

The Impact of Social Media on Anxiety and Body Image Among Young Adults

Fathima Hanan Abdul Wahid¹, Dr. Shivam Bhartiya²

¹Department of Psychology, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

Abstract: *The increasing use of social media has become an important psychological concern among young adults. Excessive and uncontrolled social media use may interfere with emotional well-being, self-perception, and body image. The present study examined the relationship between social media use, anxiety, and body image among young adults. It also investigated whether internalisation of appearance ideals mediated the relationship between social media use and body image dissatisfaction. A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design was adopted. The final eligible sample consisted of 178 young adults aged 18–35 years. Data were collected using the Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES-A), Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2), and Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and mediation analysis using 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Social media use was significantly and positively associated with anxiety ($r = .318, p < .001$) and Internalisation ($r = .380, p < .001$). However, social media use was not significantly associated with body appreciation ($r = .016, p = .832$). Passive use was a stronger predictor of anxiety ($\beta = .294$) than active use ($\beta = .198$). Mediation analysis showed that Internalisation significantly mediated the relationship between social media use and body appreciation, with an indirect effect of $-.143$ and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of $[-.235, -.072]$. The direct effect was not significant, indicating full mediation. The findings highlight the importance of healthy social media habits and critical media literacy in promoting psychological well-being among young adults.*

Keywords: Social media, anxiety, body image, internalisation, young adults, mediation

1. Introduction

Social media has become deeply integrated into everyday life, particularly among young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, X, and LinkedIn are widely used for communication, entertainment, education, and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The widespread availability of smartphones and affordable internet access has further increased social media engagement.

Although social media provides several benefits, excessive and uncontrolled use may become problematic when it interferes with daily responsibilities and psychological well-being. Young adults are especially vulnerable due to their developmental stage, which involves identity exploration, sensitivity to peer feedback, and reliance on digital validation. Constant exposure to curated, often unrealistic portrayals of beauty and lifestyle can trigger social comparison, leading to feelings of inadequacy and appearance-related anxiety.

One important psychological outcome associated with excessive social media use is anxiety. Anxiety involves persistent worry, nervousness, restlessness, and difficulty relaxing. Social media may increase anxiety through social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and pressure to respond immediately. Previous research has reported associations between problematic social media use and increased anxiety (Przybylski et al., 2013; Reyaz et al., 2024).

Body image is another important area potentially affected by excessive social media use. Body image refers to the way a person thinks and feels about their own body. Social media platforms are full of images showing perfect bodies and flawless looks. Many of these images are edited or filtered, but users do not always realise this. Repeated exposure to

such images can lead to body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

The internalisation of appearance ideals is another important factor. Internalisation means accepting society's standards of beauty as one's own personal goals. When young adults constantly see idealised bodies on social media, they may start to believe that these standards are normal and achievable. When their own body does not match these standards, they may feel unhappy and dissatisfied (Schaefer et al., 2015; Lin, 2024).

Therefore, the present study examined the relationships between social media use, anxiety, and body image among young adults. It further examined whether internalisation of appearance ideals significantly mediated the relationship between social media use and body image dissatisfaction.

Objectives

- 1) To assess the level of anxiety and body image satisfaction among young adults.
- 2) To examine the relationship between the extent and nature of social media usage and the levels of anxiety in young adults.
- 3) To examine the relationship between the extent and nature of social media usage and body image satisfaction in young adults.
- 4) To explore the mediating role of internalisation of beauty ideals in the relationship between social media use and its psychological outcomes.
- 5) To compare the impact of different types of social media platforms on anxiety and body image.

2. Method

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design was used. The design was selected to examine associations among social media use, anxiety, body image, and internalisation without manipulating the study variables. The study also examined the proposed mediating role of internalisation.

Participants and Sampling

The study focused on young adults aged 18–35 years who actively used at least one social media platform and were able to read and understand English. Participants were required to provide informed consent. A total of 180 responses were received. Two responses were excluded because the participants were outside the specified age range, resulting in 178 eligible participants.

Among the 178 eligible participants, 130 (73.0%) were female and 48 (27.0%) were male. Participants aged 25–30 years constituted the largest age group (39.9%), followed by 18–24 years (38.8%) and 31–35 years (21.3%). Most participants reported 3–4 hours of daily social media use (33.1%).

Measures

Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES-A)

The SMES-A developed by Ni et al. (2020) was adapted for this study. The original three-factor model (Affective, Behavioural, Cognitive) was adapted to fit the active-passive framework: Behavioural Engagement (4 items) was conceptualised as passive use, while Affective and Cognitive Engagement (7 items) were combined to represent active use. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater engagement.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7)

The GAD-7 developed by Spitzer et al. (2006) consists of 7 items assessing generalised anxiety symptoms over the past two weeks. Responses are rated on a four-point Likert scale (0–3). Higher scores indicate greater anxiety severity.

Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2)

The BAS-2 developed by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) consists of 10 items measuring positive body image. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1–5). Higher scores indicate greater body appreciation.

Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4)

The SATAQ-4 developed by Schaefer et al. (2015) consists of 22 items assessing internalisation of societal appearance ideals. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1–5). Higher scores indicate greater internalisation.

Procedure

Data were collected using a socio-demographic questionnaire and standardized psychological measures. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participation. The questionnaires were administered through Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were

maintained. Responses were screened for completeness and validity before statistical analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability were calculated for the study measures. Pearson correlation was used to examine associations between the variables. Multiple regression was used to examine whether passive use was a stronger predictor of anxiety and body image than active use. A simple mediation model was tested using 5,000 bootstrap resamples, examining internalisation as a mediator. Mediation analysis was conducted using JASP (2026).

3. Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The mean SMES-A Passive Use score was 15.16 (SD = 3.95), while the mean SMES-A Active Use score was 18.99 (SD = 5.67). The mean GAD-7 score was 9.82 (SD = 6.21). The mean BAS-2 score was 33.30 (SD = 10.03). The mean SATAQ-4 score was 61.11 (SD = 18.19). Using the GAD-7 severity bands, 45 participants (25.3%) were in the minimal range, 48 (27.0%) were in the mild range, 41 (23.0%) were in the moderate range, and 44 (24.7%) were in the severe range. For BAS-2, 41 participants (23.0%) had low body appreciation, 84 (47.2%) had moderate body appreciation, and 53 (29.8%) had high body appreciation.

Measure	N	M	SD
SMES-A Passive Use	178	15.16	3.95
SMES-A Active Use	178	18.99	5.67
GAD-7	178	9.82	6.21
BAS-2	178	33.30	10.03
SATAQ-4	178	61.11	18.19

The internal consistency of the measures was satisfactory to excellent. Cronbach's alpha was 0.847 for SMES-A, 0.911 for GAD-7, 0.951 for BAS-2, and 0.916 for SATAQ-4.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis showed significant positive associations between social media use and anxiety, and between social media use and internalisation. Social media use was not significantly associated with body appreciation.

Social media use was significantly associated with anxiety ($r = .318, p < .001$) and internalisation ($r = .380, p < .001$). Social media use was not significantly associated with body appreciation ($r = .016, p = .832$). Internalisation was significantly associated with body appreciation ($r = -.265, p < .001$).

Variables	N	r	P
Social media use – Anxiety	178	.318	< .001
Social media use – Body appreciation	178	.016	.832
Social media use – Internalisation	178	.380	< .001
Internalisation – Body appreciation	178	-.265	< .001

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was conducted to examine whether active use and passive use predicted anxiety and body appreciation. For anxiety, passive use was a stronger predictor ($\beta = .294, p = .026$) than active use ($\beta = .198, p = .032$). For body

appreciation, neither predictor was significant ($R^2 = .003$, $F(2, 175) = 0.23$, $p = .793$).

Mediation Analysis

A simple mediation model was tested. Internalisation significantly mediated the relationship between social media use and body appreciation. The indirect effect was $-.143$, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of $[-.235, -.072]$. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. The direct effect was not significant ($p = .095$), indicating full mediation. The Sobel test also confirmed significance ($z = -3.398$, $p < .001$).

Mediator	Indirect Effect	95% Bootstrap CI	Interpretation
Internalisation	$-.143$	$[-.235, -.072]$	Significant

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among social media use, anxiety, body image, and internalisation among young adults and investigated the mediating role of internalisation.

The first major finding was a significant positive relationship between social media use and anxiety ($r = .318$, $p < .001$). Young adults reporting higher levels of social media use also tended to report greater anxiety. This relationship may be explained by the continuous exposure to idealised content, social comparison, and the pressure to remain connected. The finding is consistent with previous research reporting associations between social media use and anxiety (Przybylski et al., 2013; Reyaz et al., 2024).

The second finding showed that social media use was not significantly related to body appreciation ($r = .016$, $p = .832$). This suggests that social media use may not directly affect how young adults feel about their bodies. Other factors such as personality, self-esteem, and offline social support may play a more important role. The finding is consistent with previous research that found no body image distortion among certain populations (Alanazi et al., 2019).

The third major finding was that passive use was a stronger predictor of anxiety than active use. For anxiety, passive use had a beta value of $.294$ ($p = .026$), while active use had a beta value of $.198$ ($p = .032$). Both were significant, but passive use was stronger. This finding is consistent with previous research reporting that passive use consistently predicted declines in well-being, whereas active use did not (Verduyn et al., 2015).

The fourth finding showed that internalisation significantly mediated the relationship between social media use and body appreciation. The indirect effect was $-.143$, with a 95% confidence interval of $[-.235, -.072]$. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, the mediation effect was significant. The direct effect was not significant ($p = .095$), indicating full mediation. This finding suggests that social media use increases the internalisation of appearance ideals, which in turn lowers body appreciation. The finding is consistent with previous research reporting that internalisation of unrealistic beauty standards made negative

body image outcomes worse among young adults (Lin, 2024; Roy Choudhury & Nethra Reddy, 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media use is connected with anxiety and internalisation among young adults. However, the direct relationship between social media use and body appreciation was not significant. This highlights the importance of internalisation when examining the psychological consequences of social media use.

5. Implications

The findings have practical implications for psychological and educational settings. Awareness programmes can help young adults recognize potentially unhealthy patterns of social media use. Counsellors and psychologists can incorporate digital habits, critical media literacy, and body image interventions for young adults experiencing difficulties related to excessive social media use.

Particular attention may be given to reducing passive scrolling and encouraging active, meaningful engagement. Educational institutions may also conduct programmes promoting responsible digital behaviour and awareness of the possible effects of excessive social media use on psychological well-being.

6. Limitations

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was based on a limited sample of 178 young adults, which may restrict generalizability. Second, self-report measures were used, and responses may be influenced by recall or response biases. Third, the study was conducted within a limited population, which may reduce applicability to other populations.

Most importantly, the cross-sectional design does not permit conclusions about cause and effect. Therefore, the findings demonstrate associations and mediation patterns within the analysed data but should not be interpreted as establishing that social media use directly causes anxiety, body dissatisfaction, or internalisation. In addition, potentially relevant factors such as stress, loneliness, self-esteem, and platform-specific data were not included in the model.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationships between social media use, anxiety, body image, and internalisation among young adults. Social media use was significantly associated with greater anxiety and greater internalisation of appearance ideals. However, social media use was not directly associated with body appreciation.

The mediation analysis showed that internalisation significantly mediated the relationship between social media use and body appreciation. This suggests that internalisation may represent an important pathway linking excessive social media use with body image concerns.

The findings emphasize the importance of promoting healthy digital habits and critical media literacy among young adults.

Future research should use larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and additional psychological variables to further clarify the pathways linking social media use and mental health.

References

- [1] Alanazi, A., Alotaibi, Y., Alojlan, J., Zaidi, U., & Rao, H. (2019). Effects of social media contents on the perception of body image. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 9(7), 179–196.
- [2] Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2016). Social media and body image concerns: Current research and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 9, 1–5.
- [3] JASP Team. (2026). JASP (Version 0.98.1) [Computer software].
- [4] Lin, H. (2024). The impact of social media on appearance and body image anxiety. In P. M. Eloundou-Enyegue (Ed.), *Addressing global challenges: Exploring socio-cultural dynamics and sustainable solutions in a changing world* (pp. 700–706). Routledge.
- [5] Ni, X., Shao, X., Geng, Y., Qu, R., Niu, G., & Wang, Y. (2020). Development of the Social Media Engagement Scale for Adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 701.
- [6] Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1841–1848.
- [7] Reyaz, S., Tiwari, A., Agarwal, T., Srivastwa, H., Kumari, J., & Sharma, Y. (2024). Impact of social media and anxiety among college students. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(6), 1–13.
- [8] Roy Choudhury, N., & Nethra Reddy, V. (2021). Body image dissatisfaction in young adults: Impact of social media use. *International Journal of Education and Psychological Research*, 10(3), 15–18.
- [9] Schaefer, L. M., Burke, N. L., Thompson, J. K., Dedrick, R. F., Heinberg, L. J., Calogero, R. M., ... & Swami, V. (2015). Development and validation of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4). *Psychological Assessment*, 27(1), 54–67.
- [10] Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B. W., & Löwe, B. (2006). A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: The GAD-7. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 166(10), 1092–1097.
- [11] Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2013). NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 46(6), 630–633.
- [12] Tylka, T. L., & Wood-Barcalow, N. L. (2015). The Body Appreciation Scale-2: Item refinement and psychometric evaluation. *Body Image*, 12, 53–67.
- [13] Verduyn, P., Lee, D. S., Park, J., Shablack, H., Orvell, A., Bayer, J., & Kross, E. (2015). Passive Facebook usage undermines affective well-being: Experimental and longitudinal evidence. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 144(2), 480–488.