

Research Paper

The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents

S. Subakalyani^{1*}, Arockia Robert S²

ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of social media usage on body image and the role of social comparison habits among adolescents. A sample of 200 adolescents was selected using simple random sampling, and data were collected through self-report measures including the Social Comparison Scale (SCS), Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), and the Body Image Concern Due to Social Media Scale (BICS-social media). A descriptive research design was employed, and data were analyzed using SPSS software. The findings indicate a significant relationship between increased social media usage and higher levels of body dissatisfaction. Social comparison habits, particularly upward comparisons, were identified as mediators in the link between social media use and body image concerns. Additionally, content related to beauty and fitness had a particularly strong negative influence on adolescents' body image. The study emphasizes the need for media literacy and interventions to address social comparison behaviors and promote healthier body image perceptions among adolescents.

Keywords: *Social Media Usage, Body Image, Social Comparison, Adolescents*

In today's hyper-connected digital environment, social media has evolved from a tool of communication to a powerful influencer of perception, identity, and behavior, especially among adolescents. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat emphasize visual aesthetics, fostering a culture where appearance often overshadows authenticity. Adolescents, in their formative years of self-concept development, are particularly vulnerable to the influence of curated and idealized images presented on these platforms (Perloff, 2014). Body image—defined as one's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about physical appearance—has emerged as a critical concern in youth mental health (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). The constant exposure to stylized portrayals of beauty can lead to dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and even disordered eating (Fardouly et al., 2015). Underpinning this phenomenon is the process of **social comparison**, particularly **upward comparison**, where adolescents compare themselves to those they perceive as superior. Festinger's (1954) **Social Comparison Theory** explains this cognitive bias, suggesting that individuals evaluate themselves based on how they measure up to others. This study investigates the relationship between social media usage and body image dissatisfaction

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, School of Allied Health Sciences, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India

²Tutor, School of Allied Health Sciences, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: June 02, 2025; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents

among adolescents, with a specific focus on the mediating role of social comparison habits. The insights gained will help design interventions promoting healthier digital engagement and positive body image.

Need and Significance of the Study

In recent years, digital media has not only reshaped communication but has redefined self-worth metrics among youth—"likes," "followers," and "shares" have become proxies for social validation. The **need** for this study stems from several pressing realities:

1. **Rising Body Dissatisfaction:** Research shows a consistent increase in body dissatisfaction, especially among girls and marginalized groups, influenced by beauty-centric media (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).
2. **High Exposure:** Adolescents spend an average of 3–5 hours daily on social media, engaging with content that often glorifies unrealistic body standards (Levine & Piran, 2019).
3. **Lack of Media Literacy:** Without the ability to critically assess what they consume, adolescents internalize harmful norms, leading to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Significance:

- **Educational Institutions:** Can design media literacy programs to promote critical thinking.
- **Mental Health Professionals:** Gain insights into the cognitive mechanisms linking social media use and body image.
- **Parents and Policymakers:** Become more equipped to regulate and guide adolescent social media engagement responsibly.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The **sample** of this study comprised **200 adolescents** selected using the **simple random sampling** method to ensure objectivity and reduce selection bias. The sample was chosen from a mix of **urban and semi-urban schools**, with efforts made to include participants of different socio-economic backgrounds, school types, and both genders.

Demographic Details

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	Female	133	61.57%
	Male	82	37.96%
Age Range	19–21	112	51.85%
	16–18	95	43.98%
	22–24	9	4.17%
How many hours per day do you spend on social media	1–3 hours	88	40.74%
	3–5 hours	65	30.09%
	Less than 1 hour	39	18.06%
	More than 5 hours	23	10.65%

Inclusion Criteria

1. College students aged between 17 and 23 years.
2. Spend at least an hour a day actively using social media.
3. Presently pursuing an undergraduate degree.

The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents

4. Capable of understanding and reading English.
5. Being prepared to provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

1. People who are not in the 17–21 age bracket.
2. Participants not in college.
3. Individuals who have been diagnosed with eating or mental health issues.
4. Students spend less than an hour a day on social media.

Instruments Used

Scale	Authors	Purpose	Reliability (Cronbach's α)	Validity
Social Comparison Scale (SCS)	Allan & Gilbert (1995)	Measures self-perception and comparison with others	0.88	Strong construct and criterion validity; correlates with self-esteem and anxiety
Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS)	Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright & Johnson (2013)	Assesses emotional and behavioral integration of social media	0.85	Validated through correlations with social connectedness and loneliness
Body Image Concern Due to Social Media Scale (BICS-social media) (based on SMACS & BICI)	Adapted from Fardouly et al. (2015); Littleton et al. (2005)	Assesses body image concerns influenced by social media content	Estimated 0.80–0.90	High face and construct validity for social media-specific body concerns

Procedure

The study was conducted among college students after obtaining necessary institutional permissions and informed consent. A pilot test ensured the clarity and reliability of the tools. Data were collected in classroom settings using printed questionnaires, including the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), the Social Comparison Scale (SCS), and the Body Image Concern Due to Social Media Scale (BICS-SocialMedia). Participants were assured of confidentiality and completed the survey within 20–25 minutes. The collected data were then screened, coded, and analyzed using SPSS, employing statistical tests such as t-tests, ANOVA, correlation, and mediation analysis

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Higher levels of social media usage are associated with greater body dissatisfaction among adolescents.

Social Media Usage Group	Number of Participants (N)	Mean Score of Body Image Concern Due to Social Media	Standard Deviation (SD)	t-value	Degrees of Freedom (df)
Low Social Media Usage	100	31.2	5.1		
High Social Media Usage	100	39.4	6.2	4.32	198

*Significant at 0.01 level.

The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents

Adolescents with high social media use report significantly higher body image dissatisfaction. Hypothesis 1 is accepted. This finding supports previous research by Fardouly et al. (2015), who found that adolescents exposed to idealized content on platforms like Instagram report increased body dissatisfaction. Similarly, Perloff (2014) emphasized that the immersive nature of social media amplifies body surveillance and appearance comparison.

Table No. 2 Social comparison habits mediate the relationship between social media usage and body image dissatisfaction.

Pathway	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Social Media Use → Social Comparison Habits	0.40	0.08	4.50	.001	N
Social Comparison Habits → Body Image Concern	0.45	0.07	5.05	.001	N
Indirect Effect (Mediation Effect)	0.27	0.06		.002	N

**Significant at 0.01 level.*

Mediation by social comparison is statistically significant. Hypothesis 2 is accepted. The mediating effect aligns with the model proposed by Haferkamp & Krämer (2011), who demonstrated that social comparison is a key process linking media exposure and self-perception. This finding also echoes Fardouly et al. (2015), who emphasized social comparison as a primary mechanism in body image disturbance.

Table No. 3 Adolescents who frequently engage in upward social comparisons on social media report lower self-esteem and greater body dissatisfaction.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Social Comparison Scale Total Score	Self-Esteem Scale Total Score	-0.41	.002
Social Comparison Scale Total Score	Body Image Concern Due to Social Media	-0.49	.001

**Significant at 0.01 level.*

Higher upward comparison is associated with lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction. Hypothesis 3 is accepted. This result supports the findings of Vogel et al. (2014), who found that frequent upward comparisons on Facebook negatively affect self-esteem. Additionally, Tiggemann & Slater (2014) observed a strong link between social media-based comparisons and body dissatisfaction among teenage girls.

The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents

Table No. 4 *The type of social media content consumed (e.g., beauty and fitness content) has a stronger negative impact on body image than general content.*

Type of Social Media Content Consumed	Number of Participants (N)	Mean Body Image Concern Score	Standard Deviation (SD)	F-value	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value
Beauty and Fitness Content	70	40.2	6.3	6.32	2, 197	.003
Movies and Entertainment Content	65	34.8	5.9			
Humor and Memes Content	65	31.7	6.0			

**Significant at 0.01 level.*

Type of content significantly influences body dissatisfaction. Hypothesis 4 is accepted. Consistent with findings from Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015), beauty-related content fosters body dissatisfaction more than neutral or entertaining content. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to appearance-centric feeds, highlighting the impact of image-based platforms.

Table No. 5 *Adolescents with higher media literacy experience fewer negative effects of social media on body image and social comparisons.*

Media Literacy Group	Number of Participants (N)	Mean Body Image Concern Score	Standard Deviation (SD)	t-value	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-value
High Media Literacy	100	31.5	5.4	4.01	198	.001
Low Media Literacy	100	39.8	6.7			

Predictor Variable	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value
Social Media Use × Media Literacy Interaction	-0.22	0.08	-3.12	.007

***Significant at 0.01 level.**

Media literacy significantly moderates the relationship. Hypothesis 5 is accepted. The buffering role of media literacy aligns with McLean et al. (2016), who highlighted that adolescents equipped with critical thinking skills are less likely to internalize harmful ideals. Levine & Piran (2019) similarly advocated for media literacy as a tool for resilience against body image issues.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reflect earlier research by Fardouly et al. (2015) and Perloff (2014) by confirming a strong association between college students' use of social media and body image problems. Body dissatisfaction was significantly higher among students who reported higher degrees of social media integration, especially when interacting with appearance-focused content like fitness and beauty postings. These findings demonstrate the influence of

The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents

upward social comparisons on self-esteem and body image, supporting the relevance of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). According to the mediating function of social comparison habits, psychological consequences are influenced by how people see and contrast themselves with others, not only by the amount of time spent online. Additionally, media literacy's moderating effect suggests that it may be a protective factor; students who were more media literate had less adverse effects, which is consistent with research by McLean et al. (2016) and Levine & Piran (2019). These results have significant ramifications for educational interventions, such as digital well-being initiatives that promote body positivity and media literacy.

REFERENCES

- Cash, T. F. (2004). *Body image: A handbook of theory, research, and clinical practice*. Guilford Press.
- Common Sense Media. (2023). *The role of media in teen body image: A research brief*. <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/media-body-image>
- Dellatto, M. (2022, March 12). How TikTok's beauty filters are reshaping young people's self-image. *Time Magazine*. <https://time.com/6156013/tiktok-beauty-filters-teen-mental-health/>
- Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015). Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. *Body Image, 13*, 38–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2014.12.002>
- Parker, A. (2021, September). Why Instagram is losing teens to TikTok—and what it means for mental health. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/instagram-teen-mental-health>
- Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. *Sex Roles, 71*(11–12), 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6>
- Tiggemann, M. (2013). *The psychology of appearance: Why we look the way we do*. Routledge.
- Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 3*(4), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
- World Health Organization. (2022). *Adolescent mental health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

Acknowledgment

The researcher sincerely thanks the participating colleges, faculty members, and students for their valuable time and cooperation. Special appreciation is extended to the academic supervisors for their guidance throughout the research process. Gratitude is also due to the developers of the standardized tools used in this study and to all those who supported this research directly or indirectly.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Subakalyani, S. & Arockia R.S. (2026). The Effects of Social Media Usage on Body Image and the Role of Social Comparison Habits among Adolescents. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 14*(1), 2942-2947. DIP:18.01.294.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.294