



Exploring the Impact of Social Networking on Body Dissatisfaction, Self-Image, and Psychological Distress Among Young Adults

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Abstract: The current study examines how social networking affects young adults' psychological distress and physical self-esteem in the 18–24 age range. This study used a quantitative cross-sectional research methodology with 150 individuals to examine the relationship between social media use, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health outcomes. Standardized questionnaires such as the Body Dissatisfaction Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, and Social Media Engagement Questionnaire were used. Contrary to earlier studies, there was no significant negative connection ($r = -.067$, $p = .414$) between body dissatisfaction and social media use. There were no discernible gender differences in depression or body dissatisfaction scores. Social media use was not significantly predicted by self-esteem either ($R^2 = .001$, $p = .711$). These findings challenge conventional wisdom about the consistently detrimental effects of social media on adolescent self-perception and highlight the need for more advanced approaches to investigate the impact of digital media on underage mental health. The study proposes school programs, parental involvement, and media literacy instruction as interventions to encourage social networking site use that is healthier.

Keywords: *Social Network; Adolescents; Body Self-Image; Body Dissatisfaction; Psychological Distress; Self-Esteem; Mental Health; Gender Differences; Media Literacy; Cross-Sectional Study*

1. Introduction

Social networking has also become a part of adolescents' life in the modern digital era, defining how they interact, view themselves, and function in the world. Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook are some of the platforms through which adolescents interact, express themselves, and form their virtual identity. Social networking offers avenues for social interaction and expression but also poses serious problems regarding body self-image and psychological health. Young adulthood is a critical period of identity consolidation and self-evaluation, during which individuals refine their sense of self, including their body image and perceived social worth. While more cognitively and emotionally mature than adolescents, young adults remain highly susceptible to external influences—particularly those stemming from digital media. Social networking sites (SNS) provide an intensely interactive space where users continually present curated versions of themselves, seek external validation through likes and comments, and engage in social comparison. Daily exposure to idealized portrayals of beauty, success, and lifestyle norms can distort perceptions of reality, leading to increased body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, and heightened psychological distress. Research increasingly highlights the negative psychological consequences of this repeated exposure, especially among individuals who internalize unrealistic appearance standards or who rely heavily on online feedback for self-worth.

2. Review of Literature

A growing body of literature has examined the intersection of social media use, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and psychological distress—especially in adolescents and young adults. Several studies suggest that prolonged exposure to idealized content on social networking platforms promotes unfavourable self-comparisons and distorted body perceptions.

Fardouly et al. (2015) found that viewing appearance-focused content on Facebook was linked to heightened body image concerns among young women. This was attributed to upward social comparison—users comparing themselves with seemingly flawless online personas. Similarly, Perloff (2014) demonstrated that social media fosters internalization of beauty ideals, which mediates the relationship between SNS exposure and body dissatisfaction.

Ryding and Kuss (2019) reviewed the psychological risks of social networking and identified a potential link between frequent Instagram use and body dysmorphic disorder symptoms. Their findings underscore the seriousness of visual-centric platforms in fostering unhealthy self-scrutiny. Grogan (2016) further emphasized that negative body image is a consistent predictor of psychological distress, including depression and anxiety.

On the other hand, Akintola (2024) reported contrasting findings in the Nigerian context, where SNS use was associated with increased self-expression and confidence among youth. This highlights the influence of cultural context and content type on digital experiences.

Ahmad et al. (2019) pointed to peer influence and validation-seeking as critical mediators between SNS use and mental health outcomes, especially among teenagers with low self-esteem.

Sharma (2023) explored gender-based differences and found that females tend to experience more distress related to appearance-based social comparisons, while males showed distress linked to lifestyle-based comparisons (e.g., success, fitness).

Lastly, Casanova-Garrigós et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis showing that platforms emphasizing physical appearance (like Instagram and TikTok) were significantly more likely to contribute to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction than platforms focused on interaction or content sharing (e.g., WhatsApp or Reddit).

Together, these studies reveal inconsistencies shaped by individual traits (like self-esteem and resilience), cultural background, gender, and the nature of social media engagement. This study aims to address these gaps by examining how self-image and psychological distress interplay with SNS use among Indian young adults, emphasizing local relevance and theoretical grounding.

These studies show that SNS influence is mediated by factors like content type, gender, self-esteem, and media literacy—pointing to the need for localized, culturally sensitive research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

This study is to explore how social networking shapes self-perception, emotional well-being, and mental health outcomes by examining its effects on adolescents' body self-image and psychological distress.

3.2 Variables of the Study

3.2.1 Independent Variable

Social Networking: Describes adolescents' usage habits and activity on social media sites as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, etc.

3.2.2 Dependent Variable

Psychological Stress: Describes the occurrence of negative emotions such as depression, and stress in adolescents.

3.3.3 Mediating Variable

Body Self Image/Body Dissatisfaction: Serves as a mediator that can clarify how social networking affects psychological distress.

Self Esteem: Can affect the strength or direction of the relationship between body image and psychological distress.

3.3 Research Objectives

- a) To examine the link between the use of social networks and body self-concept in teenagers.
- b) To investigate the ways social networking effects self-esteem and body dissatisfaction among adolescents.
- c) To evaluate the effect of social media use on psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression.
- d) To investigate gender variations in the influence of social networking on body self-concept and mental well-being.
- e) To offer information and suggestions for encouraging healthier social media use in teenagers.

3.4 Hypothesis of the Study

H₁: There is a significant relationship between social networking usage and body self-image among adolescents.

H₂: There is a significant association between social media-based social comparisons and body dissatisfaction in adolescents.

H₃: There is a significant correlation between social networking engagement and psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, among adolescents.

H₄: There is a significant difference between male and female adolescents in the effects of social networking on body self-image and psychological distress.

H₅: There is a significant relationship between online validation-seeking behavior and lower self-esteem among adolescents.

3.5 Research Design

Using a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational approach, this study looks at how adolescents between the ages of 18 and 24 perceive their bodies, use social networking, and experience psychological discomfort. To collect data efficiently and measure the study variables objectively, standardized self-report questionnaires are employed in a survey approach.

Cross-sectional design is suitable in that it takes measurements at one point in time, enabling an evaluation of associations and patterns without long-term follow-ups. It allows correlational analysis for identifying the strength and direction of associations between social media use, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and psychological distress. Moreover, group comparisons (t-tests & ANOVA) will evaluate body self-image and mental health differences across genders and levels of social media usage, and multiple regression analysis will determine predictive factors for psychological distress.

The organized research design ensures a statistically valid as well as methodologically appropriate framework, guaranteeing reliable evidence regarding the influence of social networking on adolescent mental well-being.

3.6 Data Collection Tools

To measure the study's primary variables—social networking use, body self-concept, and psychological distress in adolescents aged 18–24 years—the following standardized self-report questionnaires will be utilized:

Body Dissatisfaction Scale (BDS): Scales the level of dissatisfaction with one's body image. Participants rate their own views of body shape, weight, and appearance..

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES): Measures global self-worth and levels of self-esteem, has 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21): Assesses symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress experienced over the previous week, has 21 items, categorized into three subscales (Depression, Anxiety, Stress).

Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ): Quantifies the amount of time spent on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. evaluates the length of time, frequency, patterns of interaction, and emotional reactions to social media posts.

3.7 Data Analysis

To offer a thorough and statistically sound investigation of the relationship between social networking use, body self-image, and psychological distress in teenagers aged 18 to 24, the data will be examined using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. The analytical techniques that will be employed are;

3.7.1 Descriptive Statistics

Mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions will be computed to summarize participants' responses on social networking use, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and

psychological distress. These figures will give a general picture of trends in the data, and assist in the identification of patterns in social media use and mental health outcomes.

3.7.2 Correlation Analysis

The strength and direction of the relationships between social media use, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and psychological distress will be assessed using the Pearson correlation coefficient. This will help determine whether using social media more frequently is substantially associated with higher levels of psychological discomfort and body dissatisfaction.

3.7.3 Group Comparisons

Independent t-tests will be used to investigate gender differences in body self-concept and psychological distress. One-way ANOVA will test differences in psychological distress and body dissatisfaction between participants who are classified as low, moderate, and high social media users.

3.7.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis will be used to assess the degree to which social networking use predicts body dissatisfaction and psychological distress. Independent variables will be social media interaction, self-esteem, social comparison behavior, and time spent on social networking platforms, whereas dependent variables will be body dissatisfaction scores and psychological distress scores. The analysis will serve to determine whether social media interaction has a direct, significant relationship with self-image and mental well-being.

4. Data Analysis

This study aims to investigate the potential relationships between the psychological or behavioral variables being studied and demographic characteristics like gender, educational attainment, and socioeconomic level. A total of 150 participants contributed to this study by responding to a structured questionnaire. The data collected were statistically analysed to gain insights into the distribution and trends within the sample group.

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics of all variables*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	150	1.56	.498
Educational-qualification	150	2.29	.661
Socioeconomic-status	150	1.78	.858
Valid N (listwise)	150		

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the three variables—socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and gender—that were investigated in this study phase. The sample's gender distribution reveals a greater percentage of female participants (coded as 2), with a mean value of 1.56. Further evidence for this comes from frequency analysis, which shows that 44% of the sample identified as male and 56% as female. A mean of two was obtained for educational qualifications. Educational qualifications yielded a mean of 2.29 and a standard deviation of 0.661, suggesting a relatively moderate spread of educational levels among the participants. The mode and median value of 2 indicate that the largest proportion of respondents were graduates.

Socioeconomic status, with a mean score of 1.78 and the highest standard deviation among the three variables (0.858), shows a relatively wider variability in participants' economic backgrounds. Most participants belonged to the lower economic category (coded as 1), which aligns with the mode value of 1 and a frequency count of 50%.

Table H1: *Correlation Between Social Media Use and Body Dissatisfaction*

		Social Media	Body Dissatisfaction
Social Media	Pearson Correlation	. ^a	. ^a
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.
	N	1	0
Body Dissatisfaction	Pearson Correlation	. ^a	. ^a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	
	N	0	0
a. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.			

It was not possible to quantify the association between body dissatisfaction and social media use, according to correlation analysis table H1. With N=1 for social media and N=0 for body dissatisfaction, the table displays "Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant."

Discussion: This technical constraint indicates measurement problems in this section of the dataset. Either the social media variable did not have variance (all subjects reported the same values) or not enough data were gathered for the body dissatisfaction variable. This is a methodological problem that hindered testing the hypothesis on the relationship between social media consumption and body image issues. Future studies must guarantee sufficient variance in measurements and full data collection on all variables.

Table H2: *Correlation Between Social Media Use and Body Dissatisfaction*

		Social Media	Body Dissatisfaction
Social media	Pearson Correlation	1	-.067
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.414
	N	149	149
Body Dissatisfaction	Pearson Correlation	-.067	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.414	
	N	149	149

Social media use and body dissatisfaction have a weakly negative link, according to the second correlation table ($r = -.067$, $p = .414$, $N = 149$). There's no statistical significance to this.

Discussion: Increased social media use in this population is not associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction, according to the non-significant negative association. This finding runs counter to previous studies that found a positive relationship between social media use and body image issues. There are a number of potential explanations, including the possibility that unmeasured variables in this study mediated the link. Alternatively, the poor association could indicate that exposure to social media in and of itself is not the cause of body dissatisfaction, but rather a complex interplay of factors.

Table H3: *Correlation Between Social Media Use and Depression*

		Social media	Depression Scale
Social media	Pearson Correlation	. ^a	. ^a
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.
	N	1	0
Depression Scale	Pearson Correlation	. ^a	. ^a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	
	N	0	0
a. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.			

Like H1, the table indicates that correlation analysis between social media usage and depression scale score could not be calculated because at least one of the variables remained constant with $N=1$ for social media and $N=0$ for depression scale.

Discussion: This is yet another measurement or data collection problem that precluded analysis of the association between social media use and depression. The continuity of one, or both, variables indicates either homogeneous responses or missing data. This methodological flaw serves to emphasize the need for intense data screening and collection protocols in future research that investigates these associations

Table H4: *Gender Differences in Body Dissatisfaction and Depression (Group Statistics)*

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Body dissatisfaction	1	66	2.29	.957	.118
	2	83	2.30	.959	.105
Depression Scale	1	66	1.97	1.549	.191
	2	83	1.42	.607	.067

Table H4: *Gender Differences in Body Dissatisfaction and Depression (Independent Samples Test)*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
body dis	Equal variances assumed	.004	.951	-.084	147	.933	-.013	.158	-.326	.299
	Equal variances not assumed			-.084	139.684	.933	-.013	.158	-.326	.299
Depression Scale	Equal variances assumed	1.162	.283	2.953	147	.004	.548	.186	.181	.915
	Equal variances not assumed			2.713	80.904	.008	.548	.202	.146	.950

Results

1.Body Dissatisfaction:

Gender 1 (n=66): Mean = 2.29, SD = 0.957

Gender 2 (n=83): Mean = 2.30, SD = 0.959

$t(147) = -0.084, p = 0.933$

2. Depression Scale:

Gender 1 (n=66): Mean = 1.97, SD = 1.549

Gender 2 (n=83): Mean = 1.42, SD = 0.607

$t(147) = 2.953, p = 0.004$

Discussion: The results of the t-test identify different gender patterns between the two mental health variables:

For body dissatisfaction, the nearly equal means across gender groups (difference of only 0.01) and the non-significant t-test confirm that the two genders perceive comparable levels of body dissatisfaction. This contradicts some earlier research that often indicates gender differences in body image concerns. It implies that in today's cultural climate, body image pressures are equalizing across the genders.

In depression, gender group 1 indicates greater levels of depression. The large difference in standard deviations between gender groups (1.549 vs 0.607) also indicates higher variability in depression experience among participants in gender group 1. The result is consistent with epidemiological evidence of different depression rates across genders and underscores the necessity of gender-sensitive interventions in mental health.

Table H5: Regression Analysis of Self-Esteem as a Predictor of Social Media Use

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.031 ^a	.001	-.006	.845
a. Predictors: (Constant), self esteem				

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.099	1	.099	.138	.711 ^b
	Residual	104.962	147	.714		
	Total	105.060	148			
a. Dependent Variable: Social Media						
b. Predictors: (Constant), self esteem						

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.176	.181		12.022	.000
	self esteem	-.053	.143	-.031	-.372	.711
a. Dependent Variable: Social Media						

Results

1. Model Summary: $R = 0.031$, $R^2 = 0.001$, Adjusted $R^2 = -0.006$

2. ANOVA: $F(1, 147) = 0.138$, $p = 0.711$

3. Coefficients:

Constant = 2.176, $p < 0.001$

Self-esteem: $B = -0.053$, $\beta = -0.031$, $p = 0.711$

Discussion: The regression analysis is quite obvious that self-esteem is not a good predictor of social media usage in this population. The near zero R^2 value (0.001) shows that self-esteem is explaining the variance in social media usage at just 0.1% level, which is practically nothing. The non-significant regression coefficient for self-esteem ($p = 0.711$) too verifies this.

This finding contradicts assumptions that psychological aspects such as self-esteem are responsible for social media use behaviors. It indicates that social media use could be influenced by other elements outside of this model, such as entertainment, informational, social connectivity needs, or even just habitual behaviors. Future studies must take into consideration a more inclusive model with several possible predictors of social media use.

4.3 Discussion

Examining the effects of social networking on adolescents' bodily self-image and psychological distress between the ages of 18 and 24 was the aim of this study. The results offer insightful information about how various social media usage habits affect teenagers' emotional health, sense of self, and body image. This study emphasizes the intricate ways that social networking sites influence mental health and self-concept, highlighting the need to encourage healthier digital habits at a crucial juncture in identity development as well as the possible dangers of online comparison and validation-seeking.

Social networking use has a significant association with body self-view among teens. This hypothesis was unable to be tested because of a technical flaw in the dataset—one of

the measures (social media usage or body dissatisfaction) was constant or had missing values, making it impossible to correlate with.

Social media-based social comparisons are significantly associated with body dissatisfaction among adolescents. The study discovered a small and non-significant negative connection between social media use and body dissatisfaction ($r = -0.067$, $p = 0.414$). This suggests that higher social networking site use did not correlate with higher body image dissatisfaction in this population. Although this finding contradicts previous studies, it may be the consequence of unmeasured moderating factors such cultural differences, self-awareness, or critical media literacy.

Social networking activity is significantly associated with psychological distress, i.e., anxiety and depression, in adolescents.

Similar to Hypothesis 1, this hypothesis was untestable because of the absence of variance or missing data on the depression scale variable.

Such methodological constraints show that future research with adequate and balanced data would be essential to explore this association accurately.

Significant difference exists between male and female teenagers in the impact of social networking on body self-perception and psychological distress. The results of the t-test showed no discernible gender difference in body dissatisfaction ($p = 0.933$), suggesting that gender worries about body image are becoming more equal. However, there was a significant difference in the levels of depression ($p = 0.004$), with more depressive symptoms in men. This emphasizes the significance of gender-sensitive mental health therapies and the shifting gender dynamics in mental health.

There is a significant relationship between online validation-seeking behavior and lower self-esteem among adolescents. Self-esteem did not substantially predict social media use, according to regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.001$, $p = 0.711$). This finding suggests that adolescent social networking behavior may be affected by a variety of factors, including peer trends, boredom, or habit, rather than just self-esteem levels. It challenges widely held beliefs and calls for more integrated models in subsequent research.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to look at the intricate relationship between teenage psychological discomfort, body self-image, and social networking use in the 18–24 age range. The study aimed to investigate the relationship between social media use and body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health outcomes across various demographic groups

using a quantitative cross-sectional methodology and standardized psychometric assessments. The results offer significant new understandings of the complex relationship between digital media and young people's psychological health.

The study produced a number of significant findings that both support and contradict the body of knowledge already available on the psychological effects of social media. Our data showed a weak negative correlation between body dissatisfaction and social media usage ($r = -.067$, $p = .414$), which defies common assumptions and prior research findings. This suggests that higher social media engagement did not significantly correlate with heightened body image concerns in our sample. This surprising discovery runs counter to the large amount of research that has continuously connected social media use to body dissatisfaction, especially in teens who are more susceptible to social comparison processes.

Gender analysis revealed another significant insight: while males and females reported nearly identical levels of body dissatisfaction (means of 2.29 and 2.30 respectively), significant differences emerged in depression scores, with one gender group demonstrating substantially higher depression levels (mean 1.97 vs 1.42, $p = .004$). This gender disparity in psychological distress, despite similar body image concerns, suggests that the pathways through which social media impacts mental health may be gender-specific, potentially mediated by different psychological vulnerabilities or social media usage patterns.

The regression analysis investigating self-esteem as a predictor of social media usage yielded particularly illuminating results. With an R^2 value of merely 0.001 and a non-significant coefficient ($p = .711$), self-esteem demonstrated virtually no predictive capacity for social media engagement. This challenges theoretical frameworks that position psychological factors like self-esteem as primary drivers of social media behavior, suggesting instead that usage patterns may be influenced by factors beyond internal psychological states—such as entertainment value, information-seeking, social connectivity needs, or habitual behavior patterns.

These results provide a more sophisticated comprehension of how teenagers use and are impacted by social networking sites. The lack of a significant correlation between body dissatisfaction and social media use raises the possibility that variables not included in this study, such as the type of content ingested, active versus passive usage patterns, underlying psychological resilience, or the existence of protective social support networks, may moderate or mediate the relationship between these variables. This emphasizes how crucial it is to view social media as a complex ecosystem whose impacts depend on user characteristics and usage situations rather than as a single, all-encompassing force.

From a methodological perspective, the study encountered significant limitations that warrant acknowledgment. Technical constraints in data collection prevented the analysis of certain hypothesized relationships, particularly between social media use and psychological distress measures. The inability to compute correlations due to constant variables points to measurement issues that future research must address through more robust data collection protocols and variable operationalization. These methodological challenges underscore the complexity of measuring and analyzing digital media engagement in relation to psychological outcomes.

The limitations of this study should be addressed in future research initiatives while broadening the scope of the study. An understanding of the causal links between social media use and psychological effects across time would be greatly enhanced by longitudinal designs. Qualitative components added to mixed-methods approaches may shed light on the subjective experiences that underlie the quantitative trends seen. A more thorough knowledge of when and for whom social media creates psychological dangers would result from examining potential mediating and moderating elements, such as cultural influences, personality traits, content kinds ingested, and social comparison tendencies.

For educational institutions and parents, these findings reinforce the importance of media literacy programs that foster critical thinking about online content, helping adolescents develop healthy relationships with social media regardless of usage frequency. Rather than focusing exclusively on reducing screen time, interventions might be more effective if they target qualitative aspects of engagement—promoting active rather than passive usage, encouraging diverse content consumption beyond appearance-focused material, and fostering authentic online connections.

At the policy level, the research supports the development of digital wellbeing initiatives that acknowledge the complex and sometimes counterintuitive relationship between social media and psychological outcomes. Rather than implementing blanket restrictions, policies might focus on promoting healthy engagement patterns and providing resources for those most vulnerable to negative effects.

Future research directions should address the limitations encountered in this study while expanding the scope of investigation. Longitudinal designs would provide valuable insights into the causal relationships between social media usage and psychological outcomes over time. Mixed-methods approaches incorporating qualitative elements could illuminate the subjective experiences underlying the quantitative patterns observed. Investigating potential mediating and moderating variables—such as social comparison tendencies, content types

consumed, personality factors, and cultural influences—would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of when and for whom social media poses psychological risks.

Additionally, expanding research to include younger adolescents (13-17 years) might reveal different patterns, as this demographic may be particularly vulnerable during crucial identity formation stages. Comparative analysis across different social media platforms would also be valuable, as each platform's unique features and norms may differentially impact body image and psychological wellbeing.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on social networking's psychological impacts by highlighting the complex, sometimes counterintuitive relationships between digital media engagement and adolescent wellbeing. By challenging simplistic narratives about social media's uniformly negative effects, the findings encourage a more nuanced approach to understanding and addressing digital media's role in youth development. As social networking continues to evolve and permeate adolescent life, research must similarly adapt to capture the dynamic interplay between online engagement and psychological outcomes, ultimately informing more effective interventions to promote healthy development in an increasingly digital world.

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