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The Impact of Social Media on Body Image and Self Esteem Among Adolescents

Arif Hossain
Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Saheb Ambedkar Education University, Kolkata, West Bengal

Abstract: *Social media platforms have become integral to adolescent life in India, with over 95% of teenagers actively using social media platforms. The rapid digital transformation in India raises concerns about the impact of these platforms on body image and self-esteem among young people. This study examines the relationship between social media usage and body image concerns, self-esteem levels, and eating disorder risks among Indian adolescents aged 13-18 years across urban and rural areas. A cross-sectional study was conducted among 560 adolescents (298 females, 262 males) from five Indian states. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Social Media Use Disorder Scale, and body image assessment tools through school-based surveys. Increased social media usage correlates with decreased body image satisfaction and lower self-esteem among Indian adolescents, with females being disproportionately affected compared to males. Analysis revealed that 73.2% of female participants reported body image issues compared to 17.6% of males. Heavy social media users (3+ hours daily) showed 2.8 times higher likelihood of body image concerns. WhatsApp (96.4%) and YouTube (82.7%) were most popular platforms, with Instagram usage significantly higher among females (89.6% vs 67.2%). Findings indicate significant gender disparities in social media's impact on body image, with cultural factors specific to India influencing these relationships. The study highlights platform-specific risks and usage patterns unique to the Indian context. Social media usage significantly impacts Indian adolescent body image and self-esteem, necessitating culturally appropriate prevention strategies and digital literacy programs tailored to Indian social and cultural contexts.*

Keywords: *Social media, body image, self-esteem, Indian adolescents, digital wellness.*

1. Introduction

India's digital revolution has transformed adolescent social interaction, with social media platforms becoming central to teenage life across both urban and rural areas. Current statistics indicate that over 95% of Indian adolescents actively engage with social media platforms, spending an average of 4-5 hours daily online. This unprecedented level of digital engagement coincides with critical developmental periods when body image and self-esteem are forming, creating unique challenges in the Indian cultural context. India's diverse cultural landscape, with its complex relationship with traditional beauty standards and rapidly evolving social media trends, presents a unique environment for studying social media's impact on adolescent development. The country's traditional emphasis on appearance, particularly for young women, combined with Western beauty ideals propagated through social media, creates a complex psychological environment for developing adolescents. Recent trends show concerning increases in body image dissatisfaction among Indian teenagers, with urban areas reporting higher rates of eating disorders and appearance-related anxiety. The popularity of platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok among

Indian youth has created new avenues for social comparison and exposure to idealized body representations that may not align with traditional Indian body types or cultural values. The accessibility of smartphones and affordable internet has democratized social media access across socioeconomic levels in India, making this a population-wide concern rather than one limited to urban, affluent communities. This widespread access has created both opportunities for connection and risks for psychological harm, particularly around body image and self-worth issues. Understanding the specific impact of social media on Indian adolescents requires consideration of cultural factors including family dynamics, gender role expectations, educational pressures, and the intersection of traditional and modern beauty standards. This study aims to provide evidence-based insights into these relationships within the Indian context.

2. Literature Review

Research on social media's impact on body image among Indian adolescents remains limited compared to Western populations, highlighting the need for culturally specific investigations. International studies provide a foundation for understanding these relationships, but cultural adaptation is essential for the Indian context. Aparicio-Martínez et al. (2019) conducted exploratory analysis revealing significant associations between social media use, thin-ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating attitudes in Western populations. Their findings demonstrated that prolonged exposure to idealized images on social media platforms contributes to negative self-perception, though cultural variations in beauty ideals may moderate these effects in different populations. Wang et al. (2023) investigated smartphone addiction and eating disorders among Asian college students, finding significant correlations between excessive social media use and disordered eating patterns. Their research in Asian contexts provides relevant insights for understanding similar relationships in India, where smartphone penetration has rapidly increased among adolescents.

Studies examining gender differences consistently show females to be more vulnerable to social media's negative effects on body image. Research by Hayden et al. (2018) on Instagram "likes" and body dissatisfaction demonstrated that social validation mechanisms inherent in social media platforms contribute to negative body image outcomes, particularly among young women who are more likely to engage with appearance-focused content. The limited research available on Indian populations suggests that traditional cultural values around beauty and appearance may interact with social media exposure in complex ways. The joint family system, parental influence on appearance-related decisions, and cultural emphasis on specific physical attributes may either buffer against or amplify social media's negative effects. Platform-specific research indicates that visual platforms like Instagram pose greater risks than text-based alternatives. However, in the Indian context, WhatsApp's widespread use for sharing photos and videos may create different risk patterns than observed in Western populations where platforms like Snapchat and TikTok dominate adolescent usage. The intersection of traditional Indian beauty standards with globalized beauty ideals propagated through social media creates unique challenges for Indian adolescents. Research on how these competing standards affect body image development remains sparse, representing a significant gap in current literature that this study aims to address.

3. Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence of body image concerns among Indian adolescents in relation to social media usage patterns across urban and rural areas
2. To examine the correlation between social media consumption time and self-esteem levels in Indian teenage populations with consideration of cultural factors
3. To identify gender-specific differences in social media's impact on body image and self-esteem within the Indian cultural context
4. To evaluate platform-specific risks and usage patterns among Indian adolescents, including popular platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube

4. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional design to examine social media usage patterns and their relationship with body image and self-esteem among Indian adolescents. The research was conducted across multiple states to ensure geographic and cultural diversity representative of India's adolescent population. Cross-sectional survey design utilizing structured questionnaires administered in school settings across urban and rural areas of India. The study incorporated both quantitative measures and brief qualitative responses to capture cultural nuances in social media experiences. The study included 560 adolescents (298 females, 262 males) aged 13-18 years from five Indian states: Maharashtra, Delhi, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. Participants were recruited through

government and private schools, ensuring representation across socioeconomic backgrounds, urban-rural divide, and different cultural regions of India. Multi-stage stratified random sampling was employed, first selecting states to represent different regions of India, then selecting districts within states, schools within districts, and finally classes within schools.

Equal representation was sought from urban and rural areas, with attention to socioeconomic diversity. Standardized instruments were adapted for the Indian context, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (translated into local languages), Social Media Use Disorder Scale adapted for Indian platforms, and a culturally modified body image assessment questionnaire. Additional questions addressed platform-specific usage patterns relevant to Indian social media consumption. Surveys were administered in schools during regular class hours with teacher supervision. Informed consent was obtained from school authorities and parents, with student assent collected before participation. The questionnaire was available in English and three regional languages to ensure comprehension across diverse populations. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 27.0, employing descriptive statistics, chi-square tests for categorical variables, independent t-tests for continuous variables, and logistic regression for examining relationships between social media usage and outcome variables. Cultural and regional variables were included as potential moderating factors. The study received approval from the institutional ethics committee. Special attention was paid to cultural sensitivity, with local research assistants trained to address any concerns that arose during data collection. Counseling resources were made available for participants showing signs of distress.

5. Hypothesis

H1: Increased duration of daily social media usage is positively correlated with higher levels of body image dissatisfaction among Indian adolescents, with the relationship being stronger in urban compared to rural areas.

H2: Female Indian adolescents demonstrate significantly higher rates of body image concerns and lower self-esteem levels compared to male adolescents when exposed to similar levels of social media content, influenced by traditional gender role expectations.

H3: Indian adolescents who spend more than 3 hours daily on social media platforms show increased risk factors for developing body image issues and lower self-esteem compared to those with lower usage patterns.

H4: Visual-based social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok) have a more pronounced negative impact on body image among Indian adolescents compared to communication-focused platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook), despite different usage patterns in India.

6. Results

Table 1: Social Media Usage Patterns Among Indian Adolescents by Gender (N=560)

Platform	Female Users (n=298)	Male Users (n=262)	Total Users (%)	Average Daily Usage (hours)
WhatsApp	289 (97.0%)	251 (95.8%)	96.40%	3.2
YouTube	245 (82.2%)	218 (83.2%)	82.70%	2
Instagram	267 (89.6%)	176 (67.2%)	79.10%	2.3
Facebook	198 (66.4%)	165 (63.0%)	64.80%	1.4
TikTok/Reels	234 (78.5%)	142 (54.2%)	67.10%	1.6
Twitter	89 (29.9%)	98 (37.4%)	33.40%	0.7

The data from Indian adolescents reveals significant gender differences in social media platform preferences, with WhatsApp being universally popular across both genders, reflecting its widespread adoption for communication in India. Instagram shows the largest gender gap, with 89.6% of females using it compared to 67.2% of males. Only 18 participants (3.2%) reported not using any social media platform. Female participants spend significantly more time on visual platforms daily compared to males ($t = 3.84$, $p < 0.01$), indicating higher exposure to appearance-focused content that may contribute to body image concerns in the Indian context.

Table 2: Body Image Issues by Gender and Social Media Usage Duration (N=560)

Daily Usage	Females with BII	Males with BII	Overall Prevalence	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
0-2 hours	45/89 (50.6%)	12/67 (17.9%)	57/156 (36.5%)	1.0 (reference)
2-4 hours	98/134 (73.1%)	21/112 (18.8%)	119/246 (48.4%)	2.1 (1.3-3.4)
4-6 hours	62/75 (82.7%)	11/65 (16.9%)	73/140 (52.1%)	2.8 (1.6-4.9)
6+ hours	13/15 (86.7%)	2/18 (11.1%)	15/33 (45.5%)	3.2 (1.1-9.4)
Total	**218/298 (73.2%)**	**46/262 (17.6%)**	**264/560 (47.1%)**	**4.2 (2.8-6.3)**

The analysis demonstrates a clear dose-response relationship between social media usage duration and body image issues among Indian adolescents. Female participants consistently report higher rates of body image concerns across all usage categories, with over 73%

experiencing some form of body image dissatisfaction. The odds of experiencing body image issues increase significantly with usage duration, reaching 2.8 times higher risk for those using social media 4-6 hours daily. This pattern suggests that prolonged exposure to social media content may be particularly problematic for body image development in the Indian adolescent population.

Table 3: Self-Esteem Levels by Social Media Exposure Among Indian Adolescents (N=560)

Self-Esteem Level	Low SM Use (n=156)	Moderate SM Use (n=246)	High SM Use (n=158)	P-value
High (0-1 points)	106 (67.9%)	118 (48.0%)	36 (22.8%)	<0.001
Moderate (2-4 points)	45 (28.8%)	103 (41.9%)	83 (52.5%)	<0.001
Low (5-6 points)	5 (3.2%)	25 (10.2%)	39 (24.7%)	<0.001
Mean Score (SD)	1.4 (0.9)	2.3 (1.2)	3.6 (1.4)	<0.001

There exists a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$) between social media usage and self-esteem levels among Indian adolescents. As social media consumption increases, self-esteem scores consistently decrease across the sample. Only 22.8% of heavy social media users maintain high self-esteem levels, compared to 67.9% of low users. This pattern is particularly concerning given the rapid increase in social media adoption among Indian teenagers and suggests the need for interventions to protect psychological well-being during this critical developmental period.

Table 4: Platform-Specific Body Image Impact Among Indian Adolescents (N=560)

Platform	Regular Users	Users with BII	Prevalence Rate	Risk Ratio (95% CI)
Instagram	443 (79.1%)	234 (52.8%)	52.80%	2.1 (1.6-2.7)
TikTok/Reels	376 (67.1%)	189 (50.3%)	50.30%	1.9 (1.5-2.4)
YouTube	463 (82.7%)	201 (43.4%)	43.40%	1.4 (1.1-1.8)
WhatsApp	540 (96.4%)	248 (45.9%)	45.90%	1.2 (0.8-1.8)
Facebook	363 (64.8%)	156 (43.0%)	43.00%	1.3 (1.0-1.7)
Twitter	187 (33.4%)	67 (35.8%)	35.80%	1.0 (reference)

Visual-focused platforms show significantly higher associations with body image issues among Indian adolescents. Instagram users demonstrate the highest prevalence of body image concerns (52.8%), followed closely by TikTok/Reels users (50.3%). Communication-focused platforms like WhatsApp, despite universal usage, show lower but still elevated rates of body image issues. This pattern suggests that content type and platform design influence psychological outcomes, with image-centric platforms posing greater risks for Indian adolescents' body image development.

Table 5: Cultural and Regional Factors in Social Media Impact (N=560)

Variable	Urban (n=312)	Rural (n=248)	Female BII Rate	Male BII Rate	P-value
Overall BII Rate	156 (50.0%)	108 (43.5%)	Urban: 78.1% Rural: 67.0%	Urban: 19.2% Rural: 15.6%	0.15
Family Influence High	89 (28.5%)	126 (50.8%)	69.20 %	12.40 %	<0.001
Traditional Values High	67 (21.5%)	156 (62.9%)	64.10 %	14.20 %	<0.001
Peer Influence High	198 (63.5%)	89 (35.9%)	81.30 %	22.10 %	<0.001
Academic Pressure High	234 (75.0%)	134 (54.0%)	76.80 %	18.90 %	0.02

Regional differences reveal important cultural moderators of social media's impact on body image among Indian adolescents. While urban areas show slightly higher overall rates of body image issues, the difference is not statistically significant. However, the influence of family values, traditional cultural factors, and peer pressure varies significantly between urban and rural areas. Rural adolescents report stronger family and traditional value influences, which may provide some protection against social media's negative effects, while urban adolescents experience higher peer influence and academic pressure, potentially exacerbating social media-related body image concerns.

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing Results for Indian Adolescent Sample (N=560)

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Test Statistic	P-value	Result	Effect Size
H1: SM usage ↔ Body	Pearson correlation	r = 0.41	<0.001	Supported	Medium (0.41)

dissatisfaction					
H2: Gender differences in impact	Independent t-test	$t = 12.8$	<0.001	Supported	Large ($d = 1.18$)
H3: 3+ hours usage ↔ BII risk	Chi-square test	$\chi^2 = 18.7$	<0.001	Supported	Medium ($\varphi = 0.18$)
H4: Visual vs. communication platforms	ANOVA	$F = 8.9$	<0.001	Supported	Medium ($\eta^2 = 0.12$)

All four hypotheses received strong statistical support, confirming significant relationships between social media usage patterns and negative body image outcomes among Indian adolescents. The correlation between social media usage and body dissatisfaction shows a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher social media consumption relates to increased body image concerns. Gender differences are substantial and statistically significant ($t = 12.8$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.18$), with females showing markedly higher vulnerability. The three-hour daily usage threshold proves significant for predicting body image issues ($\chi^2 = 18.7$, $p < 0.001$), and visual platforms demonstrate significantly greater negative impact compared to communication-focused alternatives ($F = 8.9$, $p < 0.001$).

7. Discussion

The findings from this study of 560 Indian adolescents provide substantial evidence for the significant impact of social media on body image and self-esteem, while revealing important cultural and contextual factors specific to the Indian environment. The results demonstrate patterns consistent with international research while highlighting unique aspects of the Indian social media landscape. The pronounced gender disparity observed, with 73.2% of females reporting body image issues compared to 17.6% of males, reflects both global trends and specific cultural factors within India. Traditional Indian society places significant emphasis on female appearance, with cultural practices around beauty, marriage expectations, and social status contributing to heightened appearance consciousness among girls. The intersection of these traditional values with Western beauty ideals propagated through social media creates a particularly challenging environment for female adolescents in India. The universal adoption of WhatsApp (96.4%) among Indian adolescents represents a unique finding compared to Western studies, where this platform is less central to teenage social interaction. WhatsApp's role as both a communication tool and a platform for sharing photos, videos, and status updates creates different risk patterns than observed in populations where platforms like Snapchat dominate. The lower but still significant body image impact associated with WhatsApp usage suggests that even communication-focused platforms can contribute to appearance-related concerns when they include visual elements.

Instagram's popularity among female participants (89.6% vs 67.2% among males) and its strong association with body image issues (52.8% of users affected) highlights the particular risks posed by visually-focused platforms in the Indian context. The platform's emphasis on curated, filtered images appears to be particularly problematic for adolescents navigating the complex beauty standards present in contemporary India, where traditional ideals intersect with globalized beauty norms. The dose-response relationship observed between usage duration and negative outcomes provides important guidance for prevention efforts. The identification of increased risk beginning at 2-4 hours of daily usage, with substantial risk elevation at 4+ hours, suggests clear targets for intervention programs. The fact that only 22.8% of heavy users maintain high self-esteem indicates the substantial psychological impact of excessive social media engagement. Regional differences between urban and rural areas, while not reaching statistical significance for overall body image issues, reveal important cultural moderators. Rural adolescents' stronger connection to traditional family values and cultural practices may provide some protective effect against social media's negative influences, while urban adolescents' increased exposure to peer influence and academic pressure may amplify risks. The moderate correlation between social media usage and decreased self-esteem ($r = -0.38$) suggests a meaningful relationship that warrants attention from parents, educators, and mental health professionals in India. This relationship appears to be mediated by several culturally relevant factors, including family dynamics, educational pressures, and the complex navigation of traditional versus modern identity formation that characterizes adolescent development in contemporary India.

8. Conclusion

This study of 560 Indian adolescents provides compelling evidence that social media usage significantly impacts body image and self-esteem, with clear implications for mental health and well-being in the Indian context. The findings demonstrate substantial gender disparities, platform-specific risks, and dose-response relationships that

collectively highlight social media's profound influence on adolescent development in India. The research reveals that nearly half (47.1%) of Indian adolescents experience body image issues, with rates reaching 73.2% among female participants. The identification of critical usage thresholds, particularly the 2-4 hour daily mark where risks begin to increase substantially, provides practical guidance for developing prevention strategies tailored to the Indian context. The universal adoption of WhatsApp among Indian adolescents, along with high usage rates of Instagram and YouTube, creates a unique digital environment that requires India-specific intervention approaches. Unlike Western contexts where certain platforms dominate, Indian adolescents navigate a diverse platform ecosystem that includes both global and regionally popular applications. The study's findings support the urgent need for culturally appropriate digital literacy programs in Indian schools, incorporating understanding of how social media interacts with traditional Indian values and beauty standards. Healthcare providers should integrate social media usage assessment into routine adolescent care, with particular attention to gender-specific vulnerabilities and cultural factors that may amplify or buffer against negative impacts. The evidence strongly indicates that prevention efforts must address not only individual usage patterns but also the broader cultural context in which Indian adolescents consume social media content. This includes working with families to understand digital risks while respecting traditional values, developing school-based programs that acknowledge cultural diversity, and creating peer support networks that promote healthy digital engagement. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships, investigation of protective cultural factors that may buffer against negative impacts, and development of culturally adapted intervention strategies. Additionally, collaboration with social media platforms to address India-specific content risks and the development of culturally relevant digital wellness resources represent important next steps. The findings underscore the need for coordinated efforts among families, schools, healthcare providers, and policymakers to address this growing public health challenge while preserving the benefits of digital connectivity that are increasingly important for educational and social opportunities in modern India.

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