

Impact of Social Media on Body Image and Mental Health Among Youth in Bangladesh: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines the impact of social media use on body image and mental health among Bangladeshi youth, focusing on gender and age differences. Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat significantly contribute to body dissatisfaction, particularly among females aged 15-18. The findings reveal a strong correlation between increased social media use, heightened self-comparison, reduced self-esteem, and mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression. Peer pressure, social comparison, and negative online interactions further intensify these effects. To address these issues, the study advocates for media literacy programs to help youth critically engage with social media, body positivity campaigns to challenge unrealistic beauty standards, and family engagement to foster supportive environments. These interventions aim to promote critical social media engagement and resilience in youth, ultimately improving their mental well-being in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Social media, body image, mental health, youth in Bangladesh, Instagram, Snapchat, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, peer pressure, media literacy, body positivity, anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, social comparison, family influence, gender and age differences, social media addiction, unrealistic beauty standards, cultural norms, digital well-being.

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Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, with over 4.95 billion users globally as of October 2023, and an average daily usage of 2.5 hours per person (Kemp, 2024). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are especially popular among young people, shaping their social interactions, self-perceptions, and behaviors. While these platforms provide opportunities for connection and self-expression, concerns have emerged about their negative effects on body image and mental health, particularly among youth (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Dane & Bhatia, 2023).

In Bangladesh, social media usage has surged, with 52.90 million users—30.4% of the population—active as of January 2024 (Kemp, 2024). This rise in internet access, from 12.9% in 2015 to 44.5% in 2024 (von Kameke, 2024), has accelerated the influence of visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. These platforms often promote idealized and unattainable beauty standards, contributing to body dissatisfaction and self-esteem issues among young users (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Globally, research indicates that social media fosters body dissatisfaction through mechanisms like upward social comparison, validation-seeking behaviors, and exposure to curated beauty portrayals (Górska et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2018). For instance, a UK-based study among adolescents found that frequent social media use was linked to higher rates of depressive symptoms and body dissatisfaction, particularly in girls (Kelly et al., 2018). Reducing social media usage has been shown to improve body image and mental well-being, especially among young people dealing with body image concerns (Dane & Bhatia, 2023; Thai et al., 2024).

In Bangladesh, where cultural beauty norms emphasize thinness and fair skin, social media often reinforces these ideals. The conflict between global beauty ideals and local cultural expectations can intensify pressures on young people to conform to unrealistic standards (Górska et al., 2023; Islam & Wajid, 2023). This often results in harmful behaviors like extreme dieting, self-objectification, and worsening mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and social anxiety (Abbasi et al., 2024; Charmaraman et al., 2021).

Despite growing global research on this topic, there is limited understanding of how these issues specifically impact Bangladeshi youth. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the influence of social media on body image and mental health among young people in Bangladesh. By analyzing social media usage patterns and the content these users engage with, this research provides insights into the unique challenges they face and offers recommendations for promoting healthier online habits and mental well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

This mixed-methods study investigates the effects of social media on body image and mental health among Bangladeshi youth, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding. The study sought to explore social media's impact on self-perception, body image concerns, and mental well-being, while identifying strategies for fostering healthier online behaviors. The research was guided by the central question: How does social media use influence body image and mental health among young people in Bangladesh, and what interventions can promote positive body image and mental well-being?

Participants and Sampling

A total of 128 participants were recruited for this study, with 19 contributing to the qualitative interviews and 109 participating in the quantitative surveys. Participants were selected from diverse backgrounds, representing urban, suburban, and rural areas in Bangladesh. This sampling approach aimed to capture a broad cross-section of youth, parents, educators, and mental health professionals, ensuring a holistic view of social media's impact on different stakeholders.

For the qualitative sample, purposive sampling was employed to target individuals particularly affected by social media's influence on body image or mental health. This group included young people aged 15 to 24, parents, and mental health professionals. The quantitative sample was gathered using convenience sampling, allowing for a broader range of participants to engage in the survey. Although convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the results, it facilitated wider participation and engagement in the study.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve deeply into participants' social media habits, body image perceptions, and mental health experiences. These interviews, consisting of 7 to 8 open-ended questions, allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and provide detailed responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

For quantitative data, a survey was distributed via Google Forms to collect information on participants' social media usage, body image satisfaction, and mental health outcomes. The survey featured 15 questions, combining Likert-scale items to measure attitudes and behaviors with open- and closed-ended questions to capture additional context and depth in participants' responses.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, facilitated by ATLAS.ti software. This method helped identify recurring themes, such as body comparison, social validation, and psychological impacts.

These themes were then categorized and analyzed to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions, offering insights that enriched the overall findings of the study.

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to highlight key trends in social media usage, body image satisfaction, and mental health outcomes. The survey data were analyzed to identify correlations between social media use and body image concerns, paying particular attention to gender and age differences. These quantitative findings were then integrated with the qualitative insights to offer a more holistic perspective on the effects of social media on body image and mental health.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (2017). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured that their data would be kept confidential and that their identities would remain anonymous. Given the sensitive nature of topics such as body image and mental health, special attention was paid to protecting the privacy and emotional well-being of younger participants. All data were anonymized to ensure that participants' identities were safeguarded throughout the research process.

Findings

This study examines the relationship between social media use and its effects on body image and mental health among young people in Bangladesh. Data from surveys and interviews provide a comprehensive view of how social media usage influences self-perception, mental health, and social behavior.

Social Media Usage Patterns

Approximately 30.8% of respondents reported spending more than four hours per day on social media, with Facebook and YouTube being the most popular platforms across both genders. Younger participants, particularly those aged 15–18, showed a preference for visually-driven platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat.

Several participants, particularly those in the younger age group, expressed concerns about social media addiction, which hindered their ability to focus on studies and other responsibilities. As one healthcare professional noted, "Many students express difficulty in managing their social media time, which negatively affects concentration and academic performance." A female student shared, "I often find myself scrolling for hours, especially at night, without realizing it."

Table 1: Social Media Usage per Day by Gender

Social Media Usage per Day	Male (%)	Female (%)
Less than 1 hour	10.34%	17.39%

1-2 hours	17.24%	21.74%
3-4 hours	37.93%	34.78%
More than 4 hours	34.48%	26.09%

Table 1: Daily social media use categorized by gender.

Body Image and Mental Health Impact

Body Image Perception

A large percentage of respondents reported feeling neutral (36.54%) or satisfied (42.31%) with their body image, while a smaller group (13.47%) expressed dissatisfaction, particularly among females. Body dissatisfaction was especially prevalent among females, with 13.47% of participants expressing dissatisfaction with their body image. Increased social media use, particularly on platforms that emphasize idealized beauty standards, appeared to exacerbate this dissatisfaction.

Younger women, in particular, felt pressured to conform to these beauty standards. One female participant stated, "I feel like I need to edit my photos before posting; otherwise, I won't look good compared to others in my feed." A teacher added, "Many students feel pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals they see online."

Table 2: Body Image Satisfaction by Age Group

Body Image Satisfaction	15-18 (%)	19-21 (%)	22-24 (%)
Very Unsatisfied	0.00%	4.76%	3.45%
Unsatisfied	16.67%	9.52%	6.90%
Neutral	33.33%	47.62%	31.03%
Satisfied	50.00%	28.57%	48.28%
Very Satisfied	0.00%	9.52%	10.34%

Table 2: Body image satisfaction levels across age groups.

Mental Health

Participants who reported being more satisfied with their body image also tended to report better mental health outcomes. Among participants, 51.72% of males and 34.78% of females reported "Good" mental health.

The emotional toll of maintaining a curated online image was a recurring theme, with participants describing the pressure as "exhausting." Many linked their self-esteem to social media validation, indicating that the number of "likes" or comments affected their sense of self-worth. One parent noted, "My child's mood changes based on how many likes her Instagram posts get. It seems like her happiness is tied to social media validation."

Table 3: Self-Reported Mental Health by Gender

Mental Health Rating	Male (%)	Female (%)
Below Average	3.45%	4.35%
Average	31.03%	47.83%
Good	51.72%	34.78%

Excellent	13.79%	13.04%
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Table 3: Self-reported mental health ratings by gender.

Peer and Family Influence

Peer influence, often in the form of body shaming or cyberbullying, had a profound effect on body image and mental health. Approximately 34.6% of respondents reported receiving negative comments about their appearance on social media, which severely impacted their self-esteem. One female participant shared, "I've been called names like 'baby elephant' by classmates, and it hurts. I stopped uploading photos because of the teasing."

Family influence, though indirect, also contributed to shaping body image perceptions. Parents voiced concern over their children's social media use, with some acknowledging difficulty in regulating screen time and noting its impact on their children's self-esteem and confidence.

Gender and Age Differences

Gender Differences

Males were more likely to spend extended hours on social media, with 34.48% of males spending more than four hours per day compared to 26.09% of females. However, females reported greater dissatisfaction with their body image. About 17.39% of females expressed dissatisfaction compared to 10.34% of males. Females frequently mentioned feeling pressured by appearance-based comparisons, noting societal beauty standards often showcased on social media. One female participant stated, "I feel like I need to edit my photos before posting; otherwise, I won't look good compared to others in my feed."

Males, on the other hand, reported pressure to appear muscular and confident. One male participant said, "There's pressure for us to look fit, but it's not talked about as much as women's body issues. We feel it too."

Table 4: Social Media Usage and Body Image Satisfaction by Gender

Social Media Usage	Male (%)	Female (%)	Body Image Satisfaction (%)
Less than 1 hour	10.34%	17.39%	50.00% (satisfied)
1-2 hours	17.24%	21.74%	41.18% (neutral)
3-4 hours	37.93%	34.78%	45.00% (neutral)
More than 4 hours	34.48%	26.09%	35.00% (neutral)

Table 4: Impact of social media usage on body image by gender.

Age Differences

Younger participants, especially those aged 15–18, were more prone to peer influence and dissatisfaction with their body image. Among this age group, 16.67% reported feeling unsatisfied with their appearance, compared to 6.90% of participants aged 22–24.

Older participants (22–24) generally expressed more confidence, with 58.62% reporting satisfaction or high satisfaction with their body image. This suggests that age and maturity play a role in moderating the impact of social media, as younger individuals are more vulnerable to social comparisons and peer pressure.

Table: Body Image Satisfaction by Age Group

Body Image Satisfaction	15-18 (%)	19-21 (%)	22-24 (%)
Very Unsatisfied	0.00%	4.76%	3.45%
Unsatisfied	16.67%	9.52%	6.90%
Neutral	33.33%	47.62%	31.03%
Satisfied	50.00%	28.57%	48.28%
Very Satisfied	0.00%	9.52%	10.34%

Table 5: Comparison of body image satisfaction across age groups.

The findings suggest that social media usage, especially prolonged exposure to idealized images, has a significant impact on both body image and mental health among young people in Bangladesh. Gender and age differences further highlight the pressures faced by females and younger individuals, as peer and societal influences exacerbate feelings of inadequacy. These results underline the need for greater awareness of the mental and emotional costs of social media, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Discussion

This study explores the relationship between social media use, body image, and mental health among Bangladeshi youth, revealing significant impacts on body dissatisfaction and mental health outcomes. Visual-centric platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat play a central role in shaping negative body image perceptions, leading to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. These effects are particularly pronounced among younger users and females, reflecting global patterns but intensified by cultural beauty ideals in Bangladesh (Abbasi et al., 2024; Górska et al., 2023).

Impact of Social Media Platforms on Body Image

Approximately 30.8% of participants reported spending more than four hours per day on social media, particularly on visually-driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which emphasize curated beauty ideals. These platforms encourage body comparison and reinforce unrealistic standards, contributing to body dissatisfaction, especially among younger users and females. This aligns with global studies showing that exposure to idealized imagery fosters negative self-perception and body dissatisfaction (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

In Bangladesh, where traditional beauty ideals emphasize thinness and fair skin, social media's promotion of global beauty standards amplifies the pressure on young people to conform. This is especially true for young women, many of whom reported feeling the need to edit their photos to meet these unattainable standards.

The findings highlight a tension between global beauty ideals and local cultural expectations, exacerbating body image concerns and increasing dissatisfaction.

Unrealistic Ideals and Mental Health Outcomes

The study reveals a strong association between body dissatisfaction and mental health challenges among participants. Those dissatisfied with their body image were more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and social anxiety (Dane & Bhatia, 2023). These findings are consistent with global research that links frequent social media use with poor mental health outcomes (Richards et al., 2015; Thai et al., 2024).

In Bangladesh, the combination of global beauty standards with local cultural ideals exacerbates body dissatisfaction and mental health issues. The internalization of these unattainable beauty ideals contributes to lowered self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy (Islam & Wajid, 2023). The study also highlights the role of social media influencers and celebrities in intensifying these pressures, as their projections of unattainable body ideals exacerbate depressive symptoms and social anxiety (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Prichard et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying and Body Shaming

Cyberbullying and body shaming were significant issues reported by participants, particularly on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. Approximately 34.6% of participants reported receiving negative comments about their appearance, which further fueled body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem. This is consistent with global trends that associate cyberbullying with deteriorating mental health and increased body dissatisfaction (Dane & Bhatia, 2023).

These online interactions, when combined with the traditional emphasis on beauty standards, can have particularly damaging effects on young people's self-image in Bangladesh. Participants frequently noted that negative comments reinforced their dissatisfaction with their appearance, echoing findings from other studies on the impact of cyberbullying on body image and mental health (Abbasi et al., 2024; Charmaraman et al., 2021).

Impact on Physical and Mental Health

Excessive social media use had clear impacts on both physical and mental health. Participants reported experiencing sleep disturbances, weight gain, and eye strain due to prolonged exposure to social media. Moreover, many participants described feelings of anxiety and depression linked to the pressure to maintain a perfect online image (Górska et al., 2023).

A particularly concerning finding was that only 28.4% of participants engaged in regular physical activity, which exacerbates the negative effects of social media on health behaviors. This is consistent with research showing that prolonged screen time encourages a sedentary lifestyle, contributing to both poor physical and

mental health outcomes (Ferdous & Huda, 2023). The combined burden of low physical activity and mental health challenges underscores the broad range of negative outcomes associated with extended social media use (Dane & Bhatia, 2023).

Peer and Family Influence

Peer pressure, often reinforced by social media comparisons, played a significant role in shaping body image perceptions. Approximately 35% of participants reported feeling pressured by peers to conform to idealized beauty standards, particularly through social media comparisons. Younger females were particularly vulnerable, as peer comparisons frequently amplified feelings of inadequacy (Abbasi et al., 2024; de Vries et al., 2019).

Family influence also played a role in reinforcing societal beauty norms. Participants described how family members, though often unintentionally, reinforced cultural expectations related to body image, particularly around fair skin and slim body types (Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009). These family dynamics added to the pressure faced by young people to conform to idealized beauty standards, making it difficult to develop a positive self-image (Taniguchi & Thompson, 2015).

Strategies for Promoting Positive Body Image

Addressing the negative effects of social media on body image requires a comprehensive approach. Media literacy programs are essential for teaching young people how to critically evaluate social media content and recognize unrealistic portrayals of beauty. Studies have shown that interventions aimed at increasing social media literacy can have positive outcomes. For example, the SoMe Social Media Literacy Program showed modest improvements in dietary restraint and depressive symptoms, particularly for adolescent girls, six months after the intervention (Gordon et al., 2021). While effects were more limited for boys, this study highlights the potential of school-based interventions to foster healthier media consumption habits. Such programs align with other research showing that media literacy can reduce body dissatisfaction by raising awareness of media manipulation and promoting realistic body standards (Kurz et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2016).

Additionally, supporting body-positive movements on social media platforms that celebrate diverse body types and self-acceptance can help counter harmful social comparisons. Campaigns like *#NoFilterNeeded* encourage authenticity and the sharing of unedited, real-life images, which may help shift societal norms toward more inclusive beauty standards. Educators and parents play a key role in promoting healthy media consumption habits, while mental health professionals can encourage youth to engage in body-positive communities to foster healthier self-perception and well-being (Thai et al., 2024).

Recommendations

To mitigate the negative impacts of social media on body image among young people in Bangladesh, the following strategies are recommended:

- **Implement Media Literacy Programs:** Schools should introduce media literacy to help students critically evaluate social media content and recognize unrealistic portrayals of beauty. These programs can reduce the negative effects of comparison culture and improve body image perception.
- **Launch Public Awareness Campaigns:** National campaigns promoting body positivity and mental health awareness should target youth. Involving influencers and local celebrities can amplify the message to discourage unhealthy comparisons with curated social media images.
- **Engage Families in Conversations:** Provide parents with resources to foster discussions about body image and social media. Open communication within families can help reduce pressure on youth to conform to unrealistic beauty standards.
- **Promote Body-Positive Movements:** Support social media campaigns, like *#NoFilterNeeded*, that encourage authenticity and celebrate diverse body types. These initiatives can challenge societal norms and promote a healthier, more inclusive view of beauty.
- **Organize School and Community Workshops:** Conduct workshops to educate students, parents, and educators about the effects of social media on body image. Focus on strategies for developing positive self-image and encouraging healthy social media use.
- **Support Government Initiatives:** Advocate for policies that regulate harmful social media content and promote diverse beauty standards. Governments should also provide mental health services for youth struggling with body image issues.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant impact of social media on body image and mental health among Bangladeshi youth. The findings demonstrate that exposure to unrealistic beauty standards and excessive social media use contributes to lower body satisfaction, diminished self-esteem, and poor mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression.

Tackling these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving schools, families, communities, and policymakers. Raising awareness, promoting body positivity, and offering mental health support are essential strategies to help young people navigate the pressures of social media with greater confidence and resilience.

A collaborative effort from educational institutions, families, community leaders, and government authorities is essential for fostering a positive self-image and improving mental well-being in the digital age.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations include a relatively small sample size of 109 survey participants, which affects the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the sample across more diverse regions and demographics could provide a broader understanding. Although the 19 qualitative interviews offered depth, a larger participant pool could further enhance the richness of perspectives.

The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe changes over time, and reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Additionally, the focus on Bangladeshi youth may restrict the applicability of these findings to other cultural contexts.

Future research should explore larger, more diverse samples, adopt longitudinal designs to track changes over time, and delve deeper into specific social media features like filters and likes. Cross-cultural studies could provide a comparative understanding of social media's effects across different regions.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

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