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ASSESSING THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE ON YOUTH'S SELF-WORTH AND BODY IMAGE: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SIALKOT, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Social media has turned into a crucial aspect of daily living, especially for young people. While these platforms offer chances for connection, education, and enjoyment, overuse of social media has been linked to various psychological issues, such as negative body image and diminished self-esteem. This study sought to explore the impact of social media use on the self-esteem and body image of university students in Sialkot, Pakistan. A quantitative research approach grounded in the positivist paradigm was utilized. Information was gathered from 300 students registered at three universities through a standardized questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, regression analysis, and independent t-tests were conducted using SPSS Version 21. The results indicated that social media usage was significantly positively connected to body image issues and diminished self-esteem. Regression analysis additionally validated that social media use was a significant predictor of both body image and self-esteem. Statistical analysis revealed significant gender differences, showing that female students faced more intense psychological effects compared to male students. The results bolster Social Comparison Theory, indicating that regular encounters with idealized online material promote social comparison, leading to body discontent and diminished self-esteem. The research suggests enhancing digital literacy, encouraging positive social media habits, and implementing awareness initiatives to reduce the adverse psychological impacts of social media on young people.

INTRODUCTION

The swift advancement of digital technology has transformed the way people communicate, interact, and share information. Among these technological advancements, social media has surfaced as one of the most influential platforms in the daily lives of young people. Sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) enable people to create digital personas, connect with others, and consistently access visual media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). While these platforms provide educational, social, and career prospects, growing evidence suggests that extensive social media use may cause a range of psychological and emotional impacts (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017;

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Andreassen, 2015). Young adults are particularly vulnerable since adolescence and early adulthood are key periods for identity formation, personal development, and social evaluation (Erikson, 1968; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Social media platforms frequently display edited pictures, idealized lives, and unrealistic beauty standards that encourage users to compare themselves to others (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Perloff, 2014). These comparisons often result in discontent with one's looks, reduced self-esteem, and decreased feelings of self-value. Prior research has indicated that continual interaction with appearance-centric content is linked to body dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem, especially in female users (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

Social Comparison Theory indicates that people instinctively assess themselves against the abilities, accomplishments, looks, and lifestyles of others (Festinger, 1954). On social media, these comparisons frequently feature heavily altered, idealized, and carefully crafted online content, heightening users' chances of experiencing feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with themselves (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly, 2015). As a result, many young people become increasingly dependent on external validation through likes, comments, and followers, which may negatively affect their self-esteem, self-worth, and overall mental well-being (Vogel, 2014; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Globally, the engagement on social media continues to surge at an unparalleled rate, particularly among young adults who spend significant time on visually-oriented platforms where content related to appearance is prominently featured (Pew Research Center, 2021; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Research has consistently shown that prolonged interaction with appearance-focused social media content is linked to increased body dissatisfaction, greater social comparison, and lowered self-esteem (Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Despite the growing international literature on this subject, there is a scarcity of empirical data from Pakistan regarding the psychological effects of social media usage, particularly among university students, highlighting the need for further research in this cultural context (Rafiq, 2020; Bano, 2022).

Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Usage among Youth

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed how individuals connect, interact, and portray themselves within society. Social media platforms have become an essential part of daily life, particularly for young people who often interact with sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitter for communicating, entertainment, sharing content, and self-expression (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Youth are some of the most active participants in social media, as these platforms provide opportunities for social interaction, identity development, and participation in online communities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). However, the intense and looks-focused utilization of social media has raised concerns regarding its influence on mental health aspects like self-image, self-worth, and body perception (Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Social media differs from traditional media because it allows users to not only consume content but also to create, modify, and share their own online identities (boyd, 2014). Through images, videos, comments, and feedback, individuals receive ongoing information from others that can influence their self-evaluation (Vogel, 2014). The captivating nature of social media can increase users' dependence on external validation from likes, comments, and followers, which may affect self-esteem and mental health (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016). Research indicates that the psychological effects of social media are strongly related to the type of engagement, content viewed, and online interaction habits, rather than

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just the duration of usage (Kross, 2013; Verduyn, 2017).

For youth, social media has become an essential platform for shaping identity and engaging in social comparisons. According to Social Comparison Theory proposed by Festinger (1954), individuals evaluate their abilities, appearance, and social status by comparing themselves to others. In the digital realm, these comparisons happen more frequently as people are constantly confronted with deliberately crafted and glorified representations of others' lives (Chae, 2017). As a result, adolescents may develop unrealistic ideals regarding attractiveness, success, and lifestyle choices (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Perloff, 2014). Previous studies have shown that consistent engagement with social media can influence the mental well-being of young people (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017)

2.2 Social Media and Body Image

Body image refers to an individual's perception, beliefs, and feelings about their physical appearance, including evaluations related to body size, shape, beauty, and overall look (Cash, 2004). In the modern world, social media plays a major role in shaping body image, as visual material dominates many well-known platforms. Unlike traditional media, social networking sites offer continuous exposure to curated visuals, beauty upgrades, influencers, and content centered on appearance, which may shape individuals' perceptions of an ideal body (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). The link between body image and social media use can be explained by Social Comparison Theory, suggesting that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their traits to those of others (Festinger, 1954). When young people compare their appearances to unrealistic images shared online, they may perceive themselves as less attractive or inadequate (Fardouly, 2015). A variety of social media content presents carefully curated portrayals of reality through filters, digital modifications, and selective presentations, which can result in unrealistic beauty standards (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). Instagram and TikTok are particularly influential since these platforms are mainly visual and emphasize elements such as appearance, fashion, fitness, and beauty trends. Individuals frequently encounter content that promotes socially accepted standards of beauty, including slimness, flawless skin, specific body shapes, and idealized lifestyles (Cohen et al., 2019). This constant exposure can create psychological pressure in young people to conform to unattainable beauty standards. This continuous exposure can generate psychological stress in young individuals to meet unattainable beauty ideals. Research has shown that exposure to idealized appearance-focused content on social media can heighten body dissatisfaction, especially in those who participate in appearance-related comparisons (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016).

2.3 Social Media and Self-Worth

Body image refers to an individual's perception, beliefs, and feelings about their physical appearance, including evaluations related to body size, shape, appeal, and overall look (Cash, 2004). In the current era, social media plays a crucial role in shaping body image since visual material dominates many widely-used platforms. Unlike traditional media, social networking sites offer continuous exposure to selected images, beauty modifications, influencers, and content centered on appearance, which may influence individuals' perceptions of an ideal body (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). The relationship between body image and social media use can be analyzed through Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes to those of other people (Festinger, 1954). When young people compare their appearance to unrealistic images shared online, they may perceive themselves as less attractive or inadequate (Fardouly et al., 2015). A plethora of social media content displays carefully altered representations of reality through filters, digital modifications, and

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selective presentation, which can contribute to unrealistic standards of appearance (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). Continuous exposure to flawless images has been associated with increased body dissatisfaction and adverse views of one's appearance (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Research has consistently demonstrated that increased engagement with social media is linked to greater appearance comparisons and body image concerns in young people (Fardouly, 2017; Rodgers, 2020). Instagram and TikTok have a significant influence since these platforms are mainly visual and emphasize elements such as physical looks, fashion, fitness, and beauty trends. Users frequently encounter content that promotes socially accepted standards of beauty, including thinness, flawless skin, specific body shapes, and idealized lifestyles (Cohen, 2019). This constant exposure can create psychological pressure in young people to conform to unattainable beauty standards. Based on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), people instinctively assess their own skills and social standing by comparing themselves to others. Social media enhances chances for these comparisons as users are constantly shown curated and idealized depictions of the achievements, lifestyles, and appearances of others (Appel, 2016). The impact of social media on self-esteem is linked to the kinds of online activities people engage in. Active participation, like interacting with friends and obtaining social support, could enhance feelings of belonging and self-assurance, while passive exposure to appearance-centered material may elevate comparison and discontent (Verduyn, 2017).

Hypothesis:

- There is a significant relationship between social media usage and self-worth among youth.
- There is a significant relationship between social media usage and body image concerns among youth.
- There is a significant relationship between social media usage and youth's mental health and well-being

Theoretical framework:

The present study is based on **Social Comparison Theory proposed by Leon Festinger (1954)**, which explains how individuals evaluate their abilities, appearance, opinions, and personal worth by comparing themselves with others. Social comparison can influence self-perception, emotional well-being, and self-worth, particularly when objective standards are unavailable (Festinger, 1954; Rudd & Lennon, 2000). **Upward comparison**, with people perceived as more attractive or successful, may result in insecurity, dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem, while **downward comparison** may enhance self-confidence and positive self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954; Richins, 1991). Social media increases opportunities for such comparisons by exposing youth to idealized appearances, lifestyles, and achievements. Therefore, Social Comparison Theory provides a suitable framework for examining the relationship between **social media usage, body image, and self-worth among youth**

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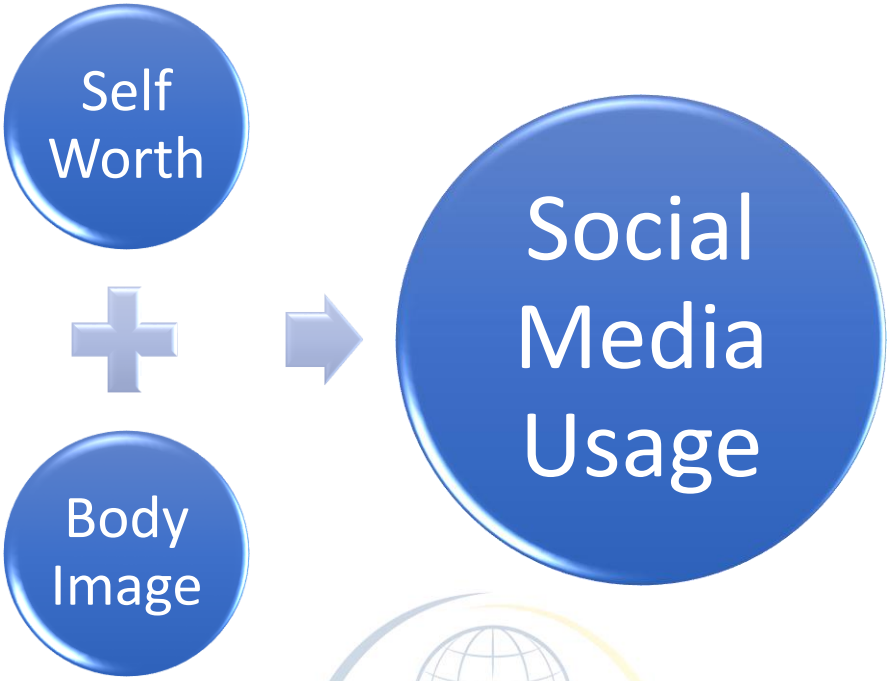

Materials and Methods:

This research utilized a quantitative methodology and embraced a positivist research framework. The research was carried out in the Sialkot District of Punjab, Pakistan. The research centered on college students aged 18 to 30. The study aimed to explore how the usage of social media affects young individuals perceptions of self-esteem and body image. A correlational cross-sectional research design was used to investigate the relationship between social media usage (independent variable) and views on self-worth and body image (dependent variables). The research population included university students enrolled at three institutions in Sialkot: Government College Women University Sialkot (GCWUS), University of Management and Technology (UMT), and University of Sialkot (USKT). The study sample consisted of 24,023 university students from the selected institutions. The population was distributed in this manner:

Table 1

University	Population Strength
Government College Women University Sialkot (GCWUS)	6,023
University of Management and Technology (UMT)	10,000
University of Sialkot (USKT)	8,000
Total Population	**24,023**

The sample size was established using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for sample size determination. The table suggests a sample size of 377 for a population of around 24,000; nonetheless, because of time and accessibility limitations, a final sample of 300 respondents was chosen. A convenience sampling method was employed for gathering data since participants were chosen according to their availability and eagerness to join the study.

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Measurements:

Social Media Usage

The independent variable in this study was social media use, which was assessed using five items modified from earlier research on social media behaviors and usage trends. These aspects evaluated how often participants check social media, follow influencers focused on appearance, share personal photos or videos, track likes and comments, and utilize filters or editing software. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The descriptive results showed that most respondents consented to various social media usage statements, implying that participants were very involved with social media platforms and online interactions.

Dependent Variables

Body Image

Body image was assessed with five items modified from earlier body image research (Cash, 2000). The evaluated aspects included appearance comparison, dissatisfaction with one's looks after engaging with social media, perceived attractiveness of others, modifications to appearance as a result of social media exposure, and the impact of edited or filtered photos. Responses were assessed using a five-point Likert scale that spanned from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). In general, the replies suggested that a significant number of participants concurred that social media affected their body image views, though a substantial portion still remained neutral or disagreed with these claims.

Self-Worth

Self-worth was assessed through ten items modified from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and prior research on self-worth related to social media. The elements evaluated included confidence derived from likes and comments, sense of personal worth, impact of online responses, stress to attain an ideal look, emotional health, appearance-related anxiety, and views on authentic body portrayal on social platforms. Every item was evaluated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The results showed that a majority of participants believed social media had a considerable impact on their self-esteem, while a lesser number disagreed or were indifferent.

Demographics

The demographic part of the questionnaire was created to gather fundamental details about the participants. It encompassed age, gender, religious belief, family structure, living conditions, job status, most commonly used social media platform, and average daily duration spent on social media. These variables were incorporated to outline the socio-demographic traits of the sample. The demographic details additionally offered context for comprehending variations in social media use, body perception, and self-esteem among participants (Rosenberg, 1965; Cash, 2000).

Results and Discussion

Table 2

Description of the Demographic Portion

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–22 years	92	30.6
	22–25 years	125	41.5
	25–30 years	83	27.6
Gender	Female	153	51.0

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	Male	147	49.0
Religion	Islam	293	97.7
	Christian	7	2.3
Family Type	Extended	50	16.7
	Joint	125	41.7
	Nuclear	125	41.7
Living Status	Rural	118	39.3
	Urban	182	60.7
Employment Status	Employed	114	38.0
	Unemployed	186	62.0

Table 2 displays the demographic traits of the 300 participants. The highest percentage (41.5%) was within the 22–25 year age range, followed by 30.6% in the 18–22 age group and 27.6% in the 25–30 age range. Females accounted for 51.0% (n = 153) and males for 49.0% (n = 147). The majority of participants identified as Muslim (97.7%, n = 293), whereas 2.3% (n = 7) identified as Christian. In terms of family type, 41.7% (n = 125) were part of joint families, 41.7% (n = 125) were in nuclear families, and 16.7% (n = 50) were from extended families. Most respondents lived in urban areas (60.7%, n = 182), while 39.3% (n = 118) lived in rural areas. Regarding employment, 62.0% (n = 186) were unemployed and 38.0% (n = 114) were employed. Overall, the sample mainly consisted of young adults, with nearly equal gender representation and a higher proportion of urban respondents.

Table 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF CORRELATION BETWEEN THREE VARIABLES:
Correlations

		Social media	Body Image	Self-Worth
Social media	Pearson Correlation	1	.519**	.579**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
Body Image	Pearson Correlation	.519**	1	.671**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
Self -Worth	Pearson Correlation	.579**	.671**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	

TABLE 3 : Correlation analysis showed significant positive relationships between social media use and body image (**r = 0.519, p < .001**), social media use and self-worth (**r = 0.579, p < .001**), and body image and self-worth (**r = 0.671, p < .001**). These findings indicate significant associations among social media engagement, body image, and self-worth among young respondents

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Table 4
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF REGRESSION:

Dependent Variable	Parameter	Beta	T	Sig.
Body Image	Intercept	1.101	6.113	.000
	SM	.557	10.493	.000
Self -Worth	Intercept	1.516	10.980	.000
	SM	.499	12.272	.000

TABLE 4 : Regression analysis showed that social media use significantly predicted both body image and self-worth. Social media use positively predicted body image (**β = 0.557, t = 10.493, p < .001**) and self-worth (**β = 0.499, t = 12.272, p < .001**). These findings indicate that increased social media use is significantly associated with changes in participants' body image and self-worth.

Table 5
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF T-TEST
Test Value=0

Gender

T	D f	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
51.539	299	.000	1.490	1.43	1.55

TABLE 5 shows the result of an independent t-test comparing gender. The t-value is 51.539, with 299 degrees of freedom and a p-value of .000, which means the result is statistically significant. The mean difference is 1.490, indicating that there is a clear difference between the two gender groups in the sample.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS:

Descriptive statistics showed that the mean scores were 3.29 (SD = 0.83) for social media use, 2.93 (SD = 0.89) for body image, and 3.16 (SD = 0.72) for self-worth. Reliability analysis indicated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.674, 0.815, and 0.822 for social media use, body image, and self-worth, respectively.

Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between social media use and body image ($r = 0.519$, $p < .001$) and between social media use and self-worth ($r = 0.579$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis further showed that social media use significantly predicted body image ($\beta = 0.557$, $t = 10.493$, $p < .001$) and self-worth ($\beta = 0.499$, $t = 12.272$, $p < .001$). The independent-samples t-test also indicated a significant gender difference ($t = 51.539$, $p < .001$). Thus, all three hypotheses were supported, indicating that social media use was significantly associated with body image and self-worth, with significant differences observed by gender. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the role of social comparison and appearance-focused social media content in shaping body image and self-evaluation (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Vogel, 2014).

Conclusion

The present study examined the effects of social media usage on young people's perceptions of self-

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worth and body image among 300 university students in Sialkot, Pakistan. The findings demonstrate that social media has become an important factor in shaping young people's perceptions of themselves and their physical appearance. The results showed significant relationships between social media usage, self-worth, and body image. Social media usage significantly predicted self-worth ($\beta = .499$, $p < .001$) and body image ($\beta = .557$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, a significant relationship was observed between social media usage and body image ($r = .519$, $p < .001$), social media usage and self-worth ($r = .579$, $p < .001$), and between body image and self-worth ($r = .671$, $p < .001$). The findings further indicate that frequent exposure to social media may encourage young people to compare their appearance and personal lives with others, particularly when they encounter idealized, edited, and filtered content. The study also found significant gender differences, indicating that the effects of social media on psychological well-being were not experienced equally by male and female respondents. In general, the results endorse the significance of Social Comparison Theory in recognizing the effects of online comparisons on body image and self-esteem perceptions. The research findings suggest that encouraging moderate social media usage, enhancing digital literacy, fostering self-acceptance, and recognizing unrealistic portrayals online can aid in alleviating the adverse psychological effects linked to excessive social media activity.

Theoretical Implications

The results endorse the relevance of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) within the realm of social media. Notable connections among social media usage, body image, and self-esteem indicate that online platforms often create chances for social comparison. The robust correlation between self-worth and body image ($r = .671$, $p < .001$) highlights the close link between physical appearance and individual value in young people.

Methodological Implications

The research illustrates the effectiveness of a quantitative, cross-sectional approach in exploring social media, body image, and self-esteem in university students. Information from 300 students were examined utilizing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, regression analysis, and an independent-samples t-test. This method offers a valuable structure for upcoming studies, yet larger sample sizes, longitudinal frameworks, and mixed-method strategies may yield more comprehensive understanding.

Practical Implications

The results emphasize the necessity for universities to implement awareness initiatives regarding edited images, unattainable beauty ideals, social comparison, and appropriate social media usage. Counseling services may assist students who face body dissatisfaction or diminished self-esteem, while families and educators can promote healthy online behaviors, self-acceptance, and in-person social engagement. Such initiatives could lessen reliance on online affirmation via likes, comments, and followers.

Recommendations

According to the results, universities ought to implement awareness initiatives regarding unrealistic beauty ideals, altered images, social comparison, and responsible social media practices. Students ought to be motivated to regularly pause their social media use and strike a balance between digital engagements and face-to-face connections. Guardians and teachers ought to assist youth in comprehending curated and idealized digital material, while support services must be accessible for individuals facing body image issues or low self-esteem. Social media influencers ought to advocate for authentic and varied portrayals of looks. Subsequent studies ought to encompass varied populations and investigate elements like peer influence, personality traits, familial settings, and gender

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through both quantitative and qualitative methods.

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