

Social Comparison and Body Image Perception as Correlates with Mental Health Among Adolescents

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Abstract- Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage during which body image and psychological well-being become central to identity formation. The present study investigates the relationship between social comparison, body image perception, and mental health among adolescents. A sample of 240 students (120 males and 120 females) aged 15–18 years was selected using purposive sampling from higher secondary schools in Kerala. Standardized instruments—the Social Comparison Scale (SCS), Body Image Questionnaire (BIQ), and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) were administered to measure comparison tendencies, body satisfaction, and mental health status, respectively. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, and Pearson's correlation. Results indicated that female adolescents reported significantly higher levels of social comparison, whereas no significant gender differences were found in body image and mental health scores. Correlation analysis revealed that higher levels of social comparison were associated with greater body dissatisfaction and poorer mental health. These findings suggest that frequent upward comparisons, particularly in the digital age dominated by social media, contribute to body image concerns and psychological distress. The study highlights the importance of media literacy programs, school-based counselling, and family support systems to help adolescents critically evaluate unrealistic portrayals, build resilience, and maintain positive self-concept. Future research should include longitudinal and intervention-based designs to strengthen causal inferences and expand generalizability.

keywords: adolescents, social comparison, body image, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by biological, psychological, and social transitions. During this period, self-concept and body image become central to identity formation, influencing self-esteem and overall mental health (Stice & Shaw, 2004). Body image refers to the attitudes, perceptions, and feelings an individual

holds toward their own physical appearance, and dissatisfaction with body image is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and maladaptive behaviors such as disordered eating (Cash & Smolak, 2011).

One of the primary mechanisms shaping body image is social comparison, described by Festinger (1954) as the tendency to evaluate one's own abilities, attributes, and worth in relation to others. While comparison may sometimes serve adaptive functions, such as self-improvement, upward comparisons—in which individuals compare themselves to those perceived as superior—often lead to dissatisfaction and psychological distress (Mussweiler, 2003). In contrast, downward comparisons can temporarily boost self-esteem, but they rarely offer long-term psychological resilience (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

The emergence of social media platforms has intensified opportunities for social comparison. Adolescents are now exposed to curated, idealized portrayals of beauty and success through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, which often highlight unrealistic standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). These digital environments promote continuous upward comparisons and amplify pressures to conform to unattainable ideals, thereby increasing risks for negative self-evaluations and poor mental health outcomes (Fardouly et al., 2015). Given these concerns, the present study examines how social comparison and body image perception are correlated with mental health among adolescents in the Indian context. The investigation is particularly relevant because global media trends and cultural shifts are influencing Indian youth, making them vulnerable to the same comparison-driven body image challenges observed internationally (Verma & Sharma, 2020).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Comparison and Mental Health

Festinger's (1954) theory established that social comparison is an innate psychological process used to evaluate the self. Subsequent studies have consistently shown that adolescents engaging in frequent social comparison are at greater risk of anxiety, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms (Chen et al., 2016). Upward comparison in particular contributes to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, while downward comparison offers only fragile, short-lived boosts in self-worth (Mussweiler, 2003; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Body Image Concerns

Research highlights body dissatisfaction as a significant risk factor for poor mental health. Stice et al. (2004) showed that negative body image predicts disordered eating and depressive symptoms in adolescents. Cash and Smolak (2011) emphasized that while historically body dissatisfaction has been more prevalent among adolescent girls, male adolescents are increasingly reporting dissatisfaction linked to muscularity and athletic appearance. Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that exposure to thin-ideal and fitness-ideal content on social media significantly heightens body dissatisfaction and self-criticism among adolescents.

Role of Social Media

With the rise of digital platforms, social comparison opportunities have multiplied. Fardouly et al. (2015) demonstrated that adolescents frequently exposed to social media reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction compared to those who engaged less. Social networking sites operate as "comparison traps," where likes, comments, and followers function as social validation metrics, reinforcing appearance-focused evaluation (Perloff, 2014).

Gender Differences

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping the effects of social comparison. Female adolescents are more likely to internalize thin-ideal beauty standards, which strongly predicts body dissatisfaction and lower mental health (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Male adolescents, however, are increasingly influenced by cultural ideals of muscularity and fitness, contributing to rising cases of body dissatisfaction among boys (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004).

Indian adolescents face a unique intersection of traditional cultural values and Western media influences. Studies suggest that body dissatisfaction is rising among Indian youth, particularly in urban

settings where global beauty standards dominate (Verma & Sharma, 2020). Adolescents in India are therefore vulnerable to similar risks of negative social comparison and poor mental health outcomes, yet this area remains under-researched in the Indian sociocultural context.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study included 240 adolescents, comprising 120 male and 120 female students aged between 15 and 18 years, selected through purposive sampling from higher secondary schools in Kerala. The sample was chosen to ensure gender balance and representation across socioeconomic backgrounds. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents, and confidentiality was assured.

Research Design

A descriptive-correlational design was employed to investigate the relationship between social comparison, body image, and mental health. This design was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to assess natural associations between psychological variables without manipulation.

Tools

Three standardized instruments were employed in the present study. The Social Comparison Scale (SCS) was used to measure the extent to which adolescents engage in upward and downward comparisons. It consists of items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *never (1)* to *very often (5)*, with higher scores reflecting greater frequency of comparison behaviors. The SCS has demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.78 and 0.85, and strong construct validity among adolescent populations.

The Body Image Questionnaire (BIQ) assessed participants' satisfaction with various aspects of their physical appearance, including weight, shape, and overall attractiveness. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from *very dissatisfied (1)* to *very satisfied (5)*, and total scores were obtained by summing item responses. Lower scores indicate greater dissatisfaction with body image. The BIQ has shown strong psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.82 and 0.88, and convergent validity supported through associations with self-esteem and body esteem measures.

To evaluate psychological well-being, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) was administered. This scale comprises four subscales: somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction, and depression. Scoring followed the binary method (0-0-1-1), where higher totals indicate poorer mental health, and scores greater than five suggest the risk of psychological distress. The GHQ-28 demonstrates high internal consistency, typically exceeding 0.86–0.90, and has established convergent validity through comparisons with clinical assessments.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) summarized the sample characteristics and variable distributions. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess gender differences in social comparison, body image, and mental health. Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to evaluate the strength and direction of associations among variables. Significance was tested at the 0.05 level, ensuring robust interpretation of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table I. Gender Differences in Social Comparison, Body Image, and Mental Health

Variable	Male (N=120) Mean \pm SD	Female (N=120) Mean \pm SD	t-value	p-value
Social Comparison	45.3 \pm 6.2	49.8 \pm 5.9	3.12*	<0.01
Body Image	62.1 \pm 8.5	61.4 \pm 7.8	0.55	>0.05
Mental Health	58.7 \pm 9.0	59.3 \pm 8.4	0.61	>0.05

Note: $p < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.

The descriptive results demonstrate that female adolescents scored significantly higher on social comparison compared to males ($t = 3.12, p < 0.01$). This indicates that girls are more prone to evaluating themselves against peers and external standards, which may partly explain their greater vulnerability to societal pressures. However, body image

satisfaction ($t = 0.55, p > 0.05$) and mental health ($t = 0.61, p > 0.05$) did not significantly differ across gender, suggesting that dissatisfaction with appearance and psychological distress are common concerns for both boys and girls in the adolescent stage.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N=240)

Variables	Social Comparison	Body Image	Mental Health
Social Comparison	1	0.41**	-0.35**
Body Image		1	-0.38**
Mental Health			1

Note: $p < 0.01$ indicates significant correlation.

The correlation analysis revealed significant relationships among the three variables. A positive correlation between social comparison and body dissatisfaction ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$) shows that adolescents who frequently compare themselves with others tend to be less satisfied with their appearance. A negative correlation between body image and mental health ($r = -0.38, p < 0.01$) suggests that those with lower satisfaction in appearance are more likely to report anxiety, depression, and overall psychological distress. Similarly, the negative correlation between social comparison and mental health ($r = -0.35, p < 0.01$)

indicates that frequent engagement in comparison is linked with poorer well-being.

DISCUSSION

These results underscore the importance of social comparison as a risk factor for both body image dissatisfaction and mental health issues in adolescents. The finding that girls engage more in social comparisons supports existing research highlighting that female adolescents are particularly vulnerable to appearance-related pressures (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Tiggemann & Slater,

2013). Nonetheless, the absence of gender differences in body image dissatisfaction and mental health outcomes indicates that male adolescents are increasingly affected by pressures to conform to ideals of muscularity and fitness (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). This shift suggests that interventions must address body image concerns in both genders.

The correlational findings align with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that upward comparison tends to undermine self-worth, and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explains how individuals internalize external evaluations of their appearance. In today's digital environment, where adolescents are constantly exposed to curated and idealized portrayals of peers and celebrities, the impact of social comparison is intensified, contributing to dissatisfaction and psychological distress.

From a practical perspective, these findings call for school-based media literacy programs that encourage adolescents to critically evaluate unrealistic portrayals of beauty online. Counseling interventions should be integrated into school systems to help adolescents develop coping mechanisms for comparison-induced stress. Furthermore, family and community support systems must be strengthened to promote resilience and positive self-concept in adolescents, reducing the harmful impact of social comparison on mental health.

LIMITATIONS

The study is not without limitations. The sample was restricted to higher secondary students from a single region, limiting generalizability. Data were collected using self-report questionnaires, which may have introduced response bias. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences, and other influencing factors such as socioeconomic status, parental involvement, or academic stress were not examined.

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that social comparison significantly contributes to body image dissatisfaction and mental health challenges among adolescents. While girls reported higher comparison tendencies, both genders were equally affected by poor body image and psychological distress. The findings highlight the

importance of school-based media literacy, counselling, and family-level interventions to promote resilience and positive mental health during adolescence.

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