

**UNVEILING THE REFLECTIONS: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON THE BODY IMAGE OF YOUNG ADULTS****Dr. Smitha K**

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**ABSTRACT**

*With the growing popularity and widespread use of social media platforms, concerns have been raised about their impact on individuals' perceptions of their bodies. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the effects of social media on body image and to identify potential mitigating factors and interventions. The study synthesizes existing literature and examines relevant theoretical frameworks to shed light on the complex relationship between social media and body image among young adults. The paper highlights the influence of social media content and representation on body dissatisfaction, along with the factors that moderate this relationship, such as gender, peer influence, and active versus passive social media use. Additionally, it discusses the psychological consequences associated with negative body image, including body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. To address these issues, various coping strategies and interventions, such as media literacy programs, body positive movements, supportive online communities, and regulatory measures, are proposed. Finally, the paper outlines future directions for research, recommendations for educational initiatives, mental health support, and policy implications to foster a healthier body image environment for young adults in the era of social media.*

*Keywords: social media, body image, young adults, social comparison theory, objectification theory, self-perception theory, body dissatisfaction, psychological consequences, coping strategies, interventions.*

In the recent century, social media (SM) has sparked a revolution. Nearly everyone has access to social media in a variety of ways. The fast expansion and accessibility of Social media is now available to everyone thanks to the network and technology, including smartphones and personal computers (PCs). The term 'social media' refers to the various internet-based networks that enable users to interact with others, verbally and visually (Carr & Hayes, 2015). According to Global Overview Report. (2022), 4.62 billion of the 7.91 billion people in the globe as of 2022 were active users of social media, and individuals spent an average of 6 hours and 58 minutes per day online, with 2 hours and 27 minutes spent on social media platforms. Regardless of their age, level of education, culture, or economic status, it affects how individuals interact and socialise with one another in daily life. The usage of social media increased more quickly among young people because it is a fascinating world that helps people make friends easily and lowers feelings of loneliness while also providing a great way to release stress. From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic period, social media platforms have become an integral part of the lives of young adults, providing them with opportunities for self-expression, connection, and information sharing.

Historically, media, such as magazines, television, and advertising, have been recognized as influential sources shaping societal beauty ideals and contributing to body dissatisfaction. However, the rise of social media has intensified this phenomenon, with the constant exposure to carefully curated images that promote unrealistic beauty standards. The pervasive presence of idealized body images on social media has raised concerns about its impact on individuals' body image perception, particularly among young adults who are more vulnerable to societal beauty standards. Body image refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of their own physical appearance, including satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their body. Adolescents use social media extensively (Pew Research Centre, 2018; Rodgers et al., 2020), and research has focused heavily on social media as a potential risk factor for body dissatisfaction (Rodgers and Melioli, 2016).

Given these factors, this research paper is an attempt to survey the existing social media-related literature to examine the influence of social media on the body image of young adults. This research paper employs a comprehensive literature review approach to synthesize existing studies on the influence of social media on the

body image of young adults. Relevant research articles, scholarly publications, and academic databases have been systematically reviewed to gather comprehensive and up-to-date information on the topic. A combination of qualitative and quantitative studies have been included to provide a balanced understanding of the phenomenon.

The paper focuses on investigating the prevalence and trends of social media usage among young adults, analyse the portrayal of idealized body standards on social media platforms, explore the mechanisms through which social media influences body image perception, including exposure to idealized body images, comparison processes, social feedback, as well as internalization of societal beauty standards and understanding the consequences of social media on young adults' body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviours, and psychological well-being. The paper also proposes strategies and interventions to promote positive body image among young adults in the context of social media.

## **THEORETICAL FRAME WORKS**

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Social Comparison Theory, proposed by Leon Festinger (1954), suggests that individuals determine their own self-worth and evaluate their abilities and attributes by comparing themselves to others. In the context of body image and social media, this theory posits that individuals engage in upward social comparisons, where they compare themselves to others who possess perceived ideal body standards depicted on social media platforms. These upward comparisons often lead to feelings of inadequacy, body dissatisfaction, and a negative self-image.

Social media facilitates constant exposure to carefully curated and edited images of individuals who adhere to societal beauty ideals, creating an environment ripe for social comparisons. Users may compare their bodies to the seemingly flawless and unrealistic standards portrayed on social media, leading to negative body image perceptions and a desire to attain the same level of perceived attractiveness. The theory highlights the role of social comparisons in shaping body image dissatisfaction among young adults using social media.

### **Objectification Theory**

Objectification Theory, developed by Fredrickson, B. & Roberts, T. A., explores the process through which individuals are reduced to objects to be visually evaluated and consumed. It emphasizes the sexual objectification and self-objectification experienced by women in particular, although it is relevant to individuals of all genders. In the context of social media and body image, Objectification Theory posits that the constant exposure to objectifying images on social media platforms can contribute to individuals viewing their bodies as objects for others' visual consumption rather than valuing their bodies for their functionality or health.

Objectifying portrayals on social media, such as explicit objectification, body shaming, or the relentless focus on appearance, can lead to self-objectification, where individuals internalize the perspective of an external observer and view themselves primarily in terms of their physical appearance. This self-objectification can increase body surveillance, body shame, and body dissatisfaction among young adults, negatively impacting their overall body image.

### **Self-Perception Theory**

Self-Perception Theory, proposed by Bem, D., (1972), suggests that individuals develop attitudes and beliefs about themselves by observing their own behaviour and inferring their internal states from their actions. In the context of body image and social media, this theory posits that individuals may form their body image perceptions based on their own online behaviours and the feedback received from others on social media.

Young adults who actively engage in posting and sharing body-related content on social media platforms may experience heightened self-awareness regarding their appearance, potentially influencing their body image perceptions. Additionally, the positive or negative feedback received from peers, such as comments, likes, or comparison with others, can further shape their body image perceptions. Self-Perception Theory highlights the role of self-observation, online behaviours, and social feedback in the formation of body image among young adults in the social media context.

These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the processes underlying the influence of social media on body image among young adults. By understanding the role of social comparison, objectification, and self-perception, researchers and practitioners can develop targeted interventions and strategies to promote healthier body image attitudes and mitigate the negative effects of social media.

### **Social Media Usage and Trends Among Young Adults**

Social media platforms have experienced exponential growth in recent years, with a significant portion of users comprising young adults. Research indicates that young adults are avid users of social media, spending a considerable amount of time engaging with various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok etc. These platforms provide opportunities for self-presentation, social interaction, and exposure to a wide range of content, including body-related content. According to the Pew Research Centre (2015), at least 92% of teenagers are active on social media. Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin (2015) identified the 13–17 age group as particularly heavy users of social media users, with 87% having access to a computer, and 58% to a tablet device. Almost three-quarters of adolescents aged 15 to 17 use a smartphone, and 68% of those aged 13 to 14 (Pew Research Centre, 2015).

### **Content and Representation on Social Media Platforms**

Social media platforms often portray and promote idealized body standards. Users frequently encounter images and videos showcasing individuals who possess culturally defined standards of attractiveness, such as a slim physique, muscularity, or flawless skin. These idealized body representations can create unrealistic and unattainable expectations, setting a narrow benchmark for beauty. Moreover, social media platforms facilitate the constant sharing and resharing of images, contributing to the perpetuation and amplification of these ideals.

The constant exposure to such content can lead young adults to internalize these idealized body standards as norms, influencing their perceptions of their own bodies. This exposure can contribute to social comparison processes, where individuals compare themselves unfavourably to the carefully constructed and edited images on social media. As a result, individuals may experience increased body dissatisfaction and a desire to conform to these unrealistic standards.

### **Idealized Body Standards**

Social media plays a significant role in reinforcing and promoting idealized body standards. Influencers, celebrities, and models often project images that adhere to societal beauty ideals, creating a culture of comparison and aspiration. Young adults may feel pressured to conform to these standards in order to be perceived as attractive and socially desirable. The constant exposure to idealized body standards can create a distorted perception of what is considered "normal" or "acceptable" in terms of body appearance. In order to create the greatest possible depiction of oneself, people spend a lot of time setting up the lighting, choosing the best viewpoint, shooting many shots, and using Photoshop (Chua and Chang, 2016; Dumas et al., 2017). Because of this, it appears that a big portion of Instagram users are those who, in contrast to the viewer, have seemingly beautiful physique, lifestyles, and relationships (Victoria, 2019).

Additionally, the availability of filters, editing tools, and photo manipulation apps on social media platforms enables users to alter their appearances and conform to these idealized standards, further perpetuating unrealistic body expectations. This digital alteration of images blurs the line between reality and fiction, making it difficult for young adults to distinguish between authentic and digitally enhanced bodies.

### **Impact on Body Dissatisfaction**

The influence of social media on body dissatisfaction among young adults is well-documented. Studies consistently show a significant association between social media use and increased levels of body dissatisfaction. Constant exposure to idealized and unattainable body images can contribute to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and negative body image perceptions.

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Young adults who engage more frequently and extensively with social media platforms may experience heightened body dissatisfaction. Social media use is associated with a greater tendency to make appearance comparisons (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Further, both experimental and correlational studies have suggested that the relationship between social media use and body dissatisfaction may be partially mediated by appearance comparisons (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

The constant comparison to seemingly perfect and filtered bodies can create a negative self-perception, as individuals may perceive themselves as falling short of these unrealistic standards. Furthermore, the "highlight reel" nature of social media, where individuals tend to showcase their best moments and physical appearance, can contribute to a distorted perception of others' lives and bodies, exacerbating feelings of dissatisfaction with one's own body.

The impact of social media on body dissatisfaction is not limited to a specific gender or age group. Both men and women can be affected by these influences, although the specific ideals and pressures may differ. It is important to recognize the potential harm caused by the promotion of idealized body standards on social media and to develop strategies to promote body acceptance and positive body image among young adults in this digital era.

### **Influencing Factors**

#### **Gender Differences**

Gender plays a significant role in the influence of social media on body image. Research suggests that women tend to be more susceptible to the negative effects of social media on body dissatisfaction compared to men. Women are more likely to engage in social comparisons, internalize societal beauty ideals, and experience body objectification. The portrayal of idealized and thin female bodies on social media platforms can contribute to increased body dissatisfaction and drive the desire for achieving unrealistic body standards.

On the other hand, men are not immune to the influence of social media on body image. The rise of "fitspiration" and "gym culture" on social media has led to the promotion of muscularity and a lean physique as the ideal male body. Men may experience pressures to attain a muscular physique and may engage in body-related comparisons and dissatisfaction as a result.

#### **Peer Influence**

Peers play a crucial role in shaping body image perceptions through social media. The online social networks and connections established on these platforms can contribute to a sense of belonging and social validation. Young adults often engage in comparisons with their peers and seek social approval and affirmation related to their physical appearance.

Positive comments, likes, and followers on social media can reinforce and enhance positive body image perceptions. Conversely, negative comments, cyberbullying, or being excluded from social media groups can have detrimental effects on body image and self-esteem. Peer influence on social media can amplify the impact of idealized body standards and contribute to heightened body dissatisfaction among young adults.

#### **Social Media Engagement**

The level of social media engagement, including the time spent on social media platforms and the types of activities performed, can influence body image perceptions. Research suggests that higher levels of social media engagement, such as frequent scrolling, following accounts focused on appearance, and seeking validation through likes and comments, are associated with increased body dissatisfaction.

The passive consumption of idealized body images without active engagement, such as liking or commenting, can still contribute to negative body image perceptions. Simply observing and internalizing these images can lead to social comparisons and increased dissatisfaction with one's own body.

**Active Versus Passive Use**

The manner in which individuals use social media can also influence body image outcomes. Active engagement, such as posting, commenting, and interacting with others in a meaningful way, may have a different impact on body image compared to passive use, which involves passive scrolling, observing, and consuming content without active participation.

Active use of social media, particularly when it involves sharing positive and diverse body representations, can contribute to a sense of empowerment, body acceptance, and positive body image. In contrast, passive use, characterized by constant exposure to idealized body standards without actively challenging or critically evaluating them, may reinforce negative body image perceptions.

Understanding the influencing factors, such as gender differences, peer influence, social media engagement, and active versus passive use, is crucial for developing targeted interventions and strategies to promote healthy body image among young adults in the context of social media. By addressing these factors, it is possible to mitigate the negative impact of social media on body image and foster a more positive and inclusive online environment.

**Body Dissatisfaction**

One of the primary psychological consequences of the influence of social media on body image is increased body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is a major contributor to eating disorders, disordered eating, low self-esteem, and poor psychological health (Stice and Shaw, 2002; Paxton et al., 2006; Cruz-Sáez et al., 2018). It is defined as "a person's negative thoughts and feelings about his/her body" (Grogan, 1999, p. 2). Continuous exposure to idealized and unrealistic body standards on social media platforms can lead to negative self-perception and dissatisfaction with one's own body. This dissatisfaction can manifest as a preoccupation with perceived flaws or imperfections, constant comparison to others, and a desire to achieve an unattainable ideal.

**Eating Disorders**

The influence of social media on body image has been associated with an increased risk of developing eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Teenagers and young adults who use social media frequently may become more dissatisfied with their bodies and driven to be skinny, making them more susceptible to eating disorders (Jiotsa B et. al. (2021)). The constant exposure to idealized body images and the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards can contribute to disordered eating behaviours, unhealthy dieting practices, and an unhealthy preoccupation with weight and body shape. In the US, depressive symptoms in young adults increased by 63% between 2018 and 2019, with researchers stating that "a likely explanation could be the concurrent rise in social media." In Canada, there was a 62% increase in eating disorder-related emergency department visits recorded between 2018-2019 and 2020 (Bayley, B. 2022).

Social media platforms may also provide spaces for the promotion and dissemination of pro-eating disorder content, known as "pro-ana" or "pro-mia" communities, which can further exacerbate the risk of developing eating disorders among vulnerable individuals.

**Low Self-Esteem**

The negative impact of social media on body image can also lead to low self-esteem. Comparing one to idealized body standards and perceiving one as falling short can erode self-esteem and self-worth. Individuals may develop negative beliefs about their appearance, leading to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of self.

Low self-esteem can extend beyond body image concerns and affect various areas of an individual's life, such as relationships, academic performance, and overall well-being.

**Depression and Anxiety**

The influence of social media on body image has been linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety among young adults. Constant exposure to idealized body images and the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards can contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction, self-consciousness, and social comparison. These factors,

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combined with the fear of judgment and rejection, can increase the risk of developing depressive symptoms and anxiety disorders. According to a study by Woods and Scott (2016,) young adults who use social media more frequently have poorer sleep, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of anxiety and despair.

Moreover, social media platforms can amplify the impact of negative self-perception and body dissatisfaction by facilitating cyberbullying, negative comments, and body shaming. The online environment can be a source of stress and anxiety, further exacerbating mental health issues.

It is essential to recognize the potential psychological consequences associated with the influence of social media on body image and to provide support, education, and interventions to promote positive body image, self-esteem, and mental well-being among young adults. Targeted interventions, such as promoting body positivity, media literacy programs, and mental health resources, can help mitigate these negative psychological outcomes.

### **Coping Strategies and Interventions**

#### **Media Literacy Programs**

Media literacy programs can play a crucial role in mitigating the negative influence of social media on body image. These programs aim to educate young adults about the media's portrayal of body ideals, the use of digital manipulation, and the unrealistic nature of many images. By developing critical thinking skills and media literacy competencies, individuals can better analyze and interpret the content they encounter on social media platforms. Media literacy programs can empower young adults to question beauty standards, challenge unrealistic portrayals, and develop a more balanced and realistic perspective on body image. Body image media literacy programmes should emphasise social media use, particularly the pressures related to viewing photos of others, and peers in particular (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

#### **Body Positive Movements**

Body positive movements promote the acceptance and celebration of diverse body types and challenge societal beauty ideals. These movements emphasize self-acceptance, self-love, and the recognition that all bodies are worthy of respect and appreciation. Body positive initiatives on social media platforms can provide a counter-narrative to the prevailing ideals by sharing diverse and inclusive representations of bodies. By promoting body diversity, body positive movements can help young adults develop a more positive body image and reduce the impact of idealized body standards perpetuated on social media.

#### **Supportive Online Communities**

Supportive online communities and forums provide spaces for individuals to share their experiences, seek support, and engage in positive body image discussions. These communities foster a sense of belonging and provide a platform for individuals to connect with others who may share similar struggles and concerns. By offering support, encouragement, and validation, these communities can help combat the negative influence of social media on body image. Moderated and safe online spaces ensure that the communities remain positive and supportive.

#### **Regulatory Measures**

Regulatory measures can also play a role in addressing the negative impact of social media on body image. This includes implementing policies and guidelines for social media platforms to promote responsible content moderation, discourage the promotion of unrealistic beauty standards, and combat harmful body shaming or pro-eating disorder content. By establishing regulations that promote ethical practices and encourage positive body image promotion, regulatory measures can help create a healthier online environment for young adults.

It is important to note that coping strategies and interventions should be multi-faceted and comprehensive, addressing individual, social, and systemic factors. Combining media literacy programs, body positive movements, supportive online communities, and regulatory measures can help mitigate the negative influence of social media on body image and promote a more positive and inclusive online culture.

In conclusion, the influence of social media on the body image of young adults is a complex and significant issue. The constant exposure to idealized body standards, the portrayal of edited and curated images, and the culture of comparison on social media platforms can contribute to negative body image perceptions, body dissatisfaction, and a range of psychological consequences. In this digital era, where social media plays a prominent role in the lives of young adults, it is crucial to recognize the potential negative impact on body image and take proactive steps to foster a healthier and more inclusive online environment. By addressing these challenges and implementing evidence-based strategies, we can empower young adults to develop a positive body image and enhance their overall well-being.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite significant progress in understanding the influence of social media on body image among young adults, several research gaps and limitations still exist. Further research is needed to explore cultural influences, long-term effects, and the experiences of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in the context of social media and body image. Educational initiatives, mental health support, and policy implications are essential components in creating a comprehensive approach to promoting positive body image among young adults.

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