delhi. The researcher interviewed each participant one by one to obtain their perspectives on body image. The results showed that most of the participants had a negative perception of their body image. The participants compared their appearance with celebrities and peers, reflecting feelings of body dissatisfaction. The study revealed a stark contrast between positive online interactions and real-world instances of body shaming and discrimination. The participants also pursued unhealthy eating habits, extreme diets, and hard work out routines. To empower adolescent girls, schools should conduct educational workshops and build support networks with the help of school counselors and family members to cultivate a positive body image.

Keywords: *Body Image, Body Dissatisfaction, Social Media, Adolescence*

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescence as the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, depicted by rapid physical, cognitive, and psychosocial growth. In this transitional stage, adolescents focus on forming their identities and engage in self-exploration by evaluating and comparing their attributes to others, which often leads to developing concerns about their body image (Ricciardelli & Yager, 2016).

Body image is multifaceted "encompassing one's body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors" (Cash, 2004, pp.1-2). It reflects how an individual perceives and assesses their appearance, which is either positive or negative, depending on its subjective nature. This phenomenon has been studied in different disciplines in various contexts: weight satisfaction, weight perception, body satisfaction or dissatisfaction, body concern, body schema, body percept, body shame, appearance evaluation, appearance orientation, fitness evaluation, fitness orientation, etc. (Shahi, 2019). These contexts explain the multidimensionality of the concept and shed light on the experiences of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the body image. Body Dissatisfaction is defined as the negative subjective evaluation of one's overall appearance. It includes negative thoughts and feelings that arise due to the perceived discrepancy between the ideal body image and the actual body image (Grogan, 2008; Heider, Spruyt, &

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De Houwer, 2018). Pertaining to the Indian context, adolescent girls have expressed facing dissatisfaction with their body image (David & Warrier, 2021).

The cultural representation of unrealistic beauty standards in media, showcases, attractive celebrities, and models in movies and advertisements. Adolescent girls obsess over the extreme lifestyle of celebrities, adopting harmful ways to acquire a slender physique (Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2009; Moy, 2015). Sources of media have extended from traditional to non-traditional forms, where social media and body image have been associated together (Rodgers et al., 2020). The time spent online engaging in appearance-related activities (i.e., liking and commenting on pictures, and watching videos for self-enhancement) amplifies negative self-evaluation alongside idealization and comparison with socially desirable individuals. This serves as a potential risk factor in twisting the thoughts and feelings of adolescent girls, who then become dissatisfied with their body image (lokumannage, 2020; Franchina & Coco, 2018).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

India was home to 467.0 million social media users till January 2023, of whom adolescent users aged 13–17 represented 8.8 percent of the Indian population (Kemp, 2023). According to a national survey, parents reported that 9-17-year-olds spent an average of three or more hours on social media, OTT platforms, and online games. At this tender age, they are not only consuming social media but are also becoming aggressive, impatient, depressive, and lethargic, as informed by their parents (The Times of India, 2023).

The widespread reach of social media signifies the interdependence of adolescents who seek opportunities to build connections with people sharing similar interests with them. As Erickson explained the identity vs. identity confusion stage in his psychosocial development theory (Cherry, 2022), adolescents use social media platforms to harbor ways and means that help in developing their identity and provide a safe space to express and voice their stories. Hence, social media controls the way it affects the lives of young adolescents. In the positive sense, it offers a platform for adolescents to make friends, harness creativity, and support each other from bullying. However, an adolescent can still become susceptible to feelings of lower self-esteem and negative body image over a while (Dar & Nagrath, 2022).

The prevalence of body dissatisfaction is prominent in Indian adolescent girls (Vinay, Malik, & Sachdeva, 2021; Dixit et al., 2011). Studies have reported that media, peers, and family have played significant roles in imbibing body image issues among young girls (Ganesan, Ravishankar, & Ramalingam, 2018; Vasudeva, 2021). However, in the present time, the digital world is promoting harmful content related to adolescent body image through social media platforms. Papageorgiou, Fisher, and Cross (2022) in their study of 14–17-year-old adolescent girls, found that social media exacerbates appearance-based concerns and body dissatisfaction through self-objectification and increases negative appearance comparisons among adolescent girls. The young girls became susceptible to the sexualized images of celebrities, such as Gigi Hadid and Selena Gomez, because their peers validated and appreciated them. The adolescent girls indulged in more negative appearance comparisons with their peers, who were deemed 'attractive' and 'popular'. Therefore, failure to meet the set expectations resulted in negative thoughts and feelings towards their body image.

The concept of social comparison was proposed by (Festinger, 1954). The theory posits that individuals compare and evaluate themselves with others to understand their self-growth. The comparisons usually occur concerning a specific attribute. Moreover, the theory

explains two types of comparisons: upward and downward comparisons. Upward comparisons infer comparing oneself to someone more accomplished, while downward comparisons indicate comparing oneself to someone inferior. Adolescent girls indulge in upward comparisons on social media to improve their appearance. However, the comparisons negatively affect them when the adolescent girls fail to meet the idealized appearance expectations leading to feelings of body dissatisfaction (Wood 1989; Roberts et al., 2022; Sukamto, Hamidah, & Fajrianthi, 2019). In a study, Scully, Swords, and Nixon (2020) found that social media platforms breed an appearance-based culture where adolescent girls aged 12-17, internalize thinness and engage in social comparisons with celebrities and their close friends. The study identified a serial mediation, indicating that the time spent in social comparisons and internalization of the ideal mediated the relationship between online appearance-related activity on Facebook and body dissatisfaction. The girls perceived themselves less favorably as they were involved in social comparisons, indicating body dissatisfaction.

Social media platforms always pose an opportunity for adolescent girls to hide behind the filters and Photoshop, creating a curated version of reality. However, this curation of their version of reality doesn't protect them from experiencing anxiety, and self-doubt about their appearance. Studies have prominently shown that issues of eating disorders, poor self-esteem, and disturbed mental health, occur due to the negative impact of social media on the body image of adolescent girls (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016; Choukas-Bradley, Roberts, & Maheux, 2022). Therefore, social media plays a predominant role in affecting body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls (Meir & Gray, 2014; Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021; Franchina & Coco, 2018; Burnette, Kwitowski, & Mazzeo, 2017).

Rationale of the study
Delhi is the capital of India, with a diverse culture and different societal norms, where a lot of families migrate for education (Chhabra & Bhattacharjee, 2018). In a survey on the mental health and well-being of school students by NCERT (2022), it was reported that only 44 percent of girls in private schools all over India, including Delhi, were confident about their body image, which is less than half of what is seen in other schools as per the gender difference in the survey. Going from middle to secondary standards, decreased the confidence in body image.

Adolescent girls use social media in their daily lives. Studies have shown a relationship between social media and the body image of adolescent girls (Zhu, 2023; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). However, the existing body of literature lacks sufficient exploration of the perspectives on body image among Indian adolescent girls and the influence exerted by social media. Therefore, the present research studied the experiences of adolescent girls to comprehend the role of social media and its influence on their body image.

Research Question
How does social media influence the body image of adolescent girls?

Objectives of the study
- To explore the body image perspectives of adolescent girls.
- To understand the influence of social media on the body image of adolescent girls.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design. A phenomenological approach is employed to understand the lived experiences of the participants, where the researcher focuses on a specific topic and, without making any assumptions, derives findings offering support for future research. This further helps in fostering an environment conducive to reflection, offering a systematic and logical framework for analyzing by the researcher (Moustakas,1994). Body image as a construct is subjective, and every individual has a different experience with their body image. Studying this concept from a phenomenological perspective helped in comprehending the participants' perspectives about their body image.

Participants

The participants were adolescent girls in the age group of 13–16 years, who studied at a public school in the northwest district of Delhi. The study used purposive non-probability sampling to select 20 participants, where the responses were collected from only 18 due to data saturation. Further, as per inclusion criteria, the participants who shared personal concerns about their body image with either their school counselor or class teacher were contacted to become a part of the study. Among them, those participants were selected for the study who confirmed accessing social media platforms frequently. The informed consent was taken from the participant and their parents. Additionally, prior permission from the school administration and the counselor was obtained to conduct the study on the school premises.

Instruments

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, which were 30–40 minutes long. There were pre-determined questions based on the previous literature, including open-ended exploratory questions that were asked during the interview. These questions were constructed to gain an understanding of how participants think and perceive their body image. The open-ended questions utilized in the study explored the perspectives of participants on their body image, whether they actively engaged in content related to physical appearance (i.e. following celebrities and influencers), whether they ever made comparisons to others based on physical appearance, and how people their age responded to the appearance-based content shared by the participants. These were some of the themes that were explored in interviews. Further, follow-up questions were asked to bring out the positive or negative experiences of the participants with their body image.

Data Collection

The data was collected through face-to-face interviews with each participant in the medical room. Before starting the interview, the researcher informed the participants about maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the information shared. The concerns of the participants were also addressed with reassurance by the researcher. The researcher initially began asking questions about participants' creative interests and hobbies to build rapport and make them feel comfortable. The questions asked of the participants helped in understanding their personal experiences on social media and body image. The researcher recorded and transcribed each interview, separately. Upon completion of the interviews, the participants were allowed to ask questions of the researcher or avail of counseling services from their school if they felt distressed.

Data Analysis
Following the steps provided by Creswell (2014) in data analysis, the researcher first began with creating and organizing data files. To accomplish this, the researcher transcribed and organized the recorded interviews individually. Accordingly, the participants' interviews were labeled chronologically.

In the next step, the researcher read the transcribed interviews and highlighted the answers expressed by the participants. This helped in understanding the underlying reflective tone and overall meaning. The third step involved describing and classifying the data into meaningful codes, which were used in producing various themes that originated after a thorough examination of the participants' responses. Further quotes and narratives were used to describe the "what" and "how" experienced by the participants, highlighting the textual and structural description of the phenomenon under research. This was accomplished by utilizing the quotes and narratives of the participants, who expressed positive and negative perspectives on how social media influences their body image. In the final step, the data was interpreted to extract the meanings answering the research questions and check their alignment with the past studies.

Moustakas (1994) explained Husserl's Epoche, whereby following the process of bracketing, the researcher was able to leave aside prejudged ideas and avoid previous experiences to engage in a more direct and unbiased exploration of the phenomenon. To further maintain the reliability of the data, the researcher rechecked the transcripts and coded data for any transparent mistakes.

RESULTS

There were 18 participants in the study, ranging in age from 13 to 16 years. All the participants were interviewed in the medical room within the school premises. The mean age of the participants was 14.78 years, and the majority of the participants followed Hinduism and their religious practices. All the participants were involved in the use of social media platforms. Interviewees identified an array of social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Instagram was the most popular app used by nine (9) participants followed by eight (8) participants who used Snapchat, and six (6) participants who used YouTube and Facebook. The information of the participants is given below in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant Information

Participant	Age	Religion	Type of social media platform
P1	13	Hinduism	YouTube and Facebook
P2	14	Hinduism	Instagram and Snapchat
P3	16	Hinduism	Instagram
P4	15	Hinduism	Snapchat and Instagram
P5	14	Hinduism	Facebook
P6	16	Hinduism	Snapchat
P7	13	Hinduism	YouTube
P8	15	Hinduism	Instagram and Snapchat
P9	15	Hinduism	Facebook and Instagram
P10	16	Hinduism	Instagram and Snapchat
P11	14	Hinduism	Facebook and YouTube
P12	15	Hinduism	Snapchat

Participant	Age	Religion	Type of social media platform
P13	16	Hinduism	YouTube and Instagram
P14	13	Hinduism	YouTube
P15	13	Hinduism	Facebook and Snapchat
P16	16	Hinduism	Instagram and Facebook
P17	15	Hinduism	Snapchat
P18	14	Hinduism	Instagram and YouTube

Five major themes were identified through the process of analysis:

Perception about body image

The fundamental theme evolved around the context of how participants perceived their body image. They believed that body image is a description of an individual's thoughts and feelings about their body. The focus is on viewing oneself through a lens of appreciation or criticism, depending on the physical attributes. P8, a 14-year-old, expressed a "love and hate" relationship with her body. *"I have a love-and-hate relationship with my body. I don't have the perfect body-to-waist ratio, and this is distressing. My nose is big and fat, and it makes me nervous.* "Sharing a similar view, other participants highlighted their personal experiences. P18 (14 years) faced constant teasing from her male classmates, and therefore she changed her hairstyle, covering her forehead with front bangs. "*I don't like my forehead; it's too big, and boys tease me. They call me monkey face. I feel bad whenever I hear it.*"

The participants shared a common self-doubt of being unattractive as per Indian beauty standards. P16 (16 years) plays for the school basketball team, and as an athlete, she works hard on building her stamina, but staying under the sun tanned her skin. She said, "*I am dusky and a little skinny for basketball, but I love it because I can play for my school in different competitions. Though I don't give much importance to my looks, sometimes I feel insecure. I have seen girls my age who are fair and beautiful. They are confident and even participate in on-stage activities. I can never do that; people will make fun of me. That's why I never participate in public speaking competitions.*"

Some of the participants were dissatisfied with their body image, while others shared mixed views. P10 (16 years): *"Sometimes I feel satisfied with my appearance, while sometimes I worry about my weight. I have PCOD, and due to hormonal changes, I gain weight quickly, which affects my mental health."* The participants viewed themselves in the light of negatively perceiving their body image. Though they were aware of their thoughts and how they felt about their bodies, none of them expressed a strong desire to adopt extreme measures to enhance their natural appearance.

Appearance comparisons

The theme appearance comparisons highlighted the participants' experiences of indulging in comparisons with celebrities and their peers on social media platforms.

Appearance comparisons with celebrities

The participants actively spent time on Instagram, followed by Snapchat among all ages. They posted pictures and videos to share snippets of their daily lives. Most participants followed celebrities, i.e., actors, content creators, and influencers. Bollywood actresses and Korean pop stars were the common personalities admired by young girls. For example, P13 (16 years) explained in her words, "Lalisa is my favorite K-pop singer. I listen to all her

songs, and she is tall, skinny, and beautiful. She is perfect; all my peers love Black Pink. If I could, I want to be like her; maybe lose a lot of weight, and in the future, I could look like her. "Another P4 (15 years) talked about Jeanie Kim: "*I love her voice, her hair, her figure, just everything. Sometimes, I compare myself to her and wish for her life. I want to be skinny and tall. I tried dieting and lost 2 kg in the past. So, I might try it again*." The Korean pop stars represented unrealistic beauty standards by promoting clear glass skin and a slim physique, which attracted the participants to adopt their lifestyle.

Mainly, the point at issue was the unhealthy comparison and the prominent need to achieve an "ideal appearance" presented by role models of these young adolescent girls. P15 (13 years) revealed a fondness for fashion and beauty content creators. In her own words, she explained, "*Kritika Khurana is my favorite beauty influencer. I like her fashion sense, and she is very curvy. I don't think I look good. Over the last few years, I gained 15 kg of weight from hormonal issues, and I can't do anything about it. Whenever I see Kritika's picture on Instagram, I start thinking, I am tall like her, but not curvy. She is prettier than me.*"

Appearance comparisons with peers

The theme of appearance comparison with peers emanated when the participants displayed a desire to look as attractive as their peers looked in their pictures. Most of them conveyed that the pictures posted by their peers on Instagram and Snapchat were contrasting to their appearance in real life. According to them, they often used filters to edit and enhance their images and videos online. The participants were self-informed about these acts but sought validation from their peers and followers on social media. P6 (16 years) reported discomfort with her complexion. "*Everyone in my class is on Snapchat. I see their stories and feel uncomfortable. Some girls don't use filters and look very attractive in their pictures. There is my friend's friend; she has clear skin and a fair complexion. Whenever I look at her story, I get annoyed. I hate my skin; there are so many pimples on my face. My complexion is dusky, and with pimples, my face looks bad. Why can't I look beautiful? This question keeps running through my mind. I posted a picture once, but instantly deleted it because I am ugly.*".

Some of the participants shared insecurities about their weight. P7 (13 years) shared her experience. "*I love dancing and making reels on Instagram. I posted a video with my best friend, and she got a lot of compliments, but no one commented on me. She has a lot of followers, and they always say that she is very beautiful. Look how thin she is! I sometimes feel low because no one gives me the same attention. I know I am a little fat, but I can dance better than her. I think if I was thinner, more people would have noticed me.*"

Furthermore, the participants sought validation from the opposite gender. They expressed jealousy when placed in situations where their female peers received significant importance for their appearance from male peers. This highlighted an unspoken boundary where the participants felt uneasy about their body image when comparing themselves to their peers.

Third-person comments

The theme of third-person comments echoes the opinions of peers, family, and other individuals connected to the participants on social media and in real life. The participants received affirmative comments from their close friends on social media. The compliments received were expressed through emoticons, i.e., heart eye emoji, fire emoji, and flattering messages such as gorgeous, cute, and stunning, describing that the participants looked splendid in their pictures.

A stark shift was noticed when participants reported instances of teasing from their peers. P1 (13 years) expressed, *"I remember a boy from the school bus. He was younger than me and called me fat in front of everyone. I was so scared and started crying in front of others."* The participant regularly encountered the boy's behavior, and even after losing weight due to dengue, she struggled to regain confidence in herself. Another participant, P11 (14 years), shared an experience about body shaming at the age of 12. Being overweight has created a haunting situation because the negative criticism from peers and relatives affected her emotional well-being and lowered her self-esteem. Despite this, she overcame these feelings with the guidance and support of her mother.

Other participants shared startling experiences. P17 (15 years) had below-average height and has remained lean all her life. However, she faced pressure from her relatives, who remarked that she was unattractive and would not find a suitable match for marriage as she grew older. Relatively, P13 (16 years) struggled with obesity at the age of 14, especially when she heard negative comments from everyone around her. To cope with the emotional impact, she further developed serious unhealthy eating habits.

Gain vs. Lose

The participants expressed their thoughts about the following weight-gain, weight-loss, and height-increase routines because of the implied pressure from their surroundings. They followed pages and channels that created diet plans, exercises, and recommended supplements for immediate results. P2 (16 years) had a dieting routine that she learned from YouTube to lose weight during the COVID-19 lockdown. Fitness videos scammed people into losing maximum belly fat in 5 to 7 days. The participant was on an extremely liquid diet, and within 10 days, she was rushed to the hospital due to weakness and body fatigue.

Some other participants prepared dieting charts to gain weight as early as possible. P9 (15 years) faced teasing for having a slim figure. She expressed, *"After waking up in the morning, I used to tell myself that today I have to eat more and look perfect."* Her diet contained a lot of proteins, i.e., eggs and chicken. Despite the efforts, no effective results were experienced immediately. Hence, she became disappointed in being unable to meet societal expectations.

The participants shared experiences of taking supplements to increase their height. P12 (15 years) was the shortest in her family. The children in her neighborhood regularly teased her. To overcome the situation, she sought medical care from unreliable sources, i.e., non-certified fitness trainers. However, the supplements didn't show any improvement in her height in the long run. These circumstances are the correct representation of the participants' willingness to improve their appearance by undermining their natural beauty.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study reveal the complex interplay of participants' experiences, societal influence, and the impact of social media on their body image. Most of the participants demonstrated negative perceptions, reflecting feelings of body dissatisfaction. For example, P8 felt self-conscious about her body weight and projected a desire to change her nose.

The participants in the present study were active users of Instagram and Snapchat, where most of them engaged in comparing their appearances with their favorite celebrities. For instance, P15 was fascinated with a fashion influencer; she admired her physique and her

lifestyle. However, she lacked confidence in herself, because of being overweight. Another participant, P4, compared herself with Korean popstar Jeanie Kim, whom she perceived as "lean and tall". The participants idolized celebrities who embodied established standards of beauty. When they compared themselves to these idols, they internalized these standards, feeling insecure and dissatisfied with their body image (Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021).

The findings also reported appearance comparisons with known peers regarding feeling anxious about their; complexion, weight, and online presence. Resonating with the findings, a study with adolescent girls in Singapore highlighted appearance-based peer comparison behaviors. The girls depicted behaviors of appearance comparisons to seek validation and recognition from their peer groups. Their struggle reinforced the peer beauty norms, rejecting their thoughts and feelings about their appearance to fulfill the expectations of the peer group. Upward comparisons with attractive peers on social media triggered feelings of low self-worth and body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls (Chua & Chang, 2016).

In alignment with the social comparison theory, the theme of appearance comparisons with celebrities and peers underscores the experiences of the participants who indulged in upward comparisons. They evaluated their appearance with those celebrities and peers whom they found "ideally attractive." However, in the process of comparison, they felt neglected and displayed negative thoughts and feelings about their body image.

Beyond the world of social media, there was a stark contrast in the online and offline interactions of the participants with their peers and family. Some of them received compliments and positive comments on their social media accounts. At the same time, others dealt with instances of body shaming, teasing, and discrimination in the real world. This scenario implies a complex relationship between virtual validation and the harsh realities of face-to-face interactions. A study in Northern England with adolescent boys and girls highlighted negative comments from appearance-related interactions between peers and them online. Adolescent girls indicated experiencing interactions with spiteful content in contrast to the boys. The gender differences reflected the imposed cultural expectations on adolescent girls to appear socially attractive (Paddock & Bell, 2021). Moving ahead, the participants were not immune to the pursuit of an "ideal" body and often indulged in unhealthy eating habits, extreme diets, and hard work out routines. For example, P2 followed liquid dieting to lose weight and was hospitalized for nutrient deficiency. Overall, the social media negatively affected the body image of the participants. The young adolescent girls succumbed to societal pressure and Western standards of beauty, further contributing to their body dissatisfaction and affecting their emotional well-being.

Therefore, the present study suggests that schools should plan interventions addressing body image concerns by considering the multifaceted influences, including societal standards, social media, and interpersonal dynamics. Educational programs, counseling, and support networks in the form of peers and family can empower adolescents to navigate societal expectations, build resilience against negative comments, and foster a positive body image. For example, schools can conduct workshops with adolescent girls and their parents to build self-esteem and confidence to reduce appearance-based insecurities magnified by using social media. The Dove Self-Esteem Project: Confident Me presents material for body confidence-building workshops at the school level. This program has been tested in a few schools in Delhi with 11–14-year-old students, providing positive results after intervention (Smith et al., 2023).

Limitations

The study had notable limitations considering it was conducted in a single school setting. The participant pool was restricted to samples who were from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to a broader population, particularly those from low-income groups. Future research should aim for a more inclusive participant selection from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds to enhance the study's external validity.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a dynamic interplay of individual experiences, societal pressure, and the negative impact of social media on the body image of adolescent girls. Most of the girls compared their appearance with celebrities and peers, reflecting feelings of body dissatisfaction. The study also reveals a stark contrast between positive online interactions and real-world instances of body shaming and discrimination. The participants also pursued unhealthy eating habits, extreme diets, and hard work out routines. To empower adolescent girls, schools should strategize educational workshops and build support networks with the help of school counselors and family members to cultivate a positive body image. Future research studies should focus on understanding the coping strategies of Indian adolescent girls to mitigate the detrimental influence of social media on their body image.

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