

Predicting Body Image Dissatisfaction From Social Media Use and Peer Comparison

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the predictive roles of social media use and peer comparison on body image dissatisfaction among university students in India.

Methods and Materials: The research employed a correlational descriptive design. A total of 491 university students from India participated in the study, with the sample size determined using the Krejcie and Morgan table. Participants completed three standardized self-report instruments: the Body Shape Questionnaire-34 (BSQ-34) to measure body image dissatisfaction, the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) to assess social media use, and the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised (PACS-R) to evaluate peer comparison. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationships between variables, and multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive roles of social media use and peer comparison on body image dissatisfaction. All assumptions for correlation and regression analyses were tested and met.

Findings: The results indicated a significant positive correlation between social media use and body image dissatisfaction ($r = .41, p < .001$), and between peer comparison and body image dissatisfaction ($r = .48, p < .001$). The multiple linear regression analysis revealed that both social media use ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) and peer comparison ($\beta = .36, p < .001$) were significant predictors of body image dissatisfaction, explaining 34.2% of the variance in the dependent variable. Peer comparison emerged as a slightly stronger predictor than social media use.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the need for educational interventions and mental health strategies aimed at reducing appearance-based social comparison and promoting healthier social media habits to improve body image outcomes.

Keywords: body image dissatisfaction, social media use, peer comparison, university students, India.

1. Introduction

Body image dissatisfaction has become a prominent psychological concern in modern society, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Defined as a negative evaluation of one's physical appearance, body image dissatisfaction is often influenced by cultural standards, societal expectations, and media portrayals of idealized beauty norms. In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media platforms has intensified these issues, offering constant exposure to curated images, idealized body types, and mechanisms for comparison with peers and influencers. With the rising popularity of visual-based platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, users—especially young people—are increasingly subjected to social comparisons that may exacerbate self-scrutiny and dissatisfaction with their appearance (Bilal et al., 2021).

A growing body of research has emphasized the role of social media in shaping body image perceptions. These platforms not only encourage the internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals but also provide a space for users to engage in self-presentation and peer evaluation (Lukman et al., 2023). Frequent exposure to idealized body images and engagement with appearance-focused content can lead to body surveillance, appearance anxiety, and ultimately, body image dissatisfaction (Jiotsa et al., 2021). According to the tripartite influence model, social media, family, and peers are primary agents influencing individuals' body image perceptions through processes of internalization and comparison (Apopei et al., 2024). Among these, social media use has emerged as a particularly potent contributor due to its visual-centric nature and the ubiquity of edited, filtered content (Griffiths et al., 2018). In fact, studies have shown that users who spend more time on social media report greater levels of body dissatisfaction compared to those with lower engagement (Abdulwahab et al., 2024).

In India, where traditional beauty ideals intersect with globalized media imagery, body image issues among youth are becoming increasingly prevalent. Indian adolescents and university students, particularly women, report growing concerns about weight, skin tone, and overall body appearance, often driven by comparison with peers and media figures (Navadiya et al., 2024). The sociocultural pressure to conform to certain physical ideals, coupled with the popularity of Westernized beauty norms on social media, creates a challenging environment for young individuals navigating self-image during formative years. Evidence suggests that the more frequently young users compare

themselves to others on social platforms, the higher their levels of body dissatisfaction and related psychological distress (Hashim et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of social comparison, first articulated by Festinger's social comparison theory, provides a useful lens through which to understand body image dissatisfaction in the age of digital media. According to the theory, individuals have an inherent drive to evaluate themselves by comparing to others, particularly in the absence of objective standards. On social media, this tendency is amplified through the constant stream of idealized images shared by peers, influencers, and celebrities (Charmaraman et al., 2021). When individuals engage in upward comparisons—comparing themselves to others perceived as more attractive—they are more likely to feel inadequate or dissatisfied with their own appearance (Möri et al., 2022). This process becomes even more problematic when the images they are exposed to are heavily edited, filtered, or represent an unattainable ideal (Mironica et al., 2024).

A systematic review of social media's impact on cosmetic considerations found that exposure to beauty-enhancing content can directly influence decisions about appearance modification, indicating a profound impact on self-perception and body satisfaction (Mironica et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies indicate that frequent appearance comparisons on platforms like Instagram are correlated with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and even consideration of cosmetic surgery among young adults (Zhou, 2024). This trend is not limited to females; young men also report dissatisfaction when exposed to idealized muscular images and experience similar pressure to conform to certain body standards (Apopei et al., 2024). However, females tend to be more vulnerable to appearance-related comparisons, particularly when social media engagement is high (Riyami et al., 2024).

In addition to image exposure, the integration of social media into everyday routines enhances its influence on body image. When users check platforms frequently, track engagement with their own posts, or seek validation through likes and comments, they may experience increased self-objectification and emotional investment in their appearance (Kalinin & Edgüer, 2023). The emotional attachment to online validation can foster anxiety about one's looks and elevate the desire to present a perfect image online (Zhu, 2023). Research conducted among adolescents in China highlighted that middle school students who frequently used social media reported stronger beliefs in the importance of appearance and were more likely to aspire to idealized body

types (Zhu, 2023). This internalization of beauty standards is a crucial mediator between social media use and body dissatisfaction (Vuong et al., 2021).

Peer comparison also plays a critical role in shaping body image during adolescence and early adulthood. Adolescents are especially sensitive to peer opinions and often rely on peer feedback to form self-concepts. When peers engage in appearance-related talk or share curated images online, it can trigger negative self-evaluation and dissatisfaction (Putri & Ninin, 2023). The dynamics of peer influence are intensified in the digital environment where feedback is immediate and often public. Moreover, research suggests that peer comparison is not merely a byproduct of media exposure but a direct predictor of body dissatisfaction, even in the absence of media content (Górska et al., 2023). In environments where appearance is a central topic of interaction, the likelihood of experiencing dissatisfaction increases significantly (Panzitta et al., 2023).

The psychological consequences of body image dissatisfaction are far-reaching. They include low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and eating disorders (Bilal et al., 2021; Charmaraman et al., 2021). Body image issues have also been linked to lower academic performance, social withdrawal, and poor mental well-being, particularly among female university students (Sabol & Duell, 2024). The pressure to conform to idealized beauty standards can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as excessive dieting, use of image-enhancing products, or cosmetic interventions (Apopei et al., 2024; Mironica et al., 2024). Additionally, studies highlight a mediating role of media internalization in the relationship between appearance scrutiny and dissatisfaction, emphasizing the cognitive processes through which media influences body image (Pattamarruk et al., 2020).

Digital literacy interventions and awareness workshops have shown some promise in reducing the negative effects of social media on self-image. For instance, media literacy programs that educate adolescents about the artificiality of social media images and promote body positivity have led to improvements in self-confidence and reductions in body dissatisfaction (Mumber et al., 2022). These findings suggest that while social media can negatively influence body image, its effects are not irreversible and can be mitigated through targeted interventions (Liu, 2022; Mumber et al., 2022).

Despite the abundance of research examining body image dissatisfaction, the combined predictive roles of social media use and peer comparison have not been sufficiently explored

within the Indian context. While some studies have established a link between social media exposure and negative body perceptions, few have examined the unique contribution of peer comparison alongside media engagement (Tufail et al., 2022). Given the rapidly growing youth population in India and their high engagement with digital platforms, it is critical to investigate the dual impact of these factors on body image dissatisfaction (Navadiya et al., 2024).

The current study aims to fill this gap by examining the extent to which social media use and peer comparison predict body image dissatisfaction among Indian university students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational descriptive design to examine the predictive relationship between social media use, peer comparison, and body image dissatisfaction. The target population consisted of university students in India. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a sample size of 491 participants was selected to ensure adequate statistical power for correlational analysis. Participants were recruited through online survey distribution using convenience sampling across multiple Indian universities. All participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study, and ethical considerations regarding confidentiality and anonymity were fully observed.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Body Image Dissatisfaction

To assess body image dissatisfaction, the Body Shape Questionnaire-34 (BSQ-34), developed by Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, and Fairburn (1987), was used. This self-report instrument is designed to measure concerns about body shape and dissatisfaction related to weight and appearance. It contains 34 items rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (always), with higher scores indicating greater dissatisfaction with body shape. The BSQ-34 includes subscales that reflect preoccupation with body shape, fear of weight gain, and feelings of fatness. Previous studies have confirmed the tool's high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding 0.95, and test-retest reliability has also been reported as strong. The BSQ-34 has demonstrated solid construct and convergent

validity across diverse populations (Abdulwahab et al., 2024; Olatona et al., 2024; Riyami et al., 2024).

2.2.2. Social Media Use

The Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), developed by Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Johnson (2013), was utilized to measure the degree of social media use. This scale includes 10 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), assessing two subscales: social integration and emotional connection to social media, and integration into social routines. Higher scores indicate greater engagement and integration of social media use in daily life. The SMUIS has been validated in various studies, showing excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.85) and good construct validity. It has been widely adopted in psychological and behavioral research to examine the role of social media in young adults' lives (Abdulwahab et al., 2024; Lukman et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Peer Comparison

To evaluate peer comparison, the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised (PACS-R), revised by Schaefer and Thompson (2014), was employed. The PACS-R is a refined measure of individuals' tendency to compare their physical appearance with that of others, particularly peers. It consists of 11 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with higher scores reflecting a higher frequency of appearance-related social comparison. The scale does not include formal subscales but captures a unidimensional construct of appearance comparison behaviors. Reliability and validity have been confirmed in numerous studies, with Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging from 0.85 to 0.90 and evidence supporting its

convergent validity with measures of body dissatisfaction and self-esteem (Dondzilo et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2025)s.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics and overall trends in responses. To examine the relationship between the dependent variable (body image dissatisfaction) and each independent variable (social media use and peer comparison), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. Following this, a standard multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which social media use and peer comparison predicted body image dissatisfaction. Statistical assumptions for correlation and regression analyses, including normality, linearity, and multicollinearity, were checked and met prior to the analyses.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 491 university students from various institutions across India. Of the total participants, 293 (59.67%) identified as female, 193 (39.30%) as male, and 5 (1.02%) as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 27 years, with the majority between 20 and 22 years old. Specifically, 106 participants (21.59%) were 18–19 years old, 224 (45.62%) were 20–22 years old, 131 (26.68%) were 23–25 years old, and 30 (6.11%) were 26–27 years old. Regarding academic standing, 178 participants (36.26%) were in their first year, 139 (28.30%) in their second year, 104 (21.18%) in their third year, and 70 (14.26%) were in their final year of study.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Body Image Dissatisfaction	97.46	21.83
Social Media Use	54.28	10.17
Peer Comparison	36.92	7.64

The results in Table 1 show that the mean score for body image dissatisfaction was 97.46 (SD = 21.83), indicating moderate to high dissatisfaction levels in the sample. The mean score for social media use was 54.28 (SD = 10.17), and the mean score for peer comparison was 36.92 (SD = 7.64),

suggesting relatively frequent use of social media and a moderate tendency toward peer appearance comparisons.

Prior to conducting Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression analyses, all relevant statistical assumptions were tested and met. The normality of the

dependent variable (body image dissatisfaction) and independent variables (social media use and peer comparison) was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values. Skewness values ranged from -0.24 to 0.37 , and kurtosis values ranged from -0.58 to 0.42 , all within the acceptable range of -1 to $+1$, indicating normal distribution. Linearity was confirmed through scatterplot inspection, which showed linear relationships between the independent

variables and the dependent variable. To assess multicollinearity, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance values were examined. VIF values for social media use and peer comparison were 1.28 and 1.31 , respectively, while tolerance values were 0.78 and 0.76 , indicating no multicollinearity concerns. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.91 , suggesting no autocorrelation in the residuals.

Table 2*Pearson Correlations Between Variables*

Variables	1	2	3
1. Body Image Dissatisfaction	—	.41** ($p < .001$)	.48** ($p < .001$)
2. Social Media Use	.41** ($p < .001$)	—	.44** ($p < .001$)
3. Peer Comparison	.48** ($p < .001$)	.44** ($p < .001$)	—

As shown in Table 2, body image dissatisfaction was positively correlated with both social media use ($r = .41$, $p < .001$) and peer comparison ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). A significant positive correlation was also observed between social media

use and peer comparison ($r = .44$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher engagement in one is associated with higher levels of the other.

Table 3*Summary of Regression Analysis*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
Regression	48263.94	2	24131.97	.585	.342	.339	127.06	< .001
Residual	92637.51	488	189.77					
Total	140901.45	490						

The regression model presented in Table 3 was statistically significant, $F(2, 488) = 127.06$, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .342$, indicating that 34.2% of the variance in body image dissatisfaction was explained by the combined effects of

social media use and peer comparison. The adjusted R^2 (.339) suggests good model fit, accounting for the number of predictors.

Table 4*Multiple Linear Regression Coefficients*

Predictor	B	Standard Error	β	t	p
Constant	31.84	5.62	—	5.66	< .001
Social Media Use	0.84	0.12	.29	6.90	< .001
Peer Comparison	1.26	0.15	.36	8.40	< .001

Table 4 presents the results of the multivariate regression analysis. Both predictors significantly contributed to the model. Social media use was a significant predictor of body image dissatisfaction ($\beta = .29$, $t = 6.90$, $p < .001$), and peer comparison was an even stronger predictor ($\beta = .36$, $t = 8.40$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that increases in social media use and peer comparison are associated with higher

levels of dissatisfaction with body image, even after controlling for the shared variance between predictors.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the predictive roles of social media use and peer comparison in body image dissatisfaction among Indian university students. The

findings revealed significant positive correlations between social media use and body image dissatisfaction, as well as between peer comparison and body image dissatisfaction. Furthermore, results from the multiple linear regression analysis indicated that both social media use and peer comparison significantly predicted body image dissatisfaction, with peer comparison emerging as a slightly stronger predictor in the model. These findings highlight the intertwined influence of digital behaviors and interpersonal comparisons on young individuals' perceptions of their bodies.

The significant association between social media use and body image dissatisfaction aligns with a large body of literature emphasizing the adverse effects of social media on self-perception. This relationship can be understood through the lens of the appearance-based social media environment, which encourages the display and consumption of highly curated and idealized images. As young people frequently engage with filtered, edited, and often unrealistic portrayals of beauty on social media platforms, they are more likely to internalize unattainable aesthetic standards and evaluate their own bodies negatively (Jiotsa et al., 2021). This pattern has been widely documented among diverse populations. For instance, studies have shown that high social media engagement correlates with increased dissatisfaction in both male and female users due to constant exposure to idealized body types (Abdulwahab et al., 2024; Lukman et al., 2023).

Our findings support the results of studies such as those by Griffiths et al., who identified that frequent engagement with image-centric social media content contributes to not only body dissatisfaction but also eating disorder symptoms and appearance-modifying behaviors (Griffiths et al., 2018). Similarly, Zhou found that social media use among females is significantly associated with heightened body anxiety, with increased time spent on platforms exacerbating dissatisfaction (Zhou, 2024). The internalization of thin and muscular ideals, often perpetuated on social media, acts as a mediator in this relationship, explaining how online exposure translates into self-evaluative distress (Vuong et al., 2021). This supports the interpretation of our results that social media engagement—particularly when driven by appearance-focused content—directly contributes to negative body image evaluations.

Beyond media exposure, the study also demonstrated that peer comparison is a strong and significant predictor of body image dissatisfaction. This reinforces social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves through comparisons with others, especially in domains

central to self-concept, such as appearance. Our results are consistent with prior findings indicating that upward appearance comparisons with peers, either online or in person, intensify feelings of physical inadequacy (Charmaraman et al., 2021). In particular, Jiotsa et al. demonstrated that individuals who frequently compare themselves with others on social media reported greater body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, suggesting a direct psychological cost of such behaviors (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

Peer comparison plays a particularly pronounced role in collectivist societies like India, where individuals often define self-worth through interpersonal relationships. In this context, social feedback and peer evaluations may amplify body-related insecurities. Navadiya et al. reported that peer influences and digital peer engagement significantly contributed to body dissatisfaction among Indian youth, particularly when peers adhered to or praised specific beauty ideals (Navadiya et al., 2024). These observations are consistent with the results of the present study and further emphasize that comparison with peers—especially when embedded in visual and interactive platforms—serves as a salient factor in the development of body-related concerns.

Notably, peer comparison slightly outperformed social media use as a predictor in our regression model. This may reflect the interpersonal salience of peer influence, as comparisons with peers often carry more emotional weight than those with celebrities or influencers. Research by Apopei et al. highlighted that peer comments and peer-generated content are perceived as more personally relevant and therefore more impactful on self-perception than commercial media content (Apopoi et al., 2024). Similarly, Putri and Ninin argued that interactions among peers, particularly those involving appearance-related judgments, contribute to identity confusion and increase self-monitoring behaviors (Putri & Ninin, 2023). This reinforces the notion that social comparison among peers—whether online or offline—has a uniquely powerful role in shaping body image.

While much of the existing research focuses on female populations, it is important to recognize that body dissatisfaction is not a gender-exclusive experience. The present study included participants of all genders and found similar trends across the sample. This aligns with studies that emphasize the increasing pressure on young men to conform to lean or muscular ideals, especially as male body standards become more visible on social media (Apopoi et al., 2024). Additionally, Möri et al. found that both women and men

who internalized idealized body images presented in media exhibited higher body dissatisfaction, supporting the generalizability of our findings across gender lines (Möri et al., 2022).

Our findings also corroborate recent evidence from other cultural contexts. For instance, Riyami et al. found that among Omani university students, females reported significantly higher body image dissatisfaction when social media usage was high, illustrating that this is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Riyami et al., 2024). Similarly, Zhu's study on Chinese adolescents emphasized how the frequent use of social media platforms facilitated internalization of appearance ideals, reinforcing dissatisfaction through persistent peer and influencer comparisons (Zhu, 2023). The consistency of such patterns across diverse samples points to the universal psychological mechanisms involved in appearance evaluation and social comparison.

Furthermore, research suggests that the integration of social media into daily routines increases the salience of appearance monitoring. Kalinin and Edgüer noted that emotional connection to social media and habitual checking behaviors are associated with lower self-esteem and greater affective instability, which may contribute indirectly to body dissatisfaction (Kalinin & Edgüer, 2023). These insights provide a broader context for interpreting our findings, suggesting that not only the content of social media but the frequency and emotional investment in its use matter for understanding psychological outcomes.

The present findings also echo the conclusions of systematic reviews on this subject. For instance, Mironica et al. concluded that the influence of social media on body dissatisfaction is pervasive and multifaceted, with visual exposure, peer interactions, and validation-seeking behaviors all playing contributing roles (Mironica et al., 2024). Additionally, Tufail et al. demonstrated a robust relationship between social media engagement and body dissatisfaction in university students, reinforcing the importance of addressing this issue in higher education settings (Tufail et al., 2022).

While many studies highlight the negative consequences of social media use, there is also emerging evidence supporting the potential of intervention strategies to reduce its harmful effects. Mumber et al. implemented an interactive workshop aimed at enhancing self-confidence and promoting media literacy in adolescents and found improvements in self-image and emotional well-being (Mumber et al., 2022). These findings suggest that educational initiatives targeting social media awareness may

buffer the adverse impact of appearance comparisons and foster healthier body image development.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its valuable findings, the present study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences about the relationships between variables. While social media use and peer comparison were found to predict body image dissatisfaction, the reverse or bidirectional effects cannot be ruled out. Second, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. Third, the sample was limited to university students from India, and although it provides insights into this specific population, the generalizability to other age groups, educational levels, or cultural contexts may be limited. Lastly, the study did not account for potential moderating variables such as gender, body mass index (BMI), or existing mental health conditions, which could influence the observed relationships.

Future studies should consider longitudinal designs to examine how social media use and peer comparison influence body image over time. This approach would help determine the directionality of these relationships and uncover long-term consequences. Additionally, future research should explore the role of moderating and mediating factors such as self-esteem, perfectionism, or media literacy in shaping these outcomes. Including a more diverse sample in terms of geographic location, socioeconomic status, and age would also enhance the generalizability of findings. Finally, qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences and cognitive processes underlying body dissatisfaction in the digital age.

Given the significant role of social media and peer comparison in predicting body image dissatisfaction, there is a need for practical interventions within educational and clinical settings. Schools and universities should incorporate media literacy programs that help students critically analyze online content and understand its potential impact on self-image. Counseling centers can offer workshops focused on building self-esteem, reducing comparison behaviors, and promoting body acceptance. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals should be trained to recognize early signs of body dissatisfaction and implement preventive strategies that foster positive body image and resilience against social pressures.

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Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

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