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Social Media Engagement, Body Image Concerns and the Need for Social Validation through Virtual Friendships Among Adolescents: A Literature Review

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Abstract
Social media has rapidly evolved within recent years. During adolescence people undergo many changes, including physical, cognitive, emotional and social. Therefore, social validation from peers is extremely important during this time. Through social media, adolescents create a certain image of themselves, observe others and gain measurable validation in the form of likes, comments, followers and direct messages. These interactions have a large effect on adolescents' body image, body satisfaction and self-esteem (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Sherman et al., 2016). This literature review aims to examine the relationship between social media use, body image issues, and seeking social validation in adolescents. This is done with a focus on seeking social validation via online friendships. The theories used in this literature review include Social Comparison Theory, Objectification Theory, Tripartite Influence Model, Sociometer Theory and Developmental Sociocultural Framework. It analyses the psychological processes linking online peer interaction and body image evaluation in adolescents (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Festinger, 1954; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Leary et al., 1995; Thompson et al., 1999). It appears that engaging in appearance content on social media platforms, exposure to ideal appearances, and placing high value on social media validation all relate to increased body dissatisfaction and appearance concerns (Fatt & Fardouly, 2023; Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Vincente-Benito & Ramírez-Durán, 2023). Virtual relationships can be both positive and negative for self-esteem. While they can provide emotional support, they may also place extra emphasis on appearance-based validation. More research is needed to understand differences between emotional and appearance-based validation online, the causal processes over time and sociocultural influences within adolescents in India (Khosla, 2024; Rides et al., 2025). A model and recommendations for further research and intervention within this area are proposed.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Adolescents, Body Image Concerns, Virtual Friendships, Social Validation, Social Comparison, Self-Esteem, Psychological Well-being

1. Introduction

During adolescence individuals undergo significant physiological changes, increasing awareness of them-

selves, and development in cognitive and social-emotional domains. In this period, adolescents begin to develop their own identity and become more aware of how they are perceived by others. As a result, peer acceptance, a sense of belonging within social groups and receiving social feedback from others heavily influences an individual's self-concept, self-esteem and psychological well-being (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Leary et al., 1995).

Body image refers to how individuals perceive, think about, feel and evaluate their physical appearance. It is influenced by an individual's personal experiences, cultural expectations of beauty, social interactions and feedback regarding their appearance from important people in their lives (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999).

With the increasing popularity of visual social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube), adolescents' socialisation has changed significantly. Social media allows adolescents to interact with peers, influencers and social groups much beyond the ones they would have interacted with in traditional social setups. Furthermore, it provides instantaneous and measurable feedback in relation to physical appearance (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Images and videos shared on social media platforms are often carefully selected, edited and therefore expose adolescents to unrealistic ideals of attractiveness. This can cause comparisons within social groups, leading to increased self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

In recent times, adolescents have been developing significant relationships with peers in online spaces. Adolescents often develop meaningful relationships with online peers or members of online communities, even if they have little or no interaction in real life. Although virtual relationships can provide support, connection and feeling of belonging, they provide significant social comparison in relation to appearance (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Rides et al., 2025). The number of 'likes', comments, compliments and followers received from posts often compensate for social acceptability and attractiveness. Individuals may therefore place value on their appearance based on these responses (Fatt & Fardouly, 2023; Sherman et al., 2016).

Although many studies have found associations between body dissatisfaction and social media use in general, there is less research in relation to psychological processes within virtual friendships, and types of validation received within these relationships. This is especially true in non-western cultures, for example in India (Khosla, 2024). Therefore, this literature review aims to review theories and findings in relation to social media use, body image issues and validation in virtual relationships within adolescents. Additionally, this literature review will identify key areas of gaps in research and provide an integrated model to inform future research.

2. Review Methodology and Scope

A narrative literature review was carried out to collate relevant theory and research. A range of peer reviewed literature was identified relating to developmental psychology, media psychology and clinical child psychology. Theory has been included in this review to explain appearance concerns and peer acceptance in adolescence (Festinger, 1954; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Leary et al., 1995; Thompson et al., 1999), and more recent empirical research examining social media usage, online peer validation, online friendship formation and body image outcomes in adolescents (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; de Vries et al., 2016; Fatt & Fardouly, 2023; Jones, 2004; Khosla, 2024; Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Rides et al., 2025; Sherman et al., 2016; Vincente-Benito & Ramírez-Durán, 2023). Findings from the literature were grouped into six themes: body image in adolescents, social media usage, social comparisons, online validation, online friendships, and gender within social contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

The impact of social media engagement on adolescents' body image can be understood through several theories:

3.1 Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory suggests that people will often compare themselves to others in order to determine their own opinions, skills and characteristics, especially when objective measures are lacking (Festinger, 1954). Within visual social media platforms, adolescents may compare their bodies to those of others such as peers, celebrities and influencers. Comparing oneself to 'upward' comparisons (with people perceived to be more attractive/ successful) on social media can lead to negative body image and feelings of body dissatisfaction (Festinger, 1954; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

3.2 Objectification Theory

Objectification Theory was proposed by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) to explain how girls and women within certain social cultures become objectified. Through this process they develop chronic body monitoring, body concerns and reduced somatic awareness. Social media increases objectification of adolescents, as adolescents are encouraged to post photographs of themselves in a way which allows them to be objectified by others and receive ratings on their looks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

3.3 Tripartite Influence Model

The Tripartite Influence Model proposes that pressures regarding appearance within social culture originate from three main sources in individuals lives: Family, Peers and Media. These pressures affect body image through internalising social beauty standards and social comparison (Thompson et al., 1999). Within modern social media platforms, these three sources of pressure overlap. Peers create media content, influencers act as social peers, and family members are included within social media. As a result, pressures relating to physical appearance increase (Thompson et al., 1999).

3.4 Sociometer Theory

Sociometer Theory proposes that self-esteem acts as an internal meter to indicate how accepted and valuable we are within social relationships (Leary et al., 1995). Increases in perceived acceptance or rejection will therefore produce increases or decreases in transient self-esteem. Social media provides measurable indicators of social acceptance or rejection through likes, comments and follower numbers from virtual peers (Leary et al., 1995; Sherman et al., 2016).

3.5 Developmental Sociocultural Perspective

In order to understand the relationship between social media and body image in adolescents, Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) combined developmental psychology and sociocultural theories. This theory, named "The Perfect Storm", considers how typical developmental changes in adolescence such as increased sensitivity to peers, exploring identity and physical changes interact with the nature of social media (such as always being accessible, visual idealism and measurable feedback from peers) to increase vulnerability to developing body image issues and internalising problems (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

4. Thematic Review of Empirical Literature

4.1 Body Image and Adolescent Psychological Development

Body image constitutes a multifaceted psychological construct comprising perceptual accuracy, cognitive evaluations, affective responses and appearance-related behaviours. During adolescence, pubertal transitions and heightened awareness of peer norms intensify scrutiny of physical traits such as body

weight, muscularity, height, facial features and skin complexion. In a longitudinal investigation of adolescent boys and girls, Jones (2004) demonstrated that appearance-related conversations with peers and social comparison processes significantly predicted longitudinal increases in body dissatisfaction. These findings confirm that adolescent body image does not develop in isolation; rather, it is co-constructed within interpersonal and sociocultural contexts where appearance norms are communicated and reinforced (Jones, 2004; Thompson et al., 1999).

4.2 Social Media Engagement and Body Image Perceptions

Empirical evidence consistently indicates that the manner in which adolescents engage with social media is more predictive of body image outcomes than overall screen duration alone. Photographic editing tools, beauty filters and selective self-presentation foster an online environment dominated by unattainable beauty ideals (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). Examining mediation pathways among adolescents, de Vries et al. (2016) found that frequent social networking site use was associated with increased peer appearance-related feedback, which subsequently predicted heightened body dissatisfaction. Similarly, in a systematic review of studies involving adolescents and young adults, Vincente-Benito and Ramírez-Durán (2023) established consistent links between intensive, appearance-focused social media engagement, body dissatisfaction and diminished self-esteem. Complementing these quantitative findings, a qualitative literature review by Popat & Tarrant (2023) revealed that adolescents actively interpret digital interactions through the lens of peer approval, noting that exposure to curated peer images frequently triggers self-consciousness and pressure to conform to digital appearance standards (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

4.3 Social Comparison Processes in Digital Environments

Social comparison processes are a key pathway from social media use to body dissatisfaction. There are two directions of social comparison on social media.

Upward comparison: Adolescents compare their un-edited appearance with the edited appearance of peers, models or influencers considered to be either more attractive or more popular than them. Consistently engaging in upward comparisons creates feelings of dissatisfaction, envy and lower body image (Festinger, 1954; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

Downward comparison: Adolescents compare themselves to peers who are seen as less attractive or less popular. While downward comparisons can momentarily increase self-evaluation, downward comparisons create strict beauty-based rankings, and encourage individuals to judge people's value based on how attractive they are.

Contrary to print/TV media where models are easily seen as 'far away professionals', social media makes it easy to confuse celebrities with peers. By comparing oneself to peers/friends and classmates (with slightly edited images), adolescents often do not consider the image has been manipulated to a very large extent. This makes upward comparison very detrimental to body satisfaction (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022 & Thompson et al., 1999).

4.4 Digital Social Validation and External Approval

Social validation is gained through other people recognising aspects of who you are as well as your appearance, feelings and behaviours. As adolescents strive for independent status outside of familial units, social validation from peers becomes very important. Through social media users are able to receive quantified validation, for example likes, comments, shares, heart reactions on stories and followers. Research into adolescents and validation from social media shows that if images have a high number of likes, adolescents are far more likely to agree with what is in the image. Images which have received a lot

of likes activate reward, social cognition and attention networks in the brain (Sherman et al., 2016). In relation to body image, research by Fatt and Fardouly (2023) indicates that adolescents who place higher importance on receiving likes, comments and followers from social media displayed much greater body image concerns. Therefore, social media validation can become extremely important in adolescents, as they consider it to be a key factor in determining their level of attractiveness/acceptance within society (Fatt & Fardouly, 2023; Sherman et al., 2016).

4.5 Virtual Friendships and Dual Dimensions of Online Validation

Virtual friendships are common in adolescents. These connections with online users, social media 'friends', gaming partners, and members of online communities, provide adolescents with social support and opportunities to express themselves. Therefore, adolescents with social difficulties within face-to-face interaction may find benefit from virtual friendships (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). However, as these interactions are visually dependent, pressure may be placed upon individuals to portray an ideal self. Research has shown that adolescents use likes, comments and reactions from their virtual friendships to demonstrate support from others and regulate social interactions and relationships with peers (Rides et al., 2025). As such, validation received through virtual friendships can be categorised into two categories:

Appearance-related validation – Receiving validation from peers based primarily on physical appearance, figure, clothing or image in order to gain positive metrics. Receiving validation based on physical appearance promotes objectification of oneself, and therefore makes individuals place value on their self-worth by how much validation they receive online (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fatt & Fardouly, 2023).

Emotional and social validation – Receiving validation from others in a supportive way, due to similarities in interests, personality and emotional connection rather than appearance. Within virtual friendship environments, receiving emotional validation helps adolescents feel included in a group and protects against mental health issues (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Rides et al., 2025).

4.6 Body Image, Self-Esteem and Sociocultural Gender Dynamics

Consistent with Sociometer Theory, overemphasising appearances within social contexts can negatively affect self-esteem and subsequently mental health in adolescents (Leary et al., 1995). However, social media platforms can have positive effects on adolescent self-acceptance if participants are part of affirming communities, view body-positive content and feel supported by peers (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). However, individual factors such as level of vulnerability, digital literacy, gender norms and culture have had major roles in influencing the outcomes of adolescents using social media. Across many cultures globally, young women are often exposed to social pressures to have a 'thin' figure, symmetrical facial features and clear skin. In recent years, young men have also experienced increased pressure to adhere to muscular, thin bodies and be tall (Jones, 2004; Choukas-Bradley, et al., 2022). In Indian adolescents, traditional gender norms in families, influences from peers, colourism and unattainable beauty standards in media contribute alongside increasing mobile phone and social media exposure. A study investigating body image issues in Indian female adolescents between the ages of 13-16 years in north-west Delhi found that using social media platforms caused the participants to compare themselves upwards to celebrities and peers, leading to body dissatisfaction and pressure to follow idealised beauty standards (Khosla, 2024). However limited research has investigated the impacts of receiving social validation from peers virtually in various populations in India (Khosla, 2024).

4.7 Synthesis of Key Reviewed Studies

Table 1: Summary of Foundational Theories and Empirical Studies Included in the Review

Author(s) and Year	Study Design / Focus	Key Findings and Theoretical Contribution
Festinger, 1954	Theoretical Paper	Demonstrated individual comparisons to others in order to evaluate traits. Therefore, leading to upward/downward comparisons for appearance.
Leary et al., 1995	Theoretical and empirical formulation of Sociometer Theory	Demonstrated that self-esteem functions as an interpersonal monitor reflecting perceived social acceptance and relational inclusion.
Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997	Theoretical framework on Objectification Theory	Explained how internalising an external observer's gaze leads to habitual body surveillance, appearance anxiety and mental health risks.
Thompson et al., 1999	Theoretical Framework (Tripartite Influence Model)	Identified three key social-cultural influences of media internalisation of beauty standards and appearance comparisons between individuals. These are family influences, peer influences and media influences.
Jones, 2004	Longitudinal study on males and females	Demonstrated that peer discussions around appearance and social comparison in adolescents significantly predicts increased body dissatisfaction over time.
de Vries et al., 2016	Empirical mediation study on adolescent SNS use	Found that social networking site use increases peer appearance-related feedback, which in turn mediates heightened body dissatisfaction.
Sherman et al., 2016	Experimental study (fMRI and behavioural methods) on adolescents	Demonstrated that receiving a high number of likes by peers increases peer approval, and activates reward and pro-social areas of the brain.
Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022	Developmental-sociocultural theoretical review	Proposed The Perfect Storm framework linking adolescent developmental sensitivity with social media features to explain body image concerns.
Fatt & Fardouly, 2023	Empirical study	Demonstrated that perceiving the importance of receiving likes, comments and followers on social media is associated to body image concerns.
Popat & Tarrant, 2023	Qualitative Systematic Literature Review	Identified adolescents have contrasting experiences in social media. Highlighting both support for acceptance from peers and causing appearance related distress.

Author(s) and Year	Study Design / Focus	Key Findings and Theoretical Contribution
Vincente-Benito & Ramirez-Duran, 2023	Systematic Review on adolescents and young people	Consistently associated high/compulsive social media use with increased body dissatisfaction and decreased self-esteem.
Khosla, 2024	Qualitative study on Indian female adolescents (aged 13-16)	Identified increased appearance comparisons to celebrity models and peers as a result of social media use in adolescents in Delhi. Leading to negative body image.
Rides et al., 2025	Qualitative study on adolescents' responses to likes/comments	Demonstrates that likes and comments received are interpreted to provide relationship support, manage impressions and allow relationship maintenance.

5. Critical Analysis and Identified Research Gaps

Limitations in current literature include:

Virtual social validation, social comparison, social media usage and poor body image were often studied in isolation from one another (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Fatt & Fardouly, 2023).

Lack of distinction within virtual peer relationships. Previous research has failed to consider the distinct features of virtual peer relationships including visual communication, asynchronous interaction and validation based on algorithmic values (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Rides et al., 2025).

Lack of distinction within types of validation received. In quantitative studies, it is difficult to determine whether adolescents are receiving appearance-based validation or non-appearance emotional support. Therefore, it is unclear why social media interactions have beneficial effects on body image in some adolescents, and negative effects in others.

Lack of research within Indian adolescents. Although there are very high levels of digital engagement in India, little research has been conducted into the effect of localised beauty standards, family influences and virtual peer relationships within Indian adolescents. The research that has been conducted has been undertaken on small sample sizes within specific regions (Khosla, 2024.)

Cross-sectional data. Many studies have cross-sectional data meaning causal relationships and associations within validation seeking behaviour and poor body image cannot be accurately determined (Vincente-Benito & Ramírez-Durán, 2023).

6. Proposed Model

This review proposes a model to understand the relationship between social media engagement, virtual validation and body image in adolescents. In this model, social media engagement is operationalised through the frequency of social media used, engaging with appearance focussed content, posting images, and interacting with influencers and virtual peers.

It is hypothesised that social media engagement has an effect on body image (body satisfaction, dissatisfaction, appearance-related anxiety, and acceptance) via appearance based social comparison, desire for social validation in a virtual setting, and perceived peer acceptance (Festinger, 1954; Choukas-

Bradley et al., 2022). In line with the Sociometer Theory, perceived acceptance or rejection from virtual peers in turn affects self-esteem and perceived value of self (Leary et al., 1995.).

In this model, moderating variables include the quality of virtual peer relationships, type of validation given (appearance-based or emotional), media literacy, psychological resilience, age and gender. If emotional support is provided within virtual peer relationships and the individual has high levels of media literacy, social media usage may have a protective effect on self-esteem and positive body image. However, if validation within relationships is focused on appearance, social media engagement is likely to produce worsened body image.

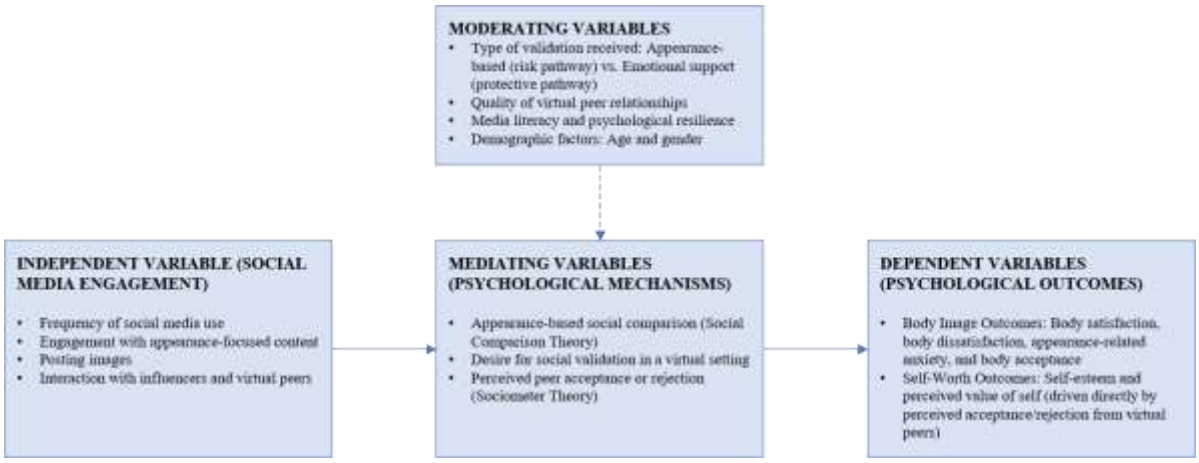

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model Linking Social Media Engagement, Virtual Validation, and Adolescent Body Image

7. Discussion and Future Research

This review presents implications in both theoretical and practical psychology. Differentiating between appearance-based validation and emotional validation will improve sociocultural and sociometric models in understanding the varied effects social media can have on adolescents (Leary et al., 1995; Thompson et al., 1999.) Future research should investigate these relationships using longitudinal and mixed methods, with diverse samples across different socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations in India to understand development of body image in relation to virtual validation across genders (Khosla, 2024).

Practically, this information can be incorporated into education strategies within schools, counselling strategies and media literacy. Instead of restricting social media use in adolescents, educators, parents and school psychologists should provide adolescents with media literacy skills. This can allow them to understand the edited nature of images, develop positive peer relationships, and separate their self-worth from measurable indicators in social media (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Rides et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The development of adolescence in social media has changed the way young people make friends, gain social validation and perceive their bodies. It has been found in theory and recent research that engaging in appearance related content, upward comparisons and receiving quantifiable validation on social media platforms can lead to body image issues (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Fatt & Fardouly, 2023; Festinger, 1954). However, online friendships may be a double-edged sword, meaning they could be a source of risk or support for adolescents. Investigating the difference in appearance-based affirmation and genuine

emotional affirmation could aid further research into adolescent development, particularly within the digital world in India. Using sociocultural, cognitive and sociometric approaches in future research can create a more positive digital environment to improve adolescents' body image and self-esteem.

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