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# The effect of social media on self-esteem and body image

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**Abstract**
The rise of social media has transformed how individuals perceive themselves and others. This review investigates the impact of social media platforms on self-esteem and body image, focusing on adolescents and young adults. Drawing on recent empirical studies and psychological theories, the paper explores mechanisms such as social comparison, appearance-focused content, and engagement with influencers. The findings highlight both positive and negative consequences, with the negative effects-particularly related to body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem-being more prominent. Recommendations for intervention strategies and future research directions are provided.

**Keywords:** Social media, self-esteem, body image, adolescents, social comparison

## Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of daily life, especially for adolescents and young adults. As of 2024, over 5.07 billion people globally use social media, representing more than 62% of the world's population (Datareportal, 2024). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube dominate digital interactions, providing users with tools to connect, share, and curate their lives. While these platforms offer numerous benefits-ranging from community building to personal expression—they also create fertile ground for comparison, validation-seeking behaviors, and internalization of idealized beauty standards. Increasingly, concerns have been raised regarding the psychological impact of this constant exposure to idealized images and content, particularly on self-esteem and body image.

Self-esteem refers to the overall evaluation of one's worth or value, whereas body image is the subjective perception of one's physical appearance. Both constructs are critical to psychological well-being and are especially vulnerable during adolescence-a developmental period marked by heightened self-consciousness and identity exploration. Studies have shown that up to 90% of teenage girls and over 70% of teenage boys report dissatisfaction with their bodies at some point during adolescence (Common Sense Media, 2016). This dissatisfaction is increasingly linked to time spent on social media platforms, which amplify unrealistic beauty ideals through filtered, edited, and often sponsored content. Social media facilitates a unique form of interaction that blurs the line between reality and curation. Users, particularly adolescents, are regularly exposed to carefully constructed representations of peers, celebrities, and influencers who often project unattainable standards of beauty, success, and lifestyle. According to a Pew Research Center (2022) study, 59% of U.S. teens report feeling pressure to look good on social media, and 32% of teen girls said that Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies. The platform's algorithmic reinforcement of appearance-based content further intensifies this exposure, increasing the likelihood of internalizing idealized body images and engaging in detrimental comparison behaviors.

The Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) offers a valuable lens through which to understand this phenomenon. The theory posits that individuals determine their self-worth by comparing themselves to others-often upwardly, to those perceived as more attractive, successful, or socially validated. In the context of social media, these comparisons are often distorted by visual enhancements, selective sharing, and performance metrics (likes, comments, followers), making them unrealistic yet psychologically impactful. Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) also highlights how discrepancies between the "actual self" and the "ideal self"-exacerbated by social media exposure-can lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction.

Empirical studies underscore these concerns. A study by Fardouly *et al.* (2015) [1] found that time spent on Facebook and Instagram was significantly associated with body image concerns in young women. Similarly, Tiggemann & Slater (2014) [2] noted that adolescents who spent more time on social media were more likely to internalize thin ideals and experience body surveillance. These findings are supported by newer research indicating that passive scrolling (viewing others' posts without interacting) is more strongly associated with negative body image than active engagement. Furthermore, the use of appearance-enhancing filters and photo-editing tools has been linked to increased dissatisfaction with one's natural appearance and a higher likelihood of undergoing cosmetic procedures (APA, 2021).

While much of the literature focuses on the negative effects, it is essential to recognize that social media can also serve as a platform for positive self-expression and body positivity. Movements such as #BodyPositivity and #SelfLove promote diverse representations of beauty and encourage users to embrace authenticity. However, these messages are

often overshadowed by the sheer volume of idealized content promoted by influencers and commercial brands.

Given the pervasiveness of social media in shaping modern identity, particularly among youth, it is imperative to understand how these platforms influence self-esteem and body image. This review aims to synthesize recent empirical findings, explore underlying psychological mechanisms, examine protective factors, and offer recommendations for mitigating the negative impacts of social media use on mental health. By doing so, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of a growing public health concern that affects millions worldwide.

**Theoretical Framework**

Two major psychological theories underlie the impact of social media on self-image:

1. **Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954):** Suggests individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others, often upward, leading to dissatisfaction.
2. **Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987):** Posits that discrepancies between one's real self and ideal self can cause emotional distress, often exacerbated by social media portrayals.

**Negative Effects on Body Image**

The rise of image-centric social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok has intensified concerns about body image issues, particularly among adolescents and young adults. These platforms often promote and perpetuate idealized body standards-thinness, muscularity, flawless skin-which are not only unrealistic but also frequently achieved through digital alterations such as filters, editing apps, and curated lighting. As a result, users are increasingly exposed to unattainable beauty ideals, leading to widespread body dissatisfaction and distorted self-perception.

Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated a direct relationship between social media usage and body image concerns. According to a seminal study by Fardouly *et al.* (2015) [1], young women who spent more time on Facebook were significantly more likely to report appearance-related concerns and engage in body comparison. Similarly, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) [2] found that Instagram usage was positively associated with internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and appearance anxiety among teenage girls. These studies suggest that the visual nature of social media, combined with the tendency for upward social comparison, plays a central role in shaping users' body image perceptions.

The psychological mechanism underlying these effects is primarily driven by appearance-based social comparison. When individuals are constantly exposed to images of seemingly perfect bodies-often enhanced or filtered-they may begin to compare themselves unfavorably. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with their own physical appearance. A study by Kleemans *et al.* (2018) [6] revealed that adolescent girls who viewed manipulated Instagram photos of peers (with filters or enhancements) reported lower body satisfaction than those who viewed unedited photos.

The pressure to conform to idealized body standards is further reinforced by engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. These metrics act as social validation indicators and can amplify the importance of appearance in one's self-worth. In a 2021 American Psychological Association (APA) survey, over 60% of adolescents reported feeling pressure to look "perfect" in photos they posted online, and 35% admitted using filters or editing apps to enhance their appearance before sharing images. This pursuit of digital perfection fosters a discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self, increasing vulnerability to body image disturbances.

Moreover, social media influencers and celebrities often serve as aspirational figures, with their curated posts setting unrealistic benchmarks for beauty and fitness. These representations contribute to the internalization of body ideals, which has been linked to disordered eating behaviors, low self-worth, and even the desire for cosmetic surgery. A study by Chae (2017) [5] on parasocial relationships with influencers found that followers who strongly identified with beauty influencers reported significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower self-acceptance.

Interestingly, this phenomenon is not limited to females. Although most studies have historically focused on women and girls, emerging research indicates that male users are also increasingly affected. Boys and young men are exposed to idealized images of muscularity and leanness, leading to muscle dysmorphia, excessive exercise, and use of supplements or steroids. A study by Karazsia *et al.* (2017) [10] found that frequent social media use among adolescent boys was associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and muscle-building behaviors.

The negative impact of social media on body image is also exacerbated in certain vulnerable populations, such as individuals with a history of low self-esteem, eating disorders, or body dysmorphia. These individuals may use social media more compulsively and interpret appearance-related content more negatively, creating a feedback loop that worsens mental health outcomes.

In conclusion, the negative effects of social media on body image are widespread and well-documented. Appearance-focused content, social comparison, validation-seeking behaviors, and exposure to idealized body types all contribute to heightened body dissatisfaction, particularly among youth. As social media continues to evolve and grow in influence, understanding these effects and developing targeted interventions will be critical to protecting mental health and fostering healthier body image narratives.

**Impact on Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem, defined as a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value, is a crucial component of mental health and emotional resilience. During adolescence and young adulthood, self-esteem is particularly malleable and heavily influenced by peer approval, self-perception, and social comparison. With the proliferation of social media platforms, these influences have become amplified, with digital validation-through likes, shares, comments, and follower counts-emerging as a modern barometer of self-worth. While social media has the potential to foster confidence through community and self-expression, a growing body of evidence suggests it more frequently undermines users' self-esteem.

One of the primary mechanisms through which social media affects self-esteem is social comparison. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook allow users to constantly compare their lives, appearances, and achievements to those of others-often leading to negative self-evaluations. Vogel *et al.* (2014) [3] found that individuals who passively consumed content on Facebook (e.g., scrolling through others' profiles without interacting) experienced lower self-esteem due to upward social comparisons. This effect is particularly pronounced when users compare themselves to peers who appear more attractive, successful, or socially engaged.

Moreover, social media creates an environment where external validation becomes central to one's self-assessment. Receiving likes, comments, and followers can offer a temporary boost in confidence; however, this form of validation is inherently unstable and dependent on the reactions of others. In a study conducted by de Vries and Kühne (2015) [4], participants who received positive feedback on their social media posts reported momentary increases in self-esteem, whereas those who received little or no engagement experienced declines. This suggests that self-worth may become contingent upon digital approval, fostering a fragile self-esteem.

The impact of social media on self-esteem also differs by gender and age. Adolescent girls, for example, often face intense pressure to conform to societal beauty standards, leading to increased self-consciousness and lower self-esteem when they feel they fall short. According to a Dove Self-Esteem Project (2020) report, 8 in 10 girls report comparing themselves to others on social media, and over 50% of girls say that social media makes them feel worse about themselves. Boys, while less frequently studied, are not immune; they may struggle with comparisons related to strength, wealth, or popularity, especially in image-driven platforms.

Another concerning trend is the link between self-esteem and self-presentation on social media. Users often engage in selective self-presentation-posting only curated or filtered images and achievements-which can create a disconnect between the online self and the real self. This incongruence can lead to internal conflict and diminished self-worth. Huang (2017), in a meta-analysis of 38 studies, concluded that social media use is modestly but significantly associated with lower self-esteem, particularly when the use involves passive consumption and comparison.

Additionally, the fear of missing out (FoMO) contributes to lower self-esteem. When users see others attending events, achieving milestones, or enjoying life, they may feel inadequate or excluded. This phenomenon, often intensified during adolescence, correlates with depressive symptoms and diminished self-worth. Przybylski *et al.* (2013) identified FoMO as a strong predictor of negative affect and low self-esteem among social media users, especially those who spend extended time on platforms without meaningful interaction.

There is also a cyclical relationship between low self-esteem and problematic social media use. Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to seek validation online, yet this behavior may reinforce their insecurities when validation is not received. Over time, this can contribute to a vicious cycle of dependency on external affirmation and chronic dissatisfaction with the self.

In contrast, positive social media experiences—such as receiving supportive comments, engaging with uplifting communities, or following body-positive accounts—can have a buffering effect. However, these experiences are often outweighed by the prevalence of idealized content and appearance-focused interactions.

In conclusion, social media exerts a multifaceted influence on self-esteem. While it offers opportunities for connection and encouragement, it more frequently cultivates self-doubt through comparison, reliance on external validation, and exposure to unrealistic standards. The effect is particularly potent during adolescence, making it a critical area for intervention through digital literacy, mental health support, and responsible platform design.

**The Role of Influencers and Filters**

In the age of digital connectivity, social media influencers have emerged as powerful agents of persuasion, particularly among youth. With carefully curated content, aesthetic appeal, and a seemingly relatable online presence, influencers often embody society's beauty and success ideals. Simultaneously, the widespread use of filters and photo-editing tools has transformed the way individuals present themselves online, fostering unrealistic visual standards and distorting self-perception. Together, these elements significantly shape users' attitudes toward their own appearance and self-worth, contributing to growing concerns about body image and self-esteem.

Influencers are typically individuals with large followings who share content across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. They are often viewed as trendsetters, promoting beauty products, fashion, fitness routines, and lifestyles that reflect idealized versions of health and attractiveness. However, these representations are frequently artificially enhanced and highly selective, reinforcing narrow and often unattainable standards of beauty. According to a study by Chae (2017) [5], followers who engage in parasocial relationships with beauty influencers tend to internalize their appearance ideals, which leads to increased body dissatisfaction and lower levels of self-acceptance.

The credibility and relatability of influencers play a key role in their psychological impact. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often position themselves as "everyday people," creating a false sense of intimacy with followers. This makes the influence of their appearance and lifestyle more potent. In a survey conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2021), over 70% of adolescents reported that they looked up to social media influencers for beauty and fashion advice, and 57% felt pressure to emulate their looks. This aspiration, grounded in filtered and commercially driven aesthetics, can lead to distorted self-image, particularly when users compare themselves to digitally perfected influencer content.

The use of filters and photo-editing apps has further exacerbated appearance-related anxiety. Apps like Facetune, Snapchat, and Instagram offer users tools to whiten teeth, smooth skin, enlarge eyes, or slim facial features with a few taps. While these tools may seem harmless or entertaining, their habitual use promotes a "filter face" aesthetic, blurring the line between digital enhancements and real-life appearance. Kleemans *et al.* (2018) [6] found that adolescent girls who viewed selfies of peers enhanced with beauty

filters reported lower satisfaction with their own looks compared to those who saw unfiltered images.

This phenomenon, often referred to as "Snapchat Dysmorphia," has led to increasing cases where individuals seek cosmetic surgery to look like their filtered selves. According to a report from the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS, 2020), 72% of surgeons reported clients requesting procedures to improve their appearance for social media, including changes inspired by filters. This shift highlights a worrying trend where virtual representations of self are prioritized over authentic appearance, creating unrealistic expectations and chronic dissatisfaction.

Moreover, filtered images set a false benchmark for attractiveness, leading users to feel inferior if they don't receive similar engagement or compliments. This can result in validation-seeking behaviors such as excessive posting, compulsive checking for likes, and anxiety when digital affirmation is lacking. A longitudinal study by Wilksch *et al.* (2020) [11] found that adolescents who frequently edited their photos were more likely to experience low self-esteem, appearance anxiety, and disordered eating patterns.

Importantly, the commercial aspect of influencer culture plays a reinforcing role. Influencers often promote beauty and fitness products, implicitly suggesting that their appearance is the result of using these items. This creates a consumer-driven cycle where followers are encouraged to buy into the influencer's lifestyle in pursuit of similar results-often without transparency about editing, cosmetic procedures, or sponsored content.

In contrast, some influencers are now promoting body positivity and authenticity, showing unfiltered content and advocating for self-love. While such movements are gaining traction, they remain overshadowed by the dominance of hyper-edited, idealized portrayals that continue to shape beauty standards online.

**Protective Factors and Moderators**

While the negative effects of social media on self-esteem and body image are well-documented, not all individuals are equally affected. A range of protective factors and moderating variables can buffer the psychological impact of appearance-based content and social comparison online. These factors influence how users perceive, internalize, and respond to the curated realities on social media, often mitigating risks associated with body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

**Media Literacy and Critical Thinking**

One of the most effective protective factors is media literacy, which involves the ability to critically evaluate media content and understand its constructed nature. Media literacy programs aim to teach young people how digital images are manipulated and how beauty ideals are culturally and commercially produced. McLean *et al.* (2016) [8] demonstrated that adolescents with higher media literacy skills were less likely to internalize unrealistic beauty standards and more likely to reject harmful comparison behaviors. Educating youth on the difference between reality and curated content can help them develop a more resilient and critical mindset when engaging with social media.

**Parental Involvement and Support**

Parental guidance serves as a key moderating influence, especially for adolescents. Open conversations about body image, self-worth, and the deceptive nature of online portrayals can foster emotional resilience. Research by Rodgers *et al.* (2020) [12] found that adolescents who reported strong parental communication and emotional support were significantly less likely to experience body dissatisfaction due to social media exposure. Moreover, parents who model healthy body image and balanced social media use can instill protective attitudes in their children.

**Peer and Community Support**

Positive peer relationships also play a protective role. Adolescents who feel accepted and supported by their peers are less likely to base their self-worth solely on appearance or social media engagement. Online communities that promote body diversity, self-acceptance, and mental health advocacy-such as body positivity movements-can counteract the negative impact of mainstream appearance-centric content. Cohen *et al.* (2019) [7] highlighted that adolescents who followed body-positive accounts reported increased self-compassion and reduced body dissatisfaction.

**Personality Traits and Self-Concept**

Certain individual differences act as natural moderators of how social media affects self-image. People with high self-esteem, strong internal locus of control, or secure attachment styles are more resistant to negative social comparisons. A study by Marengo *et al.* (2018) [13] found that individuals with high levels of self-concept clarity-meaning they had a stable understanding of who they are-were less likely to be influenced by appearance-focused social media content. Conversely, those with neurotic tendencies or low self-confidence were more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use.

**Mindful and Purposeful Social Media Use**

How individuals use social media also matters. Research distinguishes between passive consumption (scrolling through others' posts without engagement) and active engagement (commenting, messaging, posting original content). Passive use is associated with higher levels of comparison and lower self-esteem, while active engagement-especially when centered on creativity, connection, or positive messaging-can foster a sense of control and well-being. Frison and Eggermont (2016) reported that adolescents who used social media to maintain friendships experienced higher emotional support and self-worth than those who passively consumed content.

**Exposure to Diverse and Inclusive Content**

Exposure to diverse representations of beauty, including different body sizes, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, can reduce the internalization of narrow appearance standards. Platforms that promote inclusive influencers and unfiltered content can help reshape cultural definitions of attractiveness. Initiatives such as Dove's Real Beauty Campaign and content creators who normalize stretch marks, acne, or postpartum bodies can help users develop a healthier relationship with their appearance

## Conclusion

The widespread use of social media has dramatically transformed how individuals perceive themselves and others, particularly in terms of appearance and self-worth. This review synthesizes a growing body of evidence indicating that social media can significantly impact self-esteem and body image, especially among adolescents and young adults who are developmentally more susceptible to external validation and social comparison. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat-centered around visual content-often reinforce unrealistic beauty ideals and appearance-based success metrics that users internalize, consciously or unconsciously.

Empirical studies consistently reveal that frequent exposure to idealized images, the use of filters, engagement with influencers, and passive content consumption are strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, appearance-related anxiety, and low self-esteem. Social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors, driven by algorithmic engagement metrics such as likes and comments, can create a distorted self-image and lead to psychological consequences ranging from reduced self-worth to disordered eating and even cosmetic surgery desires.

However, not all individuals are affected equally. Protective factors such as media literacy, parental and peer support, diverse content exposure, and positive online communities can buffer against the adverse effects. Additionally, individual differences in personality, purpose of social media use, and critical thinking skills moderate how users interpret and respond to online content. Encouraging active, mindful engagement and fostering resilience through education and self-compassion are essential steps toward minimizing harm.

As social media continues to evolve, it is imperative for researchers, educators, policymakers, and platform developers to collaborate in creating a healthier digital ecosystem. Promoting inclusive beauty standards, regulating influencer marketing, increasing transparency in advertising and image modification, and integrating mental health support into digital platforms could significantly reduce the negative outcomes associated with online self-presentation and comparison.

In conclusion, while social media is a powerful tool for connection and expression, it also poses substantial challenges to the psychological well-being of its users. A balanced, informed approach that combines individual awareness with systemic changes is essential to ensure that social media becomes a source of empowerment rather than insecurity.

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