

Reflections of Self: How Social Media Shapes Teen Body Image

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how advances in information technology, particularly through social media, have transformed communication patterns and influenced teenagers' body image perceptions. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducted in-depth interviews with three teenage girls aged 17-21 who are active on social media. The findings indicate that many participants experience dissatisfaction with their bodies due to comparisons with prevalent beauty standards. This aligns with social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals often evaluate their appearance by contrasting themselves with others. Social interactions on social media, including comments and likes, also play a significant role in shaping self-confidence. While the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals is a notable negative effect, some participants reported feeling motivated to pursue healthier lifestyles as a positive outcome. The study highlights the need for effective interventions aimed at educating adolescents about healthy social media use and raising awareness of its potential effects on body image.

INTRODUCTION

Body image refers to an individual's perception and evaluation of their appearance and body shape. According to Smolak (in Kurniawan et al., 2023), body image develops through a learning process that begins with the awareness of physical attributes like height and size, ultimately influencing one's assessment of their physique. Cash (in Kurniawan et al., 2023) emphasizes that body image encompasses a person's attitudes toward their body, which can be perceived positively or negatively. Cash (in Febriani & Rahmasari, 2022) identifies five key aspects of body image: (1) appearance evaluation, which involves assessing how one perceives their looks; (2) appearance orientation, or the importance placed on physical appearance; (3) body areas satisfaction, which reflects contentment with specific body parts; (4) overweight preoccupation, a focus on weight concerns; and (5) self-classified weight, how individuals categorize their own body weight. Furthermore, Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) note that several factors significantly influence body image, including gender, age, mass media exposure, and interpersonal relationships. These elements can shape an individual's body image perception, contributing to either positive or negative self-assessments. Understanding these influences is crucial, especially for teenagers, as they navigate the complexities of identity and self-worth in an era dominated by social media and societal standards of beauty.

Technological advancements, particularly in information technology, have transformed how humans communicate. One significant development is the rise of social media, with Instagram emerging as a particularly popular platform. As a photo and video-sharing application, Instagram allows users to capture images, apply digital filters, and share them widely, showcasing various themes such as self-portraits, food, lifestyle, hobbies, and landscapes (Martanatasha, 2019).

While Instagram offers opportunities for creativity and entrepreneurship – particularly appealing to its predominantly young audience aged 18 to 25 (59%) – it also serves as a platform that can negatively impact users. Many individuals feel pressured to present an idealized version of themselves, leading to feelings of insecurity. Research by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) indicates that Instagram adversely affects the mental health of young users aged 14 to 25, contributing to issues such as addiction, anxiety, eating disorders, self-esteem problems, and body image concerns (Wardani in Martanatasha, 2019; Adityaputri in Martanatasha, 2019).

Adolescence, defined as the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, typically spans from around eleven or twelve years to the early twenties (Papalia, Old, and Feldman, 2008). During this period, individuals undergo significant biological, socio-emotional, and cognitive changes, including rapid physical growth, hormonal shifts, and the onset of sexual maturity (Santrock, 2013). These physical changes can heavily influence adolescents' self-acceptance and perceptions of their bodies, making it essential for them to navigate these developmental challenges effectively (Maryam & Ifdil, 2019). As this study investigates the body image of teenagers who engage with social

media, it becomes crucial to consider how platforms like Instagram shape their self-perceptions during this critical developmental stage.

Body image, defined as an individual's assessment of their appearance, involves a learning process that begins with understanding physical attributes like height and size (Smolak in Kurniawan et al., 2023). Cash (in Kurniawan et al., 2023) further explains that body image encompasses attitudes that can be positive or negative. He identifies five critical aspects of body image: (1) appearance evaluation, (2) appearance orientation, (3) body areas satisfaction, (4) overweight preoccupation, and (5) self-classified weight (Cash in Febriani & Rahmasari, 2022). Research by Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) highlights various factors influencing body image, including gender, age, mass media, and interpersonal relationships. Despite the existing literature, there is a gap in understanding how these factors specifically interact with social media, particularly among adolescents, to shape their body image perceptions. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the nuanced ways in which social media influences adolescents' body image, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in today's digital.

The study hypothesizes that teenagers engaged with such media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction compared to their peers who do not. It aims to provide insights into how interactions with visual content on social media shape adolescents' views of their bodies, reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards and impacting their self-esteem and mental well-being. Additionally, the research offers empirical data to inform educators and mental health professionals on effective media literacy programs, while also contributing to the literature by highlighting the subjective experiences of adolescents in the digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

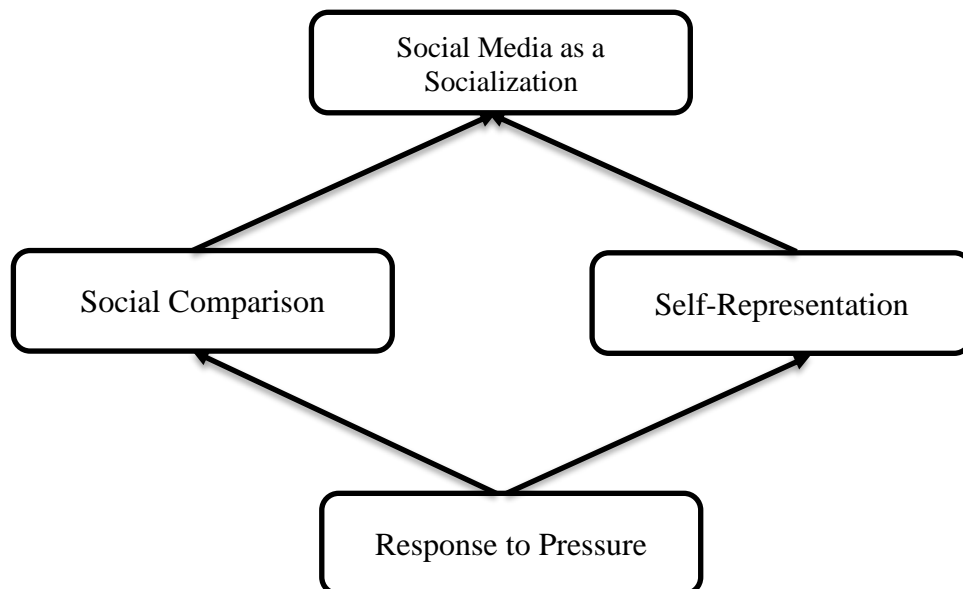


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

1. Social Media as a Socialization Agent: Social media functions as a socialization agent that shapes adolescents' views of the ideal body.
2. Social Comparison: Adolescents tend to compare themselves to the content they see on social media, which can increase body dissatisfaction.
3. Self-Representation: The way adolescents present themselves on social media can be influenced by the desire to meet popular beauty standards in the media.
4. Response to Pressure: Not all adolescents react the same way to social media pressure; some may develop strategies to counteract the negative impacts, such as increasing self-awareness or following accounts that promote body positivity.

Social Media as a Socialization Agent serves as the main basis, influencing two important aspects: social comparison, where teenagers compare themselves to content on social media and self-Representation, where the way teenagers present themselves is influenced by beauty standards. These two aspects are ultimately related to the response to pressure which describes how teenagers react to the pressure either through negative impacts or adaptive strategies such as following body positivity accounts.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research utilizes a case study approach conducted at Aisyah Pringsewu University in Lampung. The subjects, selected through purposive sampling, include female adolescents aged 17-21 who are students at the university and possess social media accounts. Data collection methods encompass interviews and observations, while data analysis follows the steps outlined by Miles and Huberman, which include data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. This methodology is designed to ensure that the selected subjects align with the specific criteria relevant to the phenomenon being studied.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Appearance evaluation involves individuals assessing their overall body appearance to determine their attractiveness. The interviews conducted revealed that social media usage often intensifies negative self-evaluations. Participants expressed a tendency to compare themselves to influencers who frequently present idealized body images. Subjects KF, PA, and SYM all conveyed feelings of inadequacy regarding their bodies. One participant noted, "I feel insecure because there are so many people who look perfect on social media, like with smooth skin and ideal bodies."

In terms of appearance orientation, which reflects how much emphasis individuals place on their looks, the subjects indicated that social media has led them to focus more on their physical appearance. One participant remarked, "Before I became active on social media, I didn't really care about my looks. But now, I find myself comparing to others and feeling insecure when I see people with slimmer bodies." This shift highlights how exposure to curated online

content can alter personal standards and self-perception.

The participants reported making various efforts to enhance their appearance, influenced by trends observed on social media. Some mentioned changes in clothing styles and skincare routines, with one subject stating, "Now that I've started using skincare, my skin is much better taken care of, and I feel more confident." These changes reflect a growing awareness and concern for personal aesthetics, largely driven by social media exposure.

Body areas satisfaction pertains to how individuals feel about specific parts of their bodies. All informants expressed positive views about certain features they consider strengths, such as their hair, lips, or face shape. For instance, one participant expressed, "I really like my hair," while another highlighted, "My face is what I like the most." These positive perceptions illustrate that despite broader insecurities, some aspects of self-image remain affirming.

Overweight preoccupation refers to concerns regarding body weight and the inclination to engage in dieting or weight-loss programs. One subject identified their body as "a bit fat" and discussed the need to diet or exercise to avoid gaining more weight. This concern reflects a common preoccupation with body size, often exacerbated by societal pressures and social media portrayals.

Self-classified weight involves how individuals categorize their own bodies in relation to societal standards. Many participants identified themselves as either thin or fat, with some expressing feelings of low self-esteem influenced by these classifications. During interviews, one participant stated, "I feel fat," while another described their ideal body as "tall and thin." Such insights reveal how social media can shape adolescents' body categorization and self-identity, leading to potentially harmful comparisons and self-assessments.

The research findings indicate that social media significantly affects teenagers' perceptions of body image. Participants reported frequently comparing themselves to others they encounter on these platforms. This behavior supports Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate their abilities and appearance by contrasting themselves with others. Previous studies, such as those by Tiggemann and Slater (2014), have similarly noted the prevalence of social comparison among adolescents using social media.

Moreover, teenagers are regularly exposed to images of idealized bodies on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. These images are often manipulated with advanced filters and editing techniques, resulting in unrealistic beauty standards. Consequently, adolescents may feel compelled to meet these standards, leading to dissatisfaction with their own appearance, as highlighted in research by Fardouly et al. (2015).

The social pressures stemming from social media also impact how teenagers perceive themselves. Feedback in the form of comments and likes from friends or followers can significantly influence their self-esteem. Negative feedback or a lack of engagement can result in decreased self-confidence and increased body dissatisfaction. Conversely, some teenagers report positive effects from their social media experiences, feeling inspired to pursue healthier

lifestyles after viewing motivational content. This aligns with findings from research by Perloff (2014), which suggests that social media can also provide supportive communities that enhance self-esteem.

Overall, the relationship between social media and adolescents' body image perception is complex and varies based on factors such as content type, social interactions, and the duration of use. This study emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of how social media influences young people's perceptions and experiences regarding body image, a sentiment echoed in previous literature (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study investigates the impact of social media on adolescents' perceptions of body image through in-depth interviews with participants. The findings indicate that social media significantly influences how teenagers view their bodies, often creating pressure to conform to beauty standards that are frequently unrealistic. Many adolescents reported engaging in comparisons with others they see on these platforms, leading to increased dissatisfaction with their own physical appearance.

Given these insights, the study suggests that future research should broaden its scope by including a more diverse range of respondents from various social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. This expansion is crucial for achieving a more comprehensive understanding of how different contextual factors shape teenagers' body image perceptions in relation to social media. By incorporating a wider variety of perspectives, subsequent research can enhance the representativeness and generalizability of its findings, providing valuable insights that are applicable to a broader population. Such efforts could also help identify specific influences and strategies to promote healthier body image perceptions among adolescents in diverse contexts.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Further research could explore broader demographics, including a diverse range of age groups, genders, and cultural backgrounds, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how social media influences body image across different populations. Longitudinal studies would also provide insights into the lasting impacts of social media exposure on self-esteem and body image over time. Additionally, examining the role of specific social media platforms and the types of content (e.g., influencer-driven posts, ads, or peer interactions) could help identify which aspects most significantly impact teenagers' body perceptions. Future studies might also investigate the effectiveness of digital literacy and self-esteem intervention programs, evaluating how such programs can help adolescents develop healthier relationships with social media and promote positive body image. Finally, analyzing the potential benefits of promoting diverse and inclusive beauty standards on social media could offer actionable strategies for reducing body dissatisfaction among adolescents.

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