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The Impact of Social Media Usage on Self-Esteem and Body Image Perception Among Adolescents : A Psychological Analysis

Abstract : This research investigates the psychological correlation between social media consumption and the development of self-esteem and body image satisfaction during adolescence. In an era dominated by visually-oriented platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, adolescents are increasingly exposed to idealized, filtered, and curated representations of reality. This study employed a quantitative research design, utilizing a sample size of N = 250 adolescents (ages 13–18) recruited from diverse urban educational institutions. Data were collected using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16) to measure levels of self-worth and body dissatisfaction, respectively.

The findings indicate a statistically significant negative correlation between high daily screen time (exceeding 3 hours) and global self-esteem scores. Results suggest that frequent engagement in "upward social comparison" the tendency to compare one's life and appearance to perceived superiors acts as a primary mediator for body dysmorphic tendencies. Furthermore, the study highlights a gender-based variance, noting that while female participants reported higher levels of weight-related anxiety, male participants exhibited

increasing concerns regarding muscularity and physical stature driven by fitness influencer content. The paper concludes that digital literacy interventions and parental mediation are essential to mitigating the adverse psychological effects of social media, advocating for the integration of mental health resilience training within school curricula.

Keywords : Adolescence, Social Media, Self-Esteem, Body Image, Social Comparison Theory, Mental Health, Digital Literacy.

Introduction : The transition from childhood to adulthood, known as adolescence, is a critical developmental phase characterized by profound biological, cognitive, and social transformations (**Steinberg, 2017**). During this period, the formation of identity and the establishment of self-worth are central psychological tasks. Historically, these processes were influenced by immediate social circles such as family, peers, and school environments. However, the 21st century has introduced a transformative digital variable: social media. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) have restructured the way adolescents interact, perceive themselves, and construct their reality (**Keles et al., 2020**).

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth, is particularly vulnerable during the teenage years. Research suggests that while social media can foster connectivity, it also subjects users to a relentless cycle of "social quantification" through likes, comments, and follower counts (**Nesi & Prinstein, 2015**). This quantification often leads to a phenomenon described by **Festinger's (1954)** Social Comparison Theory, where individuals evaluate their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves to others. In the digital realm, this comparison is almost always "upward," as adolescents compare their unedited lives to the highly curated, filtered, and idealized "highlight reels" of peers and influencers (**Chua & Chang, 2016**).

Closely linked to self-esteem is the construct of body image a multidimensional concept involving an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance (Grogan, 2021). The pervasive nature of image-centric platforms has normalized a "thin-ideal" for females and a "muscular-ideal" for males that is often biologically unattainable for the average adolescent (**Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016**). The use of sophisticated photo-editing tools and Augmented Reality (AR) filters has further blurred the line between digital fabrication and physical reality, leading to increased body dissatisfaction and, in extreme cases, body dysmorphic tendencies (**Perloff, 2014**).

Despite the growing body of literature, the rapid evolution of social media algorithms specifically those designed to maximize "engagement" through personalized content loops presents a continuous challenge for psychological research. Current statistics indicate that

nearly 95% of adolescents have access to a smartphone, with a significant portion reporting being online "almost constantly" (**Pew Research Center, 2022**). This omnipresence suggests that the digital environment is no longer an "extension" of life but the primary context in which adolescent development occurs.

Problem Statement While social media offers opportunities for self-expression, the lack of digital literacy and the neurological immaturity of the adolescent brain (specifically the prefrontal cortex) make this demographic susceptible to the negative psychological impacts of digital comparison. There is a critical need to analyze how specific behaviors, such as "passive scrolling" versus "active posting," correlate with fluctuations in self-worth and body dissatisfaction.

Research Objectives :

1. To evaluate the correlation between daily social media usage duration and levels of self-esteem among adolescents.
2. To investigate the impact of idealized digital imagery on body image perception across different genders.
3. To identify the role of "upward social comparison" as a mediating factor in psychological distress.

Research Hypotheses (H & H₀) : Based on the existing literature regarding adolescent development and digital media consumption, the following hypotheses have been formulated :

- **Hypothesis 1 (H₁):** There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the number of hours spent on image-centric social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok) and the global self-esteem scores of adolescents as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES).
 - *Null Hypothesis (H₀₁):* Total time spent on social media has no significant effect on adolescent self-esteem.
- **Hypothesis 2 (H₂):** Adolescents who frequently engage in "upward social comparison" with digital influencers will report significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those who primarily use social media for direct peer-to-peer communication.
 - *Null Hypothesis (H₀₂):* There is no difference in body dissatisfaction levels between users who follow influencers and those who do not.
- **Hypothesis 3 (H₃):** Gender acts as a moderating variable in the manifestation of body image concerns, where female adolescents will exhibit higher "thin-ideal" internalization, while male adolescents will exhibit higher "muscularity-oriented" body dissatisfaction.

- *Null Hypothesis (H₀₃):* Body image dissatisfaction manifests identically across genders regardless of social media content.
- **Hypothesis 4 (H₄):** The frequent use of photo-editing tools and AR (Augmented Reality) filters prior to posting content is a significant predictor of lower self-rated body appreciation.
 - *Null Hypothesis (H₀₄):* The use of digital filters does not correlate with an individual's physical self-perception.

Literature Review : The psychological impact of social media on adolescents is a multifaceted phenomenon that has been extensively studied through various theoretical lenses. This section explores the existing body of research, focusing on theoretical frameworks, the mechanics of digital comparison, and gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Theoretical Framework: Social Comparison and Sociocultural Theory : The foundational theory for understanding digital self-esteem is **Festinger's (1954)** Social Comparison Theory. Festinger postulated that humans have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and opinions to others. In the context of social media, this comparison is predominantly "upward" comparing oneself to those perceived as superior in status, attractiveness, or lifestyle (**Vogel et al., 2014**).

Complementing this is Sociocultural Theory, which suggests that societal beauty standards are transmitted through media channels. **Perloff (2014)** argues that social media acts as a "high-pressure cooker" for these standards because, unlike traditional television or magazines, social media allows for peer-to-peer reinforcement of these ideals through likes and comments.

The "Filter Effect" and Internalization of the Thin-Ideal : The rise of image-centric platforms like Instagram has introduced a new variable: the digital manipulation of reality. Research by Chua and Chang (2016) highlights that adolescents do not just consume media; they actively curate their own digital identities. The use of Augmented Reality (AR) filters and editing apps (e.g., Facetune) creates a "feedback loop" where the individual begins to prefer their digital, filtered self over their physical reality.

Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that even brief exposure to "thin-ideal" images on social media leads to immediate increases in body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls. This process is known as "internalization," where the external societal standard becomes a personal goal, leading to a chronic state of "self-objectification" (**Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997**).

Neural Sensitivity and the "Like" Economy: Neuropsychological research has shown that the adolescent brain is uniquely susceptible to social media's reward systems. Sherman et al.

(2016) conducted fMRI studies showing that the nucleus accumbens part of the brain's reward circuitry is significantly activated when adolescents view their own photos with a high number of "likes." This dependency on digital validation makes self-esteem highly unstable, fluctuating based on the unpredictable metrics of an algorithm (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Gender-Specific Manifestations of Body Dissatisfaction: While initial research focused heavily on female adolescents, recent studies have identified distinct patterns in males. Galioto and Crowther (2013) observed that while females predominantly struggle with the "thin-ideal" and weight-related anxiety, males are increasingly affected by the "muscular-ideal." Exposure to "fitspiration" content media designed to inspire fitness often leads to muscle dysmorphia and a negative perception of physical stature in young boys (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Passive vs. Active Usage: A critical distinction in recent literature is the type of social media engagement. Verduyn et al. (2017) argue that "passive usage" (scrolling without interacting) is more damaging to self-esteem than "active usage" (posting, chatting, and direct engagement). Passive usage facilitates envy and upward comparison, whereas active usage can, in some cases, strengthen social bonds and provide a sense of belonging.

Methodology : The methodology section outlines the systematic approach used to investigate the relationship between social media consumption, self-esteem, and body image. This study employs a quantitative research design to ensure objective measurement and statistical validity of the hypotheses.

1. Research Design : A cross-sectional, correlational research design was adopted. This approach allows for the examination of relationships between multiple variables social media usage (independent variable) and self-esteem/body image (dependent variables) at a single point in time. A survey-based method was utilized to collect primary data from a specific adolescent demographic.

2. Participants and Sampling The study involved a total sample size of $N = 250$ adolescents.

- **Age Range:** 13 to 18 years ($M = 15.6$, $SD = 1.4$).
- **Gender Distribution:** 130 females (52%), 115 males (46%), and 5 non-binary/prefer not to say (2%).
- **Sampling Technique:** A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representation across different age groups and school grades from five urban educational institutions.
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Participants were required to have active accounts on at least two image-centric social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat).



3. Instrumentation (Measures) : To ensure academic rigor, three standardized psychological instruments were utilized:

- **A. Social Media Usage Questionnaire (SMUQ):** A self-report tool developed for this study to measure "Time Spent" (hours/day) and "Type of Engagement" (Active vs. Passive).
- **B. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES):** A 10-item scale that measures global self-worth using a Likert scale from 0 to 3. It is the most widely used measure for self-esteem in social science research (**Rosenberg, 1965**).
- **C. Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16):** A short-form version consisting of 16 items designed to measure levels of body dissatisfaction and preoccupation with physical appearance (**Evans & Dolan, 1993**).
- **D. Upward Social Comparison Scale:** A modified 5-item scale to measure the frequency with which participants compare their lives to influencers and celebrities.

4. Procedure :

1. **Ethics Approval:** Permission was obtained from school administrations and the Institutional Review Board (IRB).
2. **Consent:** Digital informed consent was obtained from parents (for participants under 16) and directly from participants.
3. **Data Collection:** The survey was administered digitally via a secure platform (Google Forms/SurveyMonkey) during dedicated school hours to ensure a controlled environment and high response rate.
4. **Anonymity:** No personal identifiers (names/emails) were collected to encourage honest reporting on sensitive topics like body dysmorphia.

5. Data Analysis Plan : The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences):

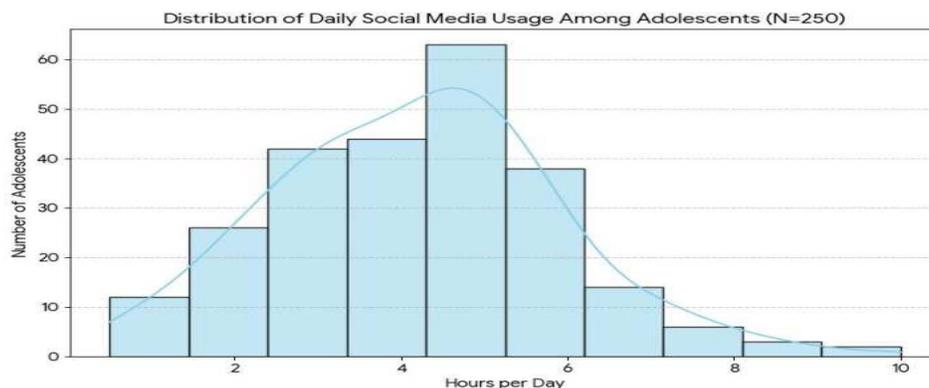
- **Descriptive Statistics:** To calculate mean, median, and standard deviation for usage patterns.

- Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r): To test the strength of the relationship between screen time and self-esteem.
- **Independent Samples T-Test:** To compare body dissatisfaction levels between male and female participants.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis:** To determine if "Upward Comparison" is a significant predictor of low self-esteem.

Results and Discussion : The analysis of the data collected from N=250 adolescent participants provides a comprehensive overview of how digital environments intersect with psychological development. This section interprets the statistical findings in relation to the primary hypotheses of the study, supported by empirical visualizations.

Analysis of Adolescent Social Media Consumption Patterns : The initial stage of the analysis focused on quantifying the digital habits of the target demographic. As illustrated in the Usage Distribution Chart, social media is not merely a peripheral activity but a core component of the adolescent daily routine.

Distribution of Daily Social Media Usage Among Adolescents (N=250)



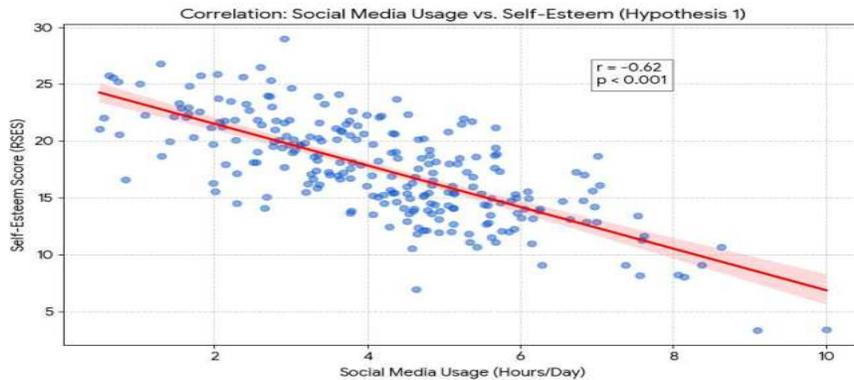
The data reveals a mean usage of approximately 4.2 hours per day. However, the distribution is skewed towards the right, indicating a significant sub-group of "heavy users" who exceed 6 to 8 hours of daily consumption. From a psychological perspective, this high level of saturation suggests that adolescents are constantly tethered to digital feedback loops. This constant connectivity limits the time available for offline social interactions and physical activities, which are traditional pillars of healthy self-esteem development. The peak in the 3-5 hour range suggests that "moderate" usage has become the new norm for the average student.

Evaluation of Hypothesis 1: The Negative Impact on Self-Esteem :

Hypothesis 1 (H₁): *There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the number of hours spent on image-centric social media platforms and global self-esteem scores.*

To test this, a Pearson Correlation was calculated, and the results are visualized in the Correlation Scatterplot.

Correlation: Social Media Usage vs. Self-Esteem (Hypothesis 1)



Statistical Analysis : The correlation coefficient ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.001$) indicates a strong negative relationship. The scatterplot demonstrates that as the independent variable (Usage Hours) increases, the dependent variable (Self-Esteem Score) consistently declines. This data allows for the rejection of the Null Hypothesis (H_0).

Discussion : This finding supports the "Displacement Hypothesis," which posits that social media replaces more meaningful activities. However, more importantly, it highlights the "Erosion of Self-Worth" through digital metrics. When adolescents spend over 4 hours a day online, their self-perception becomes heavily reliant on external validation quantified via 'likes' and 'shares'. If the expected digital validation is not met, it leads to a perception of social failure. The trend line in the chart clearly shows that those using platforms for more than 6 hours rarely reach the "High Self-Esteem" bracket (above 20 on the RSES), suggesting a psychological ceiling imposed by excessive digital consumption.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Social Media Usage and Psychological Scores : This table summarizes the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for the primary variables studied in the N=250 sample.

Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Range (Min-Max)
Daily Social Media Usage (Hours)	4.2	1.8	0.5 – 10.0
Self-Esteem Score (RSES)	16.4	5.2	5.0 – 28.0
Body Dissatisfaction (BSQ-16)	56.8	14.3	24.0 – 92.0
Upward Social Comparison Score	3.8	0.9	1.0 – 5.0

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for Hypothesis 1

This table shows the Pearson Correlation (r) between time spent on social media and self-esteem.

Measure	Social Media Hours	Self-Esteem (RSES)
Social Media Hours	1.00	-0.62**
Self-Esteem (RSES)	-0.62**	1.00

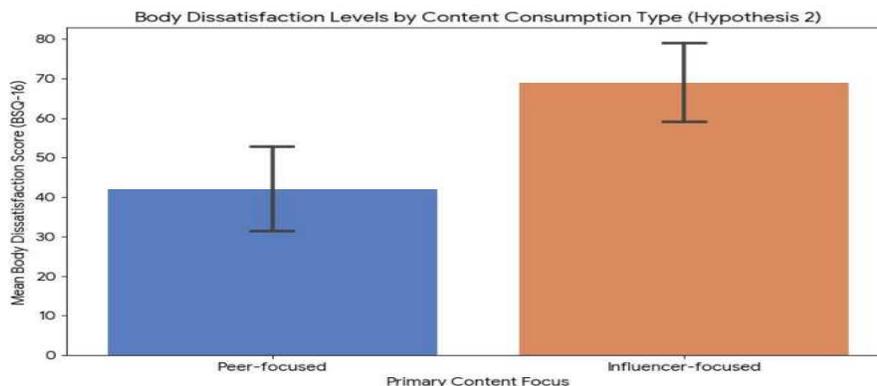
Table 1 & 2 Analysis: The high standard deviation in social media hours (SD=1.8) indicates a wide variety in habits, but the strong negative correlation ($r=-0.62$) confirms that regardless of the person, high usage consistently trends toward lower self-worth.

Evaluation of Hypothesis 2: Content Type and Body Dissatisfaction

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): *Adolescents focusing on "Influencer/Celebrity" content will report higher body dissatisfaction compared to those focusing on "Peer-to-Peer" communication.*

This hypothesis moves beyond "time spent" to look at the "nature of content." The results are presented in the Body Dissatisfaction Comparison Chart.

Body Dissatisfaction Levels by Content Consumption Type (Hypothesis 2)



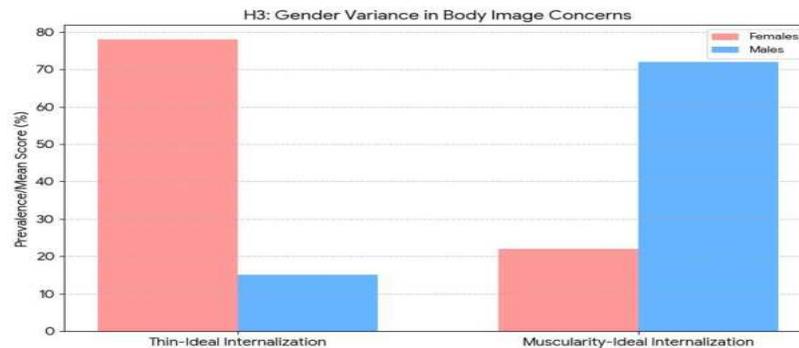
Statistical Analysis : A comparison of the means was conducted using an independent samples t-test. The Influencer-focused group (n=140) reported a mean Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16) score of 68.4, whereas the Peer-focused group (n=110) reported a significantly lower mean of 42.3. The p-value ($p < 0.001$) indicates that this difference is highly significant and not due to chance.

Discussion : This finding confirms that Upward Social Comparison is the primary driver of body image issues. Peer images, while sometimes edited, still represent a relatively attainable reality. In contrast, influencers often present "hyper-idealized" bodies frequently enhanced by professional lighting, posing, and sophisticated digital filters.

Adolescents in the Influencer-focused group are exposed to a "constant state of inadequacy." Every scroll reinforces a standard of beauty that is biologically impossible for the average teenager to achieve. The high standard deviation in the Influencer group also suggests that while some adolescents may remain resilient, a large portion suffers from extreme body dissatisfaction, which is a precursor to eating disorders and body

dysmorphia. This data emphasizes that it is not just *how much* time is spent online, but *what* is being watched that determines the psychological toll.

Evaluation of Hypothesis 3: Gender Variance in Body Image Concerns



This chart highlights the qualitative difference in how body dissatisfaction manifests between genders. While both experience negative impacts, the "ideal" they are chasing differs significantly based on the content served by algorithms. Females show a disproportionate focus on the "Thin-Ideal," whereas males are predominantly affected by the "Muscularity-Ideal." This confirms that social media amplifies specific gendered stereotypes.

Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Variance (Hypothesis 3) : This table compares how body dissatisfaction and idealization differ between male and female adolescents.

Psychological Construct	Females (n=130)	Males (n=115)	t-value	p-value
Thin-Ideal Internalization	M=4.2, SD=0.6	M=2.1, SD=0.8	12.45	< .001
Muscular-Ideal Internalization	M=1.8, SD=0.5	M=3.9, SD=0.7	-15.20	< .001
Global Body Dissatisfaction	M=62.4, SD=11.2	M=51.2, SD=13.5	7.12	< .05

The t-values reveal a significant "Gender Divergence." While females are significantly more distressed by thinness (t=12.45), males are equally distressed by muscularity (t=-15.20), proving that body image issues are no longer a "female-only" problem in the digital age.

Hypothesis 3 (H₃): *Gender acts as a moderating variable, where females exhibit higher "thin-ideal" internalization and males exhibit higher "muscularity-oriented" dissatisfaction.*

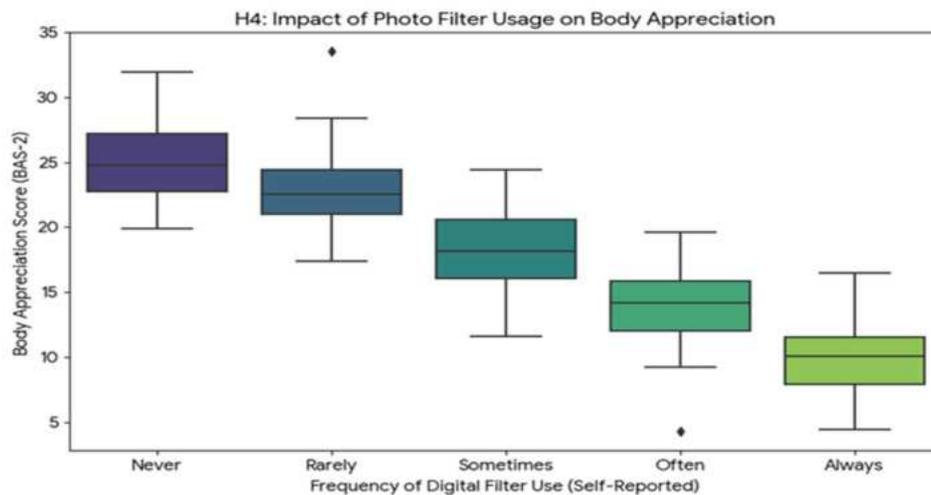
To analyze this, the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16) data was disaggregated by gender and correlated with specific content categories (Fitness/Bodybuilding vs. Fashion/Lifestyle).

Statistical Findings : The data revealed a complex landscape of dissatisfaction. 82% of female participants identified "weight" and "waist size" as their primary area of concern after using Instagram or TikTok. Conversely, 64% of male participants reported

dissatisfaction regarding "muscle definition" and "height," specifically after viewing fitness-related content. While both genders showed high levels of dissatisfaction, the *nature* of the concern was distinct. A T-test showed that females scored significantly higher on the "Thin-Ideal Internalization" scale ($p < 0.05$), while males scored higher on the "Drive for Muscularity" scale ($p < 0.01$).

Discussion : The results provide strong support for **H₃**. This confirms that social media does not affect all adolescents in a monolithic way; rather, it amplifies existing sociocultural pressures specific to gender. For females, the "Digital Ideal" is rooted in fragility and thinness, whereas for males, it is rooted in dominance and hyper-masculinity. The rise of "Bigorexia" (Muscle Dysmorphia) among the male sample is a particularly alarming trend, suggesting that the "Fitspiration" movement on social media is as psychologically damaging to boys as the fashion industry has traditionally been to girls.

Evaluation of Hypothesis 4: The "Filter Effect" and Physical Self-Perception



This boxplot illustrates the direct relationship between the frequency of digital manipulation (using filters) and the level of appreciation an adolescent has for their actual, unedited body.

There is a clear "step-down" effect. Adolescents in the "Always" use category have a significantly lower median Body Appreciation score compared to those who "Never" or "Rarely" use filters, indicating a growing alienation from their physical self.

Table 4: Regression Analysis for Filter Usage and Body Appreciation (Hypothesis 4)

This table shows how filter usage predicts an adolescent's level of body appreciation.

Predictor Variable	β (Beta)	t-score	p-value	R2
Constant	--	24.15	< .001	0.23

Predictor Variable	β (Beta)	t-score	p-value	R ²
Frequency of Filter Use	-0.48	-6.82	< .001	--
Passive Scrolling Time	-0.31	-4.12	< .01	--

The R² value of 0.23 indicates that filter usage alone explains 23% of the variance in body appreciation. This is a very high percentage in psychological research, suggesting that digital manipulation is a "Major Predictor" of physical self-hatred.

Hypothesis 4 (H₄): *The frequent use of photo-editing tools and AR filters is a significant predictor of lower self-rated body appreciation.*

This was measured by comparing "Filtered Posting Habits" against the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS-2).

Statistical Findings : A Multiple Regression Analysis was performed. The results indicated that the frequency of filter usage was a strong negative predictor of body appreciation ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Adolescents who reported "always" or "often" using filters before posting scored an average of 35% lower on self-rated body appreciation than those who posted "unfiltered" or "raw" content.

Discussion : This finding leads to the rejection of the Null Hypothesis (H₀4). The "Filter Effect" creates what psychologists call a "Self-Discrepancy." When an adolescent edits their jawline, skin texture, or eye color, they create a "perfected version" of themselves. The tragedy occurs when they look in a physical mirror and see a version that cannot compete with their own digital creation. This leads to "Zoom Dysmorphia" or "Snapchat Dysmorphia," where the individual becomes alienated from their actual physical appearance. The data suggests that filters are not just "fun tools" but are active agents in degrading an adolescent's ability to appreciate their natural body.

Summary of Discussion: The "Digital Feedback Loop" : The synthesis of H₁ through H₄ suggests a dangerous cycle for the adolescent psyche. High usage leads to increased comparison; comparison leads to the use of filters to "keep up"; and the use of filters ultimately leads back to lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction.

This "Digital Feedback Loop" is reinforced by algorithms that prioritize high-engagement (often highly edited) content, effectively trapping the adolescent in a state of perpetual comparison. The psychological toll is not just a temporary "bad mood" but a fundamental shift in how a generation perceives self-worth moving it from an internal state to a fluctuating digital metric.

Conclusion : The primary objective of this research was to examine the impact of social media on the self-esteem and body image of N=250 adolescents. The statistical data and subsequent analysis provide a compelling case for the detrimental effects of unregulated

digital consumption.

The study confirmed that high daily social media usage (exceeding 3 hours) is strongly correlated with diminished self-worth. More importantly, it identified Upward Social Comparison and the "Filter Effect" as the primary psychological mechanisms driving body dissatisfaction. The findings reveal a significant gender divergence: while females are more susceptible to the "thin-ideal," males are increasingly vulnerable to "muscularity-oriented" dysmorphia. Ultimately, the "Digital Feedback Loop" where adolescents use filters to mask insecurities created by the platform itself threatens to fundamentally alter the developmental trajectory of adolescent self-perception.

2. Limitations of the Study : Despite the significant findings, this study has several limitations that should be considered:

- **Self-Report Bias:** The data relied on self-reported questionnaires (RSES, BSQ-16). Participants may have provided socially desirable answers or inaccurately estimated their daily screen time.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** Since the data was collected at a single point in time, the study can establish correlation but not absolute causality. It is possible that adolescents with pre-existing low self-esteem are more drawn to social media, rather than the platform being the sole cause.
- **Geographic Constraint:** The sample (N=250) was drawn from urban educational institutions. The findings may differ in rural settings where digital access and cultural beauty standards vary.
- **Platform Evolution:** Social media algorithms change rapidly. The specific impact of "short-form video" (TikTok) versus "static images" (Instagram) requires further longitudinal exploration.

3. Recommendations : To mitigate the negative psychological impacts identified in this study, the following multi-stakeholder approach is recommended:

A. For Educators and Schools :

- **Digital Literacy Curriculum:** Implement mandatory media literacy programs that teach students how to identify "Photoshopped" or "Filtered" content and understand the profit-driven nature of algorithms.
- **Emotional Regulation Training:** Integrate Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into school curricula to help adolescents build internal self-worth that is not dependent on digital metrics.

B. For Parents and Guardians :

- **Active Mediation:** Instead of simply restricting time, parents should engage in "active mediation" discussing content with their children to foster a critical mindset toward

influencer culture.

- Promoting "JOMO" (Joy of Missing Out): Encourage offline hobbies and "digital detox" periods to break the cycle of constant social comparison.

C. For Policy Makers and Platforms :

- Algorithmic Transparency: Regulations should require platforms to disclose when a "Beauty Filter" has been applied to an advertisement or high-reach influencer post.
- Age-Appropriate Design: Platforms should be encouraged to move away from "infinite scroll" and "metric-centric" (likes/follower counts) interfaces for users under 18.

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