

The Impact of Social Media on Body Image and Self-Esteem Among Youth

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Abstract:

The rapid expansion of social media platforms over the past decade has transformed how young people construct identity, engage in social comparison, and perceive their physical appearance. While digital connectivity has created opportunities for self-expression, networking, and community building, it has also intensified exposure to curated images, beauty standards, and appearance-based validation systems. These dynamics have significant psychological implications, particularly for body image perception and self-esteem among adolescents and young adults. This study develops a conceptual framework integrating psychological, sociological, and media theories to examine how social media engagement influences body dissatisfaction, self-worth, and emotional well-being among youth. Drawing on Social Comparison Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, Objectification Theory, and the Uses and Gratifications framework, the paper identifies pathways through which platform features such as photo-editing tools, algorithmic feeds, influencer culture, and “likes”-based validation contribute to internalized appearance ideals and reduced self-esteem. The framework highlights gender differences, peer influence, cyberbullying, and digital literacy as critical mediating and moderating factors. The study offers implications for educational policy, digital literacy interventions, parental guidance, and mental health programming, arguing that responsible digital engagement strategies are essential for safeguarding youth psychological well-being in the social media era.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Image, Self-Esteem, Adolescents, Social Comparison, Digital Culture, Mental Health and Youth Psychology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in the social environments of adolescents and young adults due to the rapid expansion of digital communication platforms. Social media applications such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube have become central arenas for identity construction, peer interaction, and self-presentation. Unlike earlier forms of mass media, contemporary platforms are interactive, algorithm-driven, and visually intensive, prioritizing images and short-form videos as dominant modes of communication. For youth particularly adolescents navigating critical stages of identity formation these digital spaces function not merely as tools for communication but as primary socialization environments. Emerging research indicates that the psychological implications of these platforms extend beyond general well-being to specific domains such as body image perception and self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Body image refers to an individual’s subjective evaluation of their physical appearance, encompassing perceptual, cognitive, and emotional components. Self-esteem, in contrast, represents a broader global evaluation of personal worth and competence (Rosenberg, 1965). Although conceptually distinct, body image and self-esteem are closely intertwined during adolescence, a developmental period marked by heightened self-consciousness, sensitivity to peer approval, and increased concern with appearance. Longitudinal evidence suggests that dissatisfaction with body image is one of the strongest predictors of low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and disordered eating behaviours among adolescents (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Hogue & Mills, 2019). With the integration of social media into everyday life, concerns surrounding appearance have become amplified within digitally mediated peer networks.

Unlike traditional media such as television or magazines, social media platforms operate through user-generated content and algorithmic personalization. Adolescents are not passive recipients of content but active participants who curate profiles, edit photographs, and monitor peer feedback through likes, shares, and comments. These feedback metrics introduce quantifiable indicators of social approval, embedding validation into platform architecture. Studies show that visible engagement metrics significantly influence adolescents' self-evaluations, often linking perceived popularity to physical attractiveness (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). The continuous cycle of posting, feedback monitoring, and comparison can intensify self-surveillance and appearance-related anxiety.

A central mechanism through which social media influences body image is social comparison. Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves relative to others, particularly when objective standards are unavailable (Festinger, 1954). Social media environments heighten opportunities for upward comparison by presenting curated and idealized images of peers, influencers, and celebrities. Unlike conventional celebrity comparisons, social media comparisons often involve known peers, increasing psychological salience and emotional impact. Empirical research demonstrates that exposure to idealized peer images on platforms such as Instagram is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem among adolescent girls (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). These effects are magnified when users engage in passive scrolling rather than active interaction.

Self-Discrepancy Theory further explains how social media intensifies psychological distress. The theory proposes that emotional discomfort arises when individuals perceive discrepancies between their actual self and their ideal or "ought" self (Higgins, 1987). Digital platforms offer endless representations of socially rewarded "ideal selves" characterized by physical perfection, curated lifestyles, and high social status. For adolescents in formative identity stages, repeated exposure to these standards may widen perceived gaps between actual and ideal self-concepts, leading to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and diminished self-worth (Perloff, 2014).

The visual emphasis of contemporary platforms also contributes to self-objectification processes. Objectification Theory suggests that individuals, particularly girls and young women, internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies, leading to habitual body monitoring and appearance anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Social media's camera-centric design, filters, and editing tools intensify this phenomenon by encouraging users to evaluate their own images as external spectators. Research indicates that frequent photo editing and selfie-posting behaviours are associated with greater body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among adolescents (McLean et al., 2019).

Importantly, the impact of social media on body image is not uniform across genders. While adolescent girls remain disproportionately affected by thin-ideal internalization and appearance-based comparison, boys increasingly experience pressure to conform to muscularity and fitness-oriented ideals perpetuated by influencer culture (Barlett et al., 2020). Thus, body image concerns are becoming more gender-inclusive, though expressions differ in form and intensity. Moreover, emerging studies highlight intersectional variations, with factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation shaping vulnerability to appearance-related distress.

Despite these concerns, it is critical to acknowledge that social media is not inherently detrimental. Positive engagement such as participation in body positivity communities, peer support networks, and creative self-expression can enhance self-acceptance and resilience (Cohen et al., 2019). The psychological outcomes of social media use depend significantly on usage patterns, type of content consumed, and individual susceptibility factors. Active engagement tends to yield more positive outcomes than passive consumption, while critical media literacy can buffer harmful comparison effects.

Given the ubiquity of digital engagement among youth, understanding the relationship between social media exposure, body image perception, and self-esteem has become a pressing public health and educational concern. Adolescence represents a sensitive developmental window during which external validation and peer

comparison carry heightened emotional weight. If social media environments consistently reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and appearance-based validation systems, they may contribute to escalating levels of anxiety, depression, and self-worth instability.

This study responds to the growing need for an integrated conceptual framework that synthesizes psychological and media-based perspectives to explain how social media influences body image and self-esteem among youth. By identifying key mediating mechanisms such as social comparison, self-discrepancy, and objectification and examining moderating factors including gender, digital literacy, and peer support, the paper aims to provide a structured foundation for empirical research and evidence-based intervention strategies. In doing so, it situates social media not merely as a technological tool but as a powerful socio-psychological environment shaping youth identity and well-being in the twenty-first century.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Early Research on Social Media and Body Image (2010–2014)

The early phase of research on social media's role in body image focused primarily on correlational links between online interaction and appearance concerns. Researchers in this period began identifying social networking sites (SNSs) as contexts where visual self-presentation and peer evaluation were central features. Tiggemann & Slater (2013) analysed adolescent girls' engagement with image-oriented platforms such as Facebook and noted that time spent on these sites was associated with greater internalization of Western beauty ideals and heightened body dissatisfaction. Similarly, Meier & Gray (2014) found that the frequency of viewing others' photos predicted negative mood and appearance-comparison tendencies among female adolescents. These early studies established that social networking environments could function as platforms for appearance-based evaluation and comparison, laying the groundwork for later causal and mechanism-focused research.

By the end of this period, scholars began differentiating between types of social media use. Passive scrolling viewing content without interacting was linked with higher body dissatisfaction, whereas active engagement (posting and commenting) lacked consistent associations with negative outcomes (Vogel et al., 2014). This differentiation helped clarify that the psychological impact of SNSs depends not only on duration of use but on usage style.

2.2 Developmental Expansion: Concepts of Social Comparison and Self-Discrepancy (2015–2017)

Between 2015 and 2017, literature shifted toward understanding the psychological processes underlying social media's effects. Social Comparison Theory and Self-Discrepancy Theory became major explanatory frameworks. Fardouly et al. (2015) conducted experimental work demonstrating that brief exposure to appearance-focused Instagram images increased body dissatisfaction among female undergraduates compared to exposure to non-appearance content. The authors argued that upward social comparison evaluating oneself against superior others online diminishes body satisfaction. The research marked a methodological advance by isolating content type rather than general time spent online. Perloff's (2014) theoretical analysis, published slightly earlier but gaining influence during this period, integrated Self-Discrepancy Theory with digital media exposure, arguing that endless curated self-representations create unattainable "digital ideals." Adolescents, who are actively constructing identity, may perceive larger gaps between their own physical selves and ideal selves portrayed online, leading to negative emotional outcomes including low self-esteem. Hogue & Mills (2019) expanded on these mechanisms by documenting that habitual upward comparison predicted greater body dissatisfaction longitudinally. They stressed that everyday social media use reinforces habitual comparison, particularly among youth with preexisting appearance concerns. This period's work shifted emphasis from correlational associations toward understanding cognitive and affective mediators.

2.3 Intensification of Visual Culture and Objectification (2018–2020)

From 2018 onward, the literature increasingly reflected changes in platform design that emphasized visual content, such as Stories, Reels, and filters. Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2018) showed that Instagram's visually intensive format intensified body image concerns more than text-based platforms because users compared images rather than abstract narratives, making evaluations more salient and direct. Concurrent research by

Fardouly & Vartanian (2018) found evidence of self-objectification in social media contexts. Users internalized an outside observer's perspective of their own bodies, focusing on appearance as an evaluative dimension of self-worth. These researchers noted that features such as editing tools and beauty filters encouraged users to scrutinize and modify their own images, reinforcing self-monitoring and appearance anxiety. A large-scale survey by Holland & Tiggemann (2017) supported these findings, indicating a robust association between frequency of photo editing and dissatisfaction with body appearance among adolescents. These studies shifted attention from mere comparison to the internalization of an observer's perspective, where individuals evaluate their own bodies as objects rather than autonomous selves.

2.4 Emergence of Quantified Validation and Feedback Mechanisms (2020–2022)

The period between 2020 and 2022 highlighted the psychological impact of quantifiable feedback within social media environments. Nesi & Prinstein (2015) originally identified the relevance of peer feedback, but later research deepened this analysis by exploring “likes,” “shares,” and follower counts as quantifiable validation metrics.

A longitudinal study by Coyne et al. (2020) found that adolescents who placed greater importance on likes and comments reported lower self-esteem over time, above and beyond time spent online. This suggested that the *meaning* attached to feedback rather than exposure itself was central to psychological outcomes. Barlett et al. (2020) investigated gendered responses to feedback metrics and found that adolescent girls were more likely than boys to equate likes with social acceptance, whereas boys tended to focus on performance metrics such as follower growth and content reach. These gendered patterns highlighted how platform features intersect with normative expectations about appearance and social status.

2.5 Body Positivity, Resilience, and Digital Literacy (2022–Present)

From 2022 onward, research diversified to explore not only harmful effects but also positive mechanisms that can mitigate negative outcomes. Industry initiatives and user movements emphasizing body diversity and self-acceptance gained scholarly attention. Cohen et al. (2019) were among the first to document positive outcomes associated with participation in digital body positivity communities. Adolescents who followed body-inclusive content and engaged in supportive peer interactions reported higher body satisfaction and enhanced self-esteem. These effects were replicated in longitudinal work by Rodgers et al. (2022), who found that exposure to body positivity content predicted reductions in appearance concerns over time, particularly when users engaged actively rather than passively.

Media literacy emerged as a critical protective factor. Studies by Tiggemann & Slater (2020) demonstrated that educational interventions aimed at increasing awareness of photo manipulation and algorithmic influence reduced the impact of social comparison on body dissatisfaction. Such findings shifted the field toward intervention research.

2.6 Emerging Trends and Gaps

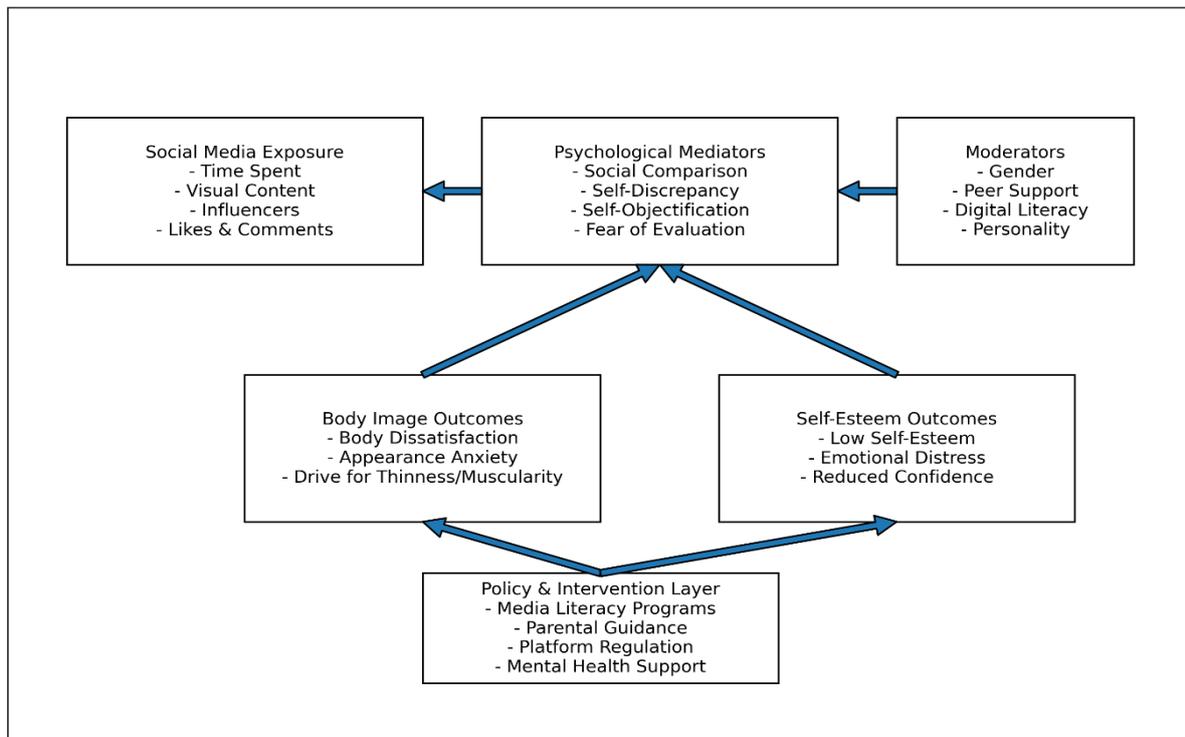
Although substantial progress has been made, existing research still reveals important gaps. Most studies have been conducted in Western, high-income contexts, limiting cross-cultural generalizability. Additionally, while early research focused predominantly on female adolescents, recent evidence suggests that boys and gender-diverse youth also experience appearance pressures, particularly related to muscularity and fitness ideals (Halliwel & Diedrichs, 2021). Measurement challenges persist, as many studies rely on self-reported usage data rather than objective behavioural metrics. Recent calls for research emphasize longitudinal designs, experimental manipulation of algorithmic exposure, and integration of neuroscientific approaches to understand how digital environments shape cognitive processing of appearance cues.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework developed in this study explains the multidimensional pathways through which social media influences body image and self-esteem among youth. Rather than assuming a direct causal relationship between screen time and psychological outcomes, the model proposes that social media operates as a structured digital environment that activates cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms. These

mechanisms mediate the relationship between exposure and outcomes, while individual and contextual factors moderate the strength and direction of effects. The framework integrates insights from Social Comparison Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, Objectification Theory, and developmental psychology to provide a comprehensive explanatory structure.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



3.1 Social Media Exposure as the Structural Context

The first component of the framework conceptualizes social media as a structural exposure environment. Adolescents and young adults are frequently immersed in visually oriented platforms that prioritize images, short-form videos, and appearance-centered communication. Features such as curated feeds, algorithmic amplification, photo-editing tools, filters, and quantifiable feedback metrics (likes, comments, followers) shape the way users interpret social value and attractiveness.

Importantly, the framework recognizes that not all exposure is identical. The type of content consumed appearance-focused content versus informational or creative content plays a critical role in determining psychological impact. Similarly, passive consumption (scrolling and observing) may produce stronger comparison effects than active engagement (posting and interacting). Thus, social media exposure represents the structural starting point of the model, but its influence is indirect and operates through internal psychological processes.

3.2 Psychological Mediators

The second component consists of psychological mediators that translate digital exposure into emotional and evaluative outcomes. These mediators explain how and why social media affects body image and self-esteem.

3.2.1 Social Comparison

Social comparison serves as a central mediating mechanism. Adolescents naturally evaluate themselves in relation to peers, but social media intensifies this process by continuously presenting curated and often idealized representations of others. Upward comparison where individuals compare themselves to perceived superior others can generate dissatisfaction when youth perceive themselves as falling short of digitally reinforced beauty standards. Because these comparisons often involve known peers rather than distant celebrities, they carry heightened emotional salience.

3.2.2 Self-Discrepancy

Self-discrepancy arises when individuals perceive a gap between their actual self and their ideal self. Social media platforms provide constant exposure to idealized physical appearances, lifestyles, and social

achievements. For adolescents in identity formation stages, repeated exposure may widen perceived discrepancies, leading to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and reduced self-worth. The more frequently youth engage with idealized content, the more likely they are to internalize these ideals as personal standards.

3.2.3 Self-Objectification

Self-objectification refers to internalizing an external observer's perspective of one's own body. Social media's emphasis on images and selfies encourages users to view themselves through a lens of evaluation and appearance-based judgment. Frequent editing, filtering, and image monitoring can reinforce habitual self-surveillance, making appearance a dominant component of self-definition. This process increases vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety.

3.2.4 Fear of Negative Evaluation

Quantified feedback systems amplify concerns about peer judgment. Adolescents may associate likes and comments with social acceptance, and the absence of expected feedback can trigger insecurity. Fear of negative evaluation strengthens the emotional impact of comparison and self-discrepancy processes, particularly in socially sensitive developmental stages.

Together, these mediators form the core psychological pathway linking social media exposure to body image concerns and self-esteem fluctuations.

3.3 Body Image Outcomes

The third component of the framework focuses on body image as an immediate outcome of psychological mediation. When social comparison, self-discrepancy, and self-objectification intensify, they often manifest as body dissatisfaction and appearance-related anxiety. Adolescents may become preoccupied with perceived physical flaws or feel pressure to conform to dominant beauty ideals.

These concerns may take gender-specific forms. Girls often report thin-ideal internalization and concerns related to weight and shape, while boys increasingly report muscularity-oriented pressures. In both cases, repeated exposure to idealized images contributes to heightened self-monitoring and dissatisfaction. Body image, therefore, functions as a proximal outcome directly shaped by digital comparison processes.

3.4 Self-Esteem Outcomes

The framework proposes that body image concerns extend beyond physical dissatisfaction and influence global self-esteem. During adolescence, physical appearance often becomes a central component of overall self-evaluation. Persistent dissatisfaction may generalize into broader negative self-perceptions, reduced confidence, and emotional distress.

Lower self-esteem may, in turn, increase vulnerability to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and social withdrawal. Thus, body image serves as an intermediary outcome that contributes to broader psychological well-being. The framework highlights that self-esteem deterioration is not merely a byproduct of social media use, but the cumulative result of repeated cognitive and emotional processes activated by digital engagement.

3.5 Moderating Factors

The conceptual model incorporates moderating variables that influence the strength and direction of relationships between exposure, mediators, and outcomes.

Gender plays a significant role in shaping vulnerability patterns, with girls often exhibiting higher sensitivity to thin-ideal comparison and boys increasingly experiencing muscularity pressures. Age and developmental stage may also moderate effects, as early adolescence is typically marked by heightened peer sensitivity.

Digital literacy functions as a protective moderator. Youth who understand photo manipulation, algorithmic amplification, and commercial influencer strategies are less likely to internalize unrealistic standards. Similarly, strong peer support and positive family communication can buffer harmful comparison effects. Personality traits such as perfectionism and high neuroticism may intensify susceptibility to dissatisfaction. These moderating factors explain why social media impacts are heterogeneous rather than universal.

3.6 Policy and Intervention Layer

The final layer of the framework situates the individual within broader institutional and policy environments. Educational systems can implement media literacy programs that teach critical engagement with online

content. Parents can foster open dialogue and balanced digital habits. Platforms can adopt transparency measures regarding edited images and reduce emphasis on visible popularity metrics. Mental health services integrated within schools can identify early signs of body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, providing preventive interventions. This outer layer underscores that while social media operates at the individual level, solutions require systemic coordination.

3.7 Integrated Model Interpretation

Overall, the conceptual framework demonstrates that social media influences youth body image and self-esteem through structured psychological pathways rather than simple exposure effects. Digital environments stimulate social comparison, widen self-discrepancies, and encourage self-objectification, which in turn shape body dissatisfaction and global self-esteem. These relationships are moderated by gender, personality, social support, and digital literacy, and can be mitigated through targeted educational and policy interventions. The framework therefore provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for empirical testing and intervention design, recognizing both the risks and the transformative potential of social media in shaping youth identity and psychological well-being.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual and qualitative research design grounded in interdisciplinary theory from psychology, media studies, and sociology. The research relies exclusively on secondary data sources published including peer-reviewed journal articles, meta-analyses, and global mental health reports.

A systematic literature screening process was conducted to identify empirical studies examining relationships between social media use, body image perception, and self-esteem among adolescents aged 12–24. Thematic synthesis was applied to identify recurring constructs such as comparison behaviour, ideal internalization, cyberbullying exposure, and gender variation.

Rather than conducting statistical analysis, the study develops a theoretical integration model linking digital exposure to psychosocial outcomes. This conceptual generalization provides a foundation for future empirical testing using survey-based or longitudinal designs.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study conceptualizes social media as a powerful socio-psychological environment that shapes body image and self-esteem among youth through structured cognitive and emotional pathways. The discussion highlights that the impact of social media is not merely a function of screen time, but of the meanings, comparisons, and evaluative processes embedded within platform design. Visual-centric environments, algorithmic amplification of idealized content, and quantifiable validation systems collectively intensify appearance-based self-evaluation. These structural features activate social comparison, widen perceived self-discrepancies, and reinforce self-objectification, ultimately influencing body dissatisfaction and global self-esteem.

A key implication of the framework is that body image concerns are not isolated phenomena but are interconnected with broader identity formation processes during adolescence. Youth are particularly vulnerable because adolescence is characterized by heightened peer sensitivity and ongoing self-concept development. When digital platforms normalize unrealistic beauty standards and reward appearance-based validation, they shape self-worth around external approval rather than intrinsic qualities. Persistent exposure to curated and edited representations of peers and influencers can therefore contribute to chronic dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety, and emotional distress.

At the same time, the discussion emphasizes that social media is not inherently detrimental. Its psychological consequences depend on patterns of engagement, content type, and individual resilience factors. Active participation in supportive communities, exposure to body-positive messaging, and development of critical media literacy can promote empowerment and self-acceptance. Thus, the relationship between social media and youth well-being is complex and mediated by both risk and protective factors.

Educational Implications

Educational institutions play a crucial role in addressing the psychological impact of social media. Integrating digital literacy programs into school curricula can help adolescents critically evaluate online content, recognize image manipulation, and understand algorithmic biases. Such programs should emphasize that online representations are curated rather than authentic reflections of everyday reality. Additionally, incorporating body image education and self-esteem development workshops can foster resilience and encourage self-worth based on competencies, character, and relationships rather than appearance.

Parental and Family Implications

Families serve as primary socialization agents and can significantly buffer harmful digital influences. Open communication about online experiences, encouragement of balanced digital habits, and supportive dialogue regarding appearance concerns can mitigate the negative effects of comparison and feedback anxiety. Rather than imposing strict restrictions, parents may achieve better outcomes by promoting reflective engagement and modelling healthy self-esteem behaviours.

Policy and Platform Implications

At a broader structural level, platform designers and policymakers have a responsibility to consider youth mental health in digital architecture. Transparency regarding edited images, reduction of visible popularity metrics, and promotion of diverse body representations can reduce comparison pressures. Policymakers may also consider regulatory frameworks that require disclosure of manipulated content and support youth mental health initiatives. Collaborative efforts between governments, educational institutions, and technology companies are essential to create safer digital environments.

Mental Health Implications

The findings underscore the importance of early identification and intervention. Mental health professionals working with adolescents should routinely assess social media engagement patterns when addressing body dissatisfaction or low self-esteem. School-based screening programs can detect early signs of distress and provide timely counselling support. Preventive strategies that build self-compassion and emotional regulation skills may reduce vulnerability to external validation pressures.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework explaining how social media influences body image and self-esteem among youth. By integrating psychological theories and developmental perspectives, the model demonstrates that digital exposure operates through mediating mechanisms such as social comparison, self-discrepancy, and self-objectification. These processes contribute to body dissatisfaction, which may generalize into reduced global self-esteem and emotional distress.

Importantly, the analysis reveals that the impact of social media is neither universally negative nor uniform across individuals. Moderating factors such as gender, personality traits, peer support, and digital literacy shape the intensity and direction of outcomes. While certain patterns of engagement may heighten vulnerability, others may promote empowerment and social connection.

The findings suggest that youth psychological well-being in the digital age requires a balanced approach. Rather than demonizing social media, stakeholders must recognize its dual potential and focus on fostering informed, resilient, and critical engagement. By aligning educational initiatives, family support, mental health services, and platform accountability, societies can better safeguard adolescents' body image and self-esteem in increasingly digital social landscapes.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships between social media exposure and changes in body image and self-esteem over time. While cross-sectional studies dominate current literature, long-term studies would provide deeper insight into developmental trajectories and

cumulative effects. Additionally, experimental research manipulating content type and feedback mechanisms could clarify specific platform features that drive psychological outcomes.

Cross-cultural research represents another critical avenue. Much of the existing evidence originates from Western contexts, limiting generalizability to diverse cultural settings where beauty standards and social norms differ. Comparative studies across socioeconomic and cultural groups would enhance theoretical robustness and inform culturally sensitive interventions.

Further investigation is needed into emerging technologies such as augmented reality filters, artificial intelligence-generated influencers, and immersive virtual environments. These technologies may intensify appearance-based pressures and reshape identity construction in ways not yet fully understood. Research should also explore intersectional dimensions, including gender identity, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, to identify differential vulnerability patterns.

Finally, future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs, including digital literacy education, body positivity campaigns, and platform design modifications. Evidence-based strategies are essential to translate theoretical insights into practical solutions that promote healthy development. By advancing interdisciplinary and policy-relevant research, scholars can contribute to building digital ecosystems that support rather than undermine youth psychological well-being.

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