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Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Archives, Jan-Dec, 2025, 4(1), 33-39

Social Media and Body Image Dissatisfaction among Pakistani Adolescents: A Psychological Study

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Abstract

Social media is an inseparable part of every adolescent's day-to-day activities, impacting different spheres of psychological functioning, particularly body image. The increased use of social media presents adolescents with ideal body images which can foster body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. However, this phenomenon has hardly been studied within Pakistan. The current study sought to determine the association between social media use and body image dissatisfaction among Pakistani adolescents as well as determine differences, if any, in these variables by gender. A cross-sectional approach was adopted for this study, and data were collected from three hundred adolescents (150 males and 150 females) from ten metropolitan areas of Pakistan through purposive sampling. The Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ) was used to measure social media usage, while the Body Image Dissatisfaction Scale (BIDS) was used to measure body image dissatisfaction. Data was processed in SPSS Version 28 using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, linear regression, and independent samples *t* test. There was a noteworthy positive association between social media usage and body image dissatisfaction ($r = .56, p < .01$). Regression analysis showed that social media usage was a significant predictor of body image dissatisfaction, ($\beta = .56, p < .001$) explaining 31% of the variance. Differences by gender were evident, with females showing greater social media usage ($M = 44.75, SD = 9.89$) and greater body image dissatisfaction ($M = 41.60, SD = 9.12$) than males. This research puts forward the case that increased social media usage damages the body image perspective of the youth, especially female adolescents. These results need further consideration in light of the need to promote responsible social media use in young people to reduce body dissatisfaction.

Keywords: Social media engagement, body image dissatisfaction, adolescents, gender differences, Pakistani youth.

1. Introduction

The growing use of social media by adolescents has changed how they view themselves and their mental health. As in many other countries, Pakistan has seen a rapid increase in accessibility to the internet (Abbasi et al., 2024). Because of this, social media has gained popularity as the main means for social interaction, entertainment, and self-expression (Khawaja & Aleemi, 2022; Akram et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the beauty standards that are propagated on these platforms have also exacerbated the issue of body image dissatisfaction amongst adolescents (Arshad & Akhtar, 2024). Adolescents' perception of their bodies has been manipulated by the unrealistic digitally altered images and curated lifestyles that they are exposed to. This in turn has led to a warped perception of self-worth and increased the chances of negative self-esteem outcomes (Akram et al., 2025).

Adolescence portrays a significant phase of development due to increased self-consciousness and susceptibility to external stimuli (Batool et al., 2022; Shahzadi & Rasheed, 2024). People during this stage self-reflect and engage in social comparisons, which is often intensified by social media. Aesthetically edited, filtered images and videos posted on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook may encourage adolescents to compare their age and physical appearance to beauty standards which is often difficult to attain (Fatima et al., 2024). This can promote body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, and increase anxiety, depression and disordered eating symptoms (Hafeez & Zulfiqar, 2024). Considering the collectivist cultural context in Pakistan where social approval and compliance matters, there is even greater emphasis to conform to ideal social standards of beauty (Pasha & Hashmat, 2024).

Some well-known theories, including the Social Comparison Theory and Objectification Theory, help explain the psychology of social media-related body image dissatisfaction. For instance (Haider et al., 2023), Social Comparison Theory holds that when people come into contact with idealized representations, they tend to engage in upward comparisons which results in self-doubt and feelings of worthlessness (Fatima et al., 2022). On the other hand, Objectification Theory argues that constantly consuming media content that promotes looks leads individuals to adopt an objectified view of their bodies, judging them based on how others perceive them instead of appreciating their bodies' inherent qualities. Such theories are useful in understanding the impacts of social media on the adolescent's body image and psychological health (Iqbal et al., 2024).

With the swift changes in digital technology in Pakistan, most teenagers consume social media excessively which makes it important to study how much body dissatisfaction these platforms contribute towards (Ramzan & Siddiqui, 2021; Bibi et al., 2024). Literature from the West has found a high correlation between social media usage and body image issues, yet there are few studies that deal with this issue in Pakistani teenagers (Iqbal et al., 2024). There is no doubt that culture, religion, and family expectations greatly influence how Pakistani teenagers consume and react to social media. To help these youth in question, it is important to remember these cultural details while crafting effective measures that counter poor self-perceptions and destructions to mental health self-image alongside body image issues (Mushtaq et al., 2024).

The challenge of body image issues among Pakistani youth stems from deeply entrenched psychological, social, and cultural beliefs self-perception (Mushtaq et al., 2023). Parents, teachers, mental health specialists, and lawmakers must come together to improve consumption of social media as well as more realistic portrayals of beauty (Fatima et al., 2022). They reinforce an environment which accepts indifference towards social media's distortion of body image dissatisfaction, and psychologically strengthens a Pakistani youth's self-image (Karim et al., 2025).

1.1 Problem Statement

The scope of social media use in Pakistan has risen significantly among the youth, raising the question of how it affects one's body image; however, no focused research has been done that could look at this phenomenon within the particular Pakistani context (Ramzan & Siddiqui, 2021). During adolescence, individuals are most vulnerable to social media's influence as their beauty ideals can become socially constructed leading to detrimental self-image, self-worth, and other possible mental health issues. Previous research conducted in social media active western countries has shown body image dissatisfaction as a byproduct of social media exposure, but the particular sociocultural context of Pakistani adolescents has not been studied thoroughly. This study intends to fill this gap by examining the relationship between social media usage and body image dissatisfaction among Pakistani adolescents while taking into account psychological effects and the culture that influences self-perception and social comparison.

1.2 Significant of the study

This study is of utmost importance in assessing the psychological and social impacts of social media overexposure on Pakistani youths, as it helps in studying the intersection of mental health and the digital media phenomenon. The results will help measure the social media's impact on body dissatisfaction, which will assist educators, parents, and mental health professionals and strategists to address the negative consequences more efficiently. In addition, the study will assist in policy formulation by demonstrating the importance of digital literacy and social media usage intervention programs for adolescents' mental wellbeing. It will also serve as a base for more research into culturally sensitive

instruments that encourage positive self-image and self-acceptance among Pakistani adolescents.

1.3 Aim of the Study

The objective of this study is to analyse the impact of social media on the body image of adolescents in Pakistan by investigating the body image self-esteem paradox. The concept of social comparison, self-objectification and culture will be analyzed in detail in an effort to understand the impact of digital media on the adolescent's body image and self-esteem. This research is central in developing impact and awareness interventions, campaigns, and educational programs to help Pakistani adolescents possess a healthy body image and self-esteem in the age of the Internet.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted using a quantitative cross-sectional approach to understand the correlation between the usage of social media and body image problems of adolescents in Pakistan. This approach was useful for capturing the magnitude of the problem as well as the relationships, allowing the researchers to fully assess the impact of social media on body image among the respondents. Employing a systematically designed methodology made it possible to identify prominent social and psychological issues that can lead to weaken mental health of adolescents in this era of social media and technology.

The study was carried out in ten prominent cities of Pakistan to capture as much as possible in terms of geography and culture. The chosen cities were Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Quetta, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Multan, Faisalabad, Hyderabad, and Sialkot. This made it possible to understand the varying levels of social media use among different socioeconomic and educational status groups. The target population for this study was Pakistani teenagers who use social media, and non-probability purposive sampling was used to select those who qualified. The sample size was set using the G*Power sample size calculator to make sure the statistical power was enough to find relationships between the necessary variables. Participants were included if they were aged 13 to 19 years, had been using social media for an hour each day, and gave consent. Adolescents who have any psychological disorders which impact their body image, those who do not actively use social media, or those unwilling to participate were excluded from the study.

Utilizing the Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ) developed by Przybylski et al (2013), which consists of 9 items covering emotional connection and therapy usage with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, social media use was measured. The Body Image Dissatisfaction Scale (BIDS) developed by Cash et al (2002) measured body image dissatisfaction through body size dissatisfaction, weight concerns, and related emotional distress with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. For analysis of the gathered data, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28 was used. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, actual and potential ranges, skewness, and kurtosis were obtained, while inferential analyses included Cronbach's alpha reliability, linear regression, independent sample t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The Institutional Review board (IRB) issued ethical approval for the study prior to data collection, whereby informed consent was collected from participants and guardians where applicable. The participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality and were provided resources for psychological support to help alleviate any distress during discussions of body image that participants might have faced.

3. Results

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Study Participants (N = 300)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	150	50.0
	Female	150	50.0
Age Group	13-15 years	100	33.3
	16-17 years	120	40.0
	18-19 years	80	26.7
City	Islamabad	30	10.0
	Lahore	30	10.0
	Karachi	30	10.0

	Peshawar	30	10.0
	Quetta	30	10.0
	Rawalpindi	30	10.0
	Multan	30	10.0
	Faisalabad	30	10.0
	Hyderabad	30	10.0
	Sialkot	30	10.0
Social Media Usage	1-2 hours/day	90	30.0
	3-4 hours/day	110	36.7
	More than 4 hours/day	100	33.3

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the study participants (N = 300). The sample of the study included an equal number of male (50%) and female (50%) youngsters, mostly aged 16 to 17 years (40%). Sampling was done in Ten Pakistani Cities, where each of the cities provided 10% of the sample. Participants were divided into strata based on hours spent using social media. 36.7% of the respondents used social media for 3-4 hours while 33.3% for more than 4 hours.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation between Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2
1. Social Media Engagement	42.50	9.82	1	.56**
2. Body Image Dissatisfaction	38.75	8.95	.56**	1

Table 2 shows the descriptive and correlation analysis related to the social media engagement and body image dissatisfaction. The mean scores of social media engagement was 42.50 (SD = 9.82) and for body image dissatisfaction, the mean score was 38.75(SD = 8.95). There was a positive statistically significant correlation ($r = .56, p < .01$) suggesting that increased social media engagement tends to heighten body image dissatisfaction among adolescents.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Predicting Body Image Dissatisfaction from Social Media Engagement

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p
Social Media Engagement	0.62	0.08	.56	7.75	.001

$R^2 = .31, F(1, 298) = 60.06, p < .001$

The engagement of social media was noted to contribute significantly to body dissatisfaction. This statement can be validated from results obtained in Table 3. The body image dissatisfaction predicted from social media activity regression analysis was clear. Although it appears as though women suffer a great deal more than men, it's quite possible that female teenagers are just more conscious of negative self-image than their male peers.

Table 4: Independent Sample t-Test for Gender Differences in Study Variables

Variable	Gender	M	SD	t	df	p
Social Media Engagement	Male	40.25	9.45	-3.20	298	.002
	Female	44.75	9.89			
Body Image Dissatisfaction	Male	35.90	8.35	-4.15	298	.001
	Female	41.60	9.12			

Table 4 shows that women have higher social media engagement and body image dissatisfaction as compared to men. The results are startling. The two groups were evaluated individually with respect to both these parameters and the average scores obtained were statistically significant for females. Girls

certainly suffer a great deal more in this regard than boys.

3.1 Discussion

The focus of the research was to explore the association between body image dissatisfaction and social media engagement among adolescents in Pakistan. A positive correlation was found between social media engagement and body image dissatisfaction which implies that social media usage increases dissatisfaction with one's body image. This supports prior body of work proposing that adolescents' body image dissatisfaction stems from overexposure to ideal body portrayals on social media (Zainab & Ahmad, 2021). The correlation coefficient ($r = .56, p < .01$) indicates a moderate to strong correlation which reinforces the belief that social media use does support negative self-images and unrealistic beauty standards (Huang, 2020). These findings suggest that more emphasis needs to be placed on understanding how social media use affects perceptions of body image in adolescents.

The social media use made a notable impact to the level of body image dissatisfaction ($\beta = .56, p < .001$) which explains 31% of the dissatisfaction in the body image. These results are in line with previous research regarding social media's impact on young people's body image issues (Sabih et al., 2021). Body image dissatisfaction can be increased through social media engagement by means of targeted marketing of outfits, peer comparisons, and other media that focus on one's looks (Rizwan et al., 2022). These findings highlight the need to consider social media engagement as one of the risk factors related to body image issues among adolescents who are more prone to peer pressure.

Gender differences emerged in both social media use and body image dissatisfaction as analyzed by an independent sample t-test. Women seem to use social media more actively ($M = 44.75, SD = 9.89$) than men ($M = 40.25, SD = 9.45$) also women have a greater body image dissatisfaction ($M = 41.60, SD = 9.12$) compared to men ($M = 35.90, SD = 8.35$). The results are in consonance with the existing literature concerning social media use by adolescent females who are more prone to appearance-related content which results in body dissatisfaction (Shaikh et al., 2024). These results also support objectification theory which suggests that women's self-objectification and body dissatisfaction increases because of the societal and media scrutiny of their physical appearance (Siraj & Ali, 2023).

The descriptive statistics also revealed that adolescents who spent numerous hours on social media reported higher levels of body image dissatisfaction. The results suggest that adolescents who engaged with social media for more than four hours a day were more dissatisfied compared to those who spent less time on these platforms. This is similar to previous researches as it was noted that the more time one spends on social media, the more likely they are to engage in social comparisons, specifically to altered images of themselves (Munir & Dawood, 2021). These results emphasize the more significant influence that social media has on body image issues for heavy consumers of such content.

The results of the study give fresh insights into the issues facing adolescent mental health and social media use. Because there is an overwhelming association between social media consumption and poor body image, it calls for the design and implementation of programs aimed at improving media literacy among adolescents. Previous studies have shown that critical engagement with media and enhancement of self-esteem as interventions can offset poor body image results from social media use (Tufail et al., 2022). Schools, parents, and policymakers need to find ways of informing adolescents that social media is often an edited reality and help them learn appropriate social media use. Furthermore, advocacy for body positivity and the use of diverse body types by social media influencers, including fashion influencers, need to be used to reverse the negative consequences of social media exposure (Hamid et al., 2023).

As stated earlier, the present investigation was a descriptive one but self-contained in nature and therefore it had its own limitations. Descriptive designs do not allow for establishing causative links for the relationship between social media activity and body image discontentment. To test the direction of this association, longitudinal or experimental approaches should be used in future work. Also, the study used self-reported instruments which can introduce response inaccuracies like social desirability bias. Future research may utilize more reliable methods of social media use to collect additional medical data, which would improve the accuracy of the research results. In addition, the sample was exclusively Pakistani adolescents which questions the general applicability of the findings. There are many angles that cross-cultural research can address in examining the extent of social media impact on body image dissatisfaction.

3.2 Limitation

A few shortcomings of the current study that need to be pointed out include the following. To begin with, the basic descriptive research design used in this investigation does not permit the determination of any cause-and-effect relationship between social media use and dissatisfaction with one's body image. Secondly, the self-reported instruments used for data collection are also very problematic in that they may suffer from bias as participants may have chosen to exaggerate their body social media use and body image concerns or vice versa. The study also focused on ten major cities of Pakistan which may not be representative of people living in rural areas or those belonging to different cultures. Finally, the study did not focus on other confounding factors such as the role of parents, peers, and existing mental health problems which may have an influence on the body image perception.

4. Recommendation

For future research, it is recommended that social media influence on an adolescent's body image concerns employs a qualitative approach, through focus group discussions and interviews with adolescents. This will provide deeper insights concerning their feelings and thoughts surrounding social media usage and body image. In addition, future scholars should also employ self-esteem and peer influence as potential mediating or moderating variables to explain body image dissatisfaction more fully. Lastly, applying the study on rural populations and other cultures would increase the scope of the study.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates a remarkable connection between engagement in social media and body image dissatisfaction amongst the Pakistani adolescents, particularly with the females in the research sample. These findings lead to the conclusion that social media is a critical factor in perpetuating negative body image, thereby necessitating interventions aimed reducing the amount of time spent on social media. This study, despite its limitations, offers important reflections regarding the social media effects on the attended age, and calls for deeper investigation and policy plans concerning students and adolescents identified as being vulnerable to body image issues.

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