Proceedings of ICILLP 2025 Symposium: Psychological Perspectives on Teacher-Student Relationships in Educational Contexts
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.NS28247

The Psychological Costs of Self-Presentation on Social Media for Adolescent Body Image

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Abstract. Adolescents increasingly engage in highly visual, feedback-driven self-presentation on social media, which can intensify appearance concerns and compromise mental health. This paper discusses psychological and sociological research to examine how three interrelated mechanisms, such as upward social comparison, validation-seeking via metrics (e.g., likes), and the curation of "perfection" through editing tools like filters, shape adolescent body image worldwide. A narrative review and critical appraisal of meta-analyses, systematic reviews, experimental and neuroimaging studies, and recent longitudinal/EMA findings were conducted to integrate evidence across methods and populations. The review indicates that appearance-focused social media activity and exposure to idealized content are reliably associated with higher body dissatisfaction and lower body esteem; validation-sensitive self-presentation predicts depressive symptoms and self-evaluative vulnerability; and platform affordances (public metrics, photo editing) reinforce internalization of unrealistic ideals. The specific impact varies depending on content type (e.g., makeup tutorials) and sociocultural factors. The paper concludes by offering implications for parents, schools, platforms, and clinicians, emphasizing the need for targeted psychological education, information flow interventions, and design improvements to reduce appearance-dependent feedback loops.

Keywords: body image, social comparison, self-objectification, adolescents

1. Introduction

Self-presentation on social media embeds adolescents in a perpetual cycle of image creation, peer evaluation, and audience feedback that centers on appearance and quantifies social approval. Evidence from meta-analytic and systematic reviews links social networking site use to body image disturbance and eating-related concerns, with appearance-focused comparison as a key pathway [1-2]. Validation-seeking and feedback monitoring (e.g., tracking likes/comments) further heighten risk by tying self-evaluation to volatile public metrics, a process associated with depressive symptoms and lower momentary well-being [3]. Neuroimaging work corroborates these dynamics, showing that popular social endorsement engages adolescent reward circuitry and amplifies conformity to peer signals [4].

Based on existing literature, this study examines how upward comparison, identity seeking, and carefully crafted idealized images collectively shape adolescents' body image. The research

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evaluates the differential effects of content types (e.g., "fitness inspiration"), gendered aesthetic standards (slim vs. athletic), and usage patterns (active/passive exposure), while outlining protective strategies (media literacy, positive body image exposure). The goal is to clarify when and why self-presentation pressures during adolescence translate into dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and internalized symptoms [1-4].

2. Conceptual frameworks

2.1. Sociocultural transmission of ideals

The Tripartite Influence Model posits that appearance norms are transmitted via media, peers, and parents, with internalization and appearance comparison mediating effects on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating [5]. This framework predicts stronger risk when platforms intensify peer salience and ideal exposure, as occurs in public, metricized feeds. For instance, adolescents may absorb thinness ideals from fashion magazines or Instagram influencers (media), compare their looks to close friends' filtered selfies (peers), or hear parents making critical comments about weight (family). Each source reinforces a cycle of idealization and self-monitoring. This framework predicts stronger risk when platforms intensify peer salience and ideal exposure, as occurs in public, metricized feeds such as TikTok's "For You" page or Instagram's explore tab, where algorithmic amplification ensures repeated exposure to socially rewarded, appearance-focused content.

2.2. Self-objectification processes

Objectification theory suggests that constant external surveillance fosters self-objectification and body monitoring. People could easily be exposed to mood swings and dangerous eating pathology [6]. Visual self-presentation (e.g., selfies, editing) may operationalize these processes in adolescence by training attention on the body as an object to be evaluated. For example, adolescent girls who repeatedly check their appearance before posting selfies may internalize the sense that their worth lies primarily in how their body looks to others. This often leads to social anxiety and compulsive editing behaviors.

3. Mechanisms of harm in online self-presentation

3.1. Upward social comparison

Highly curated, idealized images of peers and influencers heighten the likelihood of upward comparison and unfavorable self-evaluations. Ecological momentary assessment indicates that upward comparisons occur frequently on social media and are more harmful for body image than in-person comparisons [7]. Experimental studies show that exposure to "fitspiration" reliably increases body dissatisfaction and reduces appearance self-esteem, mediated by state appearance comparison [8-9].

3.2. Validation-seeking and public metrics

Adolescents often post appearance-focused content to seek validation, monitor likes/comments, and even delete posts with "insufficient" approval. Longitudinal and observational work links comparison/feedback-seeking to depressive symptoms and lower well-being, suggesting that contingent self-worth and rejection sensitivity are heightened in metricized environments [3].

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Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) evidence shows that seeing many "likes" on one's photos activates reward circuitry and increases conformity to popular content, reinforcing approval-oriented posting [4].

3.3. Curated perfection through editing and filters

Editing tools and photo-investment behaviors (planning, retouching, re-taking) enable the curation of "perfect" selves. Adolescent selfie-editing and appearance-investment correlate with body dissatisfaction and problematic social media use; selfie expectancies and social appearance anxiety predict more compulsive posting/monitoring [10-11]. These practices normalize unattainable standards and make everyday self-presentation resemble advertising.

Evidence from diverse research designs consistently demonstrates the centrality of self-presentation mechanisms in shaping adolescent body image. For example, Fardouly and colleagues found through a five-day ecological momentary assessment study with young women that social media appearance comparisons were predominantly upward in direction and had more detrimental consequences for body image than in-person comparisons [7]. Similarly, Tiggemann and Zaccardo, in an experimental design, showed that exposure to "fitspiration" imagery increased body dissatisfaction and reduced appearance self-esteem, with effects mediated by appearance comparison [8]. A systematic review by Jerónimo and colleagues reinforced these findings, concluding that fitspiration exposure is reliably associated with negative body image outcomes, particularly among younger users [9]. These results parallel Holland and Tiggemann's earlier systematic review, which found that photo-based social networking activities and feedback-seeking behaviors were linked to body image and eating concerns through appearance-focused comparison [2].

4. Psychological outcomes and scope conditions

4.1. Body dissatisfaction and self-esteem

Across 63 samples (N ≈ 36,500), social media use shows a small but reliable positive association with body image disturbance, with stronger effects for appearance-focused use [1]. Mediation studies indicate that internalization and comparison serially link use intensity to body-esteem decrements [12]. Cross-sectional and longitudinal work also connects thin- and muscular-ideal internalization on social media to dissatisfaction among girls and boys, respectively [13].

4.2. Depressive and anxiety symptoms

Feedback-seeking and comparison predict higher depressive symptoms, suggesting that contingent approval may undermine mood and self-worth [3]. These findings align with heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and reward processing, consistent with neural responses to "likes" in adolescents [4].

4.3. Differential patterns by gender and content

Boys are increasingly exposed to muscularity-oriented ideals; studies report links between social media exposure, drive for muscularity, and dissatisfaction in male adolescents and young men [13]. Their self-evaluations often focus on achieving bulk, definition, and strength, with dissatisfaction

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emerging when muscular ideals seem unattainable. By contrast, girls are more frequently confronted with "slim-fit" imagery, which heightens pressure to appear lean and blemish-free [7-9].

5. Protective factors and practical strategies

5.1. Critical media literacy and feed curation

Interventions that train adolescents to identify editing, idealization, and algorithmic amplification can disrupt automatic comparison and reduce internalization. For example, classroom workshops that guide students to spot airbrushing in magazine covers or demonstrate how Instagram filters alter skin tone and body proportions have been shown to reduce endorsement of unrealistic appearance ideals. Exposure to body-positive content—especially posts emphasizing functionality and diversity, such as athletes highlighting strength over looks or influencers celebrating scars and stretch marks—can improve body satisfaction and body appreciation in the short term [14-15].

5.2. Design-level and clinical approaches

Design changes that de-emphasize public metrics (e.g., hiding like counts), slow sharing, or nudge toward diverse content may reduce validation-seeking loops. Clinically, brief cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), informed modules are recommended within multi-tier school programs. CBT aims to help adolescents identify and challenge distorted appearance-related thoughts, reduce compulsive comparison, and build healthier self-worth not contingent on online approval. When combined with parent and teacher psychoeducation, these interventions can provide both cognitive strategies and supportive environments that buffer against social media's appearance pressures [16].

6. Limitations and directions for future research

This paper is limited by its reliance on secondary literature rather than original empirical data, which restricts the ability to establish causality. The reviewed studies vary in design, measurement, and sample populations, making cross-study comparisons difficult. Causality remains difficult to establish due to measurement heterogeneity (time-use vs. activity type), self-report biases, and rapidly evolving platform features. More preregistered longitudinal and experimental work is needed across non-WEIRD contexts, inclusive samples (gender diverse youth), and platform-specific affordances (short-form video, AI filters). Research should differentiate between-person and within-person processes to clarify when increases in appearance activity predict later dissatisfaction, and to test whether protective content yields durable gains rather than transient mood effects.

7. Conclusion

Self-presentation pressures on social media present credible risks for adolescent body image. The preponderance of evidence links appearance-focused activities and idealized content to higher body dissatisfaction and lower body esteem, with validation-contingent posting and public metrics deepening vulnerability. Effects are moderated by content type, gendered ideals, and usage patterns. They are not uniform across adolescents or contexts. Practical responses include strengthening critical media literacy, increasing exposure to body-positive content, and implementing platform design choices that reduce appearance-contingent feedback loops. Coordinated efforts by families, schools, clinicians, and platforms can shift adolescent online culture toward healthier, less appearance-centric norms.

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