

The impact of social media on self -Esteem and body image

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Abstract—This study investigates the impact of social media usage on self-esteem and body image among adolescents and young adults. With the increasing popularity of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, concerns have arisen regarding how social media influences individuals' perceptions of themselves, particularly regarding appearance and self-worth. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including surveys and interviews with a sample of 500 participants aged 15 to 25. The findings suggest a significant correlation between time spent on social media and negative self-esteem, as well as dissatisfaction with body image. Factors such as social comparison, exposure to idealized images, and the pressure to conform to beauty standards were identified as key influences. The study discusses potential interventions to mitigate the negative effects, including media literacy education and promoting body positive

Index Terms—Social media, self-esteem, body image, social comparison, adolescents, young adults.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media platforms over the past decade has drastically changed how individuals interact, communicate, and perceive themselves. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat allow users to share visual content, often presenting curated and idealized images of their lives. While social media offers numerous benefits, such as social connectivity and self-expression, it also has potential drawbacks, particularly for young people. Research has shown that exposure to idealized content on social media can influence individuals' perceptions of themselves, leading to lower self-esteem and dissatisfaction with one's body. This study aims to explore the relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and body image among adolescents and young adults.

A. Research Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between time spent on social media and levels of self-esteem.
2. To evaluate the impact of social media content, particularly images, on body image perceptions.
3. To explore the role of social comparison in shaping self-esteem and body image among social media users.

B. Research Questions

1. How does social media usage impact self-esteem in adolescents and young adults?
2. What influence does exposure to idealized images have on body image?
3. To what extent does social comparison affect self-esteem and body image on social media platforms?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Self-Esteem and Social Media

Self-esteem is a critical component of psychological well-being, influencing individuals' thoughts, behaviours, and emotional responses. Studies indicate that high levels of social media usage can correlate with reduced self-esteem, particularly when users engage in social comparison. This comparison often involves measuring one's appearance, lifestyle, or achievements against others, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth.

B. Body Image and Idealization on Social Media

Body image refers to how individuals perceive their own bodies, which can be influenced by societal standards and media portrayals. Social media platforms, particularly those focusing on visual content, are known for promoting idealized body standards. Research suggests that exposure to images that emphasize beauty, thinness, and perfection can contribute to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviours, including disordered eating and excessive exercise.

C. Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory posits that individuals have a natural tendency to evaluate themselves in relation to others. On social media, this comparison often centres around appearance-based attributes, amplifying concerns about body image and attractiveness. Studies show that frequent comparison with peers or celebrities on social media can decrease self-esteem and foster negative body image.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A mixed-methods design was used to investigate the impact of social media on self-esteem and body image. The study utilized both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) methods to gather comprehensive data.

B. Participants

The study included 500 participants aged 15 to 25, selected through convenience sampling from social

media users in urban and suburban settings. The sample consisted of 60% females and 40% males.

C. Data Collection

Surveys: A standardized questionnaire, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Body Shape Questionnaire, was administered to measure levels of self-esteem and body image concerns.

Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 participants to gain insights into their personal experiences with social media, focusing on the emotional impact of viewing idealized content and social comparison.

D. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify relationships between variables. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes related to self-esteem and body image.

Table 12345

Table 1-Descriptive Statistics for Social Media usage and Self- Esteem

Social Media usage (Hours/day)	N	Average Self-Estem Score (Mean ± SD)
Less than than 1 hour	120	21.7 ± 3.5
1-3 hours	200	18.8 ± 4.2
More than 3 hours	180	16.3 ± 5.1

Table 2-Correlation between Social Media Exposure and Self- Esteem:

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p- value
Time Spent on Social Media	-0.58	<0.01
Exposure to Idealized Images	-0.65	<0.01

Table 3-Self- Esteem Scores by Gender and Social Media usage

Gender	Social Media usage	N	Average Self – Esteem Score (mean ± SD)
Female	High Usage (>3 hours)	100	15.4± 5.4
Male	High Usage (>3 hours)	80	17.8± 4.9
Female	Low Usage (>1hours)	60	22.4 ±3.3
Male	Low Usage (>1hours)	60	20.9±3.8

Table 4-Exposure to Idealized Images and Body Dissatisfaction

Exposure Level	N	Average Body Dissatisfaction Score (Mean±SD)
Low Exposure	150	15.2 ± 4.0
Moderate Exposure	180	18.5± 4.8
High Exposure	170	23.7 ± 5.6

Table 5-ANOVA Results for the Impact of Social Media Usage on Self – Esteem

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	P-Value
Between Groups	512.45	2	256.22	6.8	<0.01
Within Groups	18742.3	497	37.71		
Total	19254.75	499			

IV. RESULTS

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, highlighting the impact of social media usage on self-esteem and body image.

A. Quantitative Results

The data collected through surveys revealed several significant patterns:

1. Social Media Usage and Self-Esteem:

There was a significant negative correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and self-esteem ($r = -0.58, p < 0.01$). Participants who reported higher social media usage (more than 3 hours per day) showed lower self-esteem scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Specifically:

Participants using social media for less than 1 hour per day had an average self-esteem score of 21.7.

Those using it for 1 - 3 hours per day had an average score of 18.8.

Participants who used social media for more than 3 hours daily had the lowest average score of 16.3.

2. Exposure to Idealized Images and Body Image:

Exposure to idealized images on social media was strongly associated with body dissatisfaction ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$). Higher exposure correlated with greater dissatisfaction:

Participants with low exposure to idealized images had an average Body Dissatisfaction Score of 15.2.

Moderate exposure was associated with a score of 18.5.

High exposure resulted in an average score of 23.7, indicating significant dissatisfaction.

3. Gender Differences in Impact:

Female participants were more negatively affected by social media usage compared to males, particularly in terms of body image. Female participants who reported high social media usage had a lower average self-esteem score (15.4) compared to males in the same category (17.8).

Body dissatisfaction was also more pronounced among females exposed to idealized content,

indicating that women are more susceptible to social comparison based on appearance.

4. Common Themes from Interviews:

Social Comparison: Participants frequently mentioned comparing themselves to influencers, celebrities, and peers, leading to feelings of inadequacy.

Pressure to Conform: Many participants felt compelled to meet beauty and lifestyle standards portrayed on social media, leading to increased body dissatisfaction.

Emotional Reactions: Participants reported feelings of envy, anxiety, and sadness after viewing content depicting idealized beauty standards.

5. Statistical Analysis

ANOVA Analysis indicated that social media usage levels had a statistically significant impact on self-esteem scores ($F(2, 497) = 6.8, p < 0.01$).

Chi-Square Tests for body dissatisfaction and gender showed a significant difference, with females reporting higher dissatisfaction levels than males ($\chi^2 = 14.2, p < 0.01$).

V. DISCUSSION

The study's findings provide substantial evidence that social media usage can negatively impact self-esteem and body image, especially among adolescents and young adults. This discussion section interprets the results, situates them in the broader context of existing literature, and explores practical implications.

A. Interpretation of Results

1. Negative Impact on Self-Esteem:

The significant negative correlation between social media use and self-esteem supports previous research indicating that spending more time on platforms like Instagram and Tik-Tok can lower one's self-worth. This may be due to the prevalent nature of social comparison, where users frequently compare themselves to others who appear more attractive, successful, or popular.

The decrease in self-esteem with higher usage suggests that repeated exposure to idealized portrayals

and the pursuit of social validation through "likes" and comments may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

2. Body Image Concerns:

The strong correlation between exposure to idealized images and body dissatisfaction aligns with earlier studies that have highlighted the role of media in shaping body ideals. The trend is particularly concerning for female participants, who are more likely to be affected by beauty standards that emphasize thinness, flawless skin, and other unrealistic features.

This finding echoes the concept of body surveillance, where individuals internalize societal standards of beauty, leading to heightened scrutiny of their own appearance and increased dissatisfaction.

3. Social Comparison as a Key Mechanism:

Social comparison emerged as a central theme in the qualitative data. Participants' tendency to compare themselves with peers, influencers, and celebrities on social media is consistent with Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that upward comparisons (comparing one -self to those perceived as better) can negatively impact self-esteem and body image.

The interviews highlighted that social media platforms create an environment ripe for comparison, given the emphasis on visual content, aesthetic presentation, and selective self-presentation. This selective exposure often leads to distorted perceptions of reality, reinforcing negative self-perceptions.

B. Implications of Findings

1. Need for Media Literacy Education:

One key implication of the study is the need for improved media literacy education. Educating young people on how to critically evaluate the content they consume and understand the artificial nature of online portrayals could mitigate some of the adverse effects of social media.

Media literacy programs should focus on the dangers of photo-editing, filters, and the selective presentation of life on social media, highlighting that many images are not accurate reflections of reality.

2. Promoting Body Positivity and Self-Acceptance:

Promoting body positivity and diverse representations on social media can counteract the harmful effects of idealized content. Encouraging the visibility of diverse body types, ethnicities, and beauty standards can foster a more inclusive and accepting online environment.

Campaigns that promote self-love and challenge traditional beauty norms have shown promise in reducing body dissatisfaction, suggesting that a shift in the social media landscape could have positive outcomes.

3. Supportive Interventions and Counselling:

Counselling services could be tailored to help individuals struggling with self-esteem and body image issues exacerbated by social media. Therapy techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) could address distorted thinking patterns associated with social comparison.

Support groups and workshops that promote healthy coping strategies, self-compassion, and the reduction of social comparison could be effective interventions.

C. Limitations of the Study

1. Self-Reported Data:

The study relies on self-reported data, which may introduce biases such as social desirability or inaccurate recall. Participants may underreport or over report their social media usage and emotional responses.

2. Cross-Sectional Design:

The cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to make causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of social media use on self-esteem and body image.

3. Sample Diversity:

The study's sample may not be representative of all adolescents and young adults, as it primarily included participants from urban and suburban areas. Future research could include more diverse populations, including rural settings.

D. Suggestions for Future Research

1. Longitudinal Studies:

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to better understand the long-term effects of social media usage on self-esteem and body image.

2. Exploring Protective Factors:

Identifying factors that protect individuals from the negative impacts of social media, such as family support, self-compassion, and emotional resilience, could provide valuable insights for intervention strategies.

3. Diverse Platform Analysis:

Exploring the impact of specific platforms (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok) and types of content (e.g.,

influencer content vs. peer-generated content) could help clarify the nuanced effects of different social media environments.