



## Exploring the Relationship Between Instagram Use and Body Image Issues Among Teenagers

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the study is to examine how Instagram usage is associated with the body image anxiety problems in adolescents and how social comparison can mediate the association. The method of the research is quantitative survey and descriptive statistical analysis, Pearson correlation, and linear regression and also qualitative interviews to understand the subjective experiences of Instagram users. The findings of the quantitative study revealed that, the duration of Instagram use and social comparison had significant positive effect on body image anxiety and that social comparison was the primary mediator. Qualitative data show that the teens are usually feeling pressured by unrealistic beauty standards and lower in self-confidence when exposed to social comparison, despite the fact that positive content can offer emotional support. To sum up, the negative influence on the mental health of adolescents should be minimized by implementing interventions based on social media education and promoting positive body images.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the current age and era in the digital world, social media is part of our daily life and in particular, the teens. As one of the most popular social media, Instagram provides its users with several opportunities to share photos and recordings, leave comments and likes to any materials posted by other users. According to the recent statistics, over a billion monthly active users are registered on Instagram which was a huge number and a considerable percentage of them is people of the teenage age group (Saini & Goswami, 2020). One such issue is the implication of Instagram usages on the mental health and living conditions of the Instagram users. A particularly significant issue is the way adolescents that are constantly exposed to edited and perfect images can develop a negative attitude toward their body image and self-perception (Jain et al., 2023; Re & Bruno, 2024; Digennaro & Tescione, 2024). The teens are at the developmental phase of self-identity, and they are thus very susceptible to external factors, which means that they compare themselves to Instagram unrealistic beauty standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Nyambura, 2019).

In earlier studies, it has been revealed that social media is harmful to both body image and self esteem particularly to young women. A study by Fardouly et al. (2015)

established a linkage of social comparison on social media with poor mood and the body image problem in young women. Moreover, Perloff (2014) emphasized that the impacts of the social media on the body attitudes issues can be addressed in terms of a number of theoretical frameworks including social comparison theory and objectification theory. Nonetheless, most studies have discussed the correlation between the use of social media in general and body image issues, whereas not many of them discussed the effects of one of the most visual social media, Instagram, on the body image of teenagers. This study hence tries to investigate how using Instagram can be connected with body image issues during adolescence in the context of the Indonesian culture. In the current age and era in the digital world, social media is part of our daily life and in particular, the teens. As one of the most popular social media, Instagram provides its users with several opportunities to share photos and recordings, leave comments and likes to any materials posted by other users. According to the recent statistics, over a billion monthly active users are registered on Instagram which was a huge number and a considerable percentage of them is people of the teenage age group (Daneshjo, 2023; Amson, 2024). One such issue is the implication of Instagram usages on the mental health and living conditions of the Instagram users. A particularly significant issue is the way adolescents that are constantly exposed to edited and perfect images can develop a negative attitude toward their body image and self-perception. The teens are at the developmental phase of self-identity, and they are thus very susceptible to external factors, which means that they compare themselves to Instagram unrealistic beauty standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

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The effects of social media on Instagram, that is, comments and likes, are the same and affect self-view and body image. It will examine how such social interactions would result in body image issues in the case of adolescents (Vogel et al., 2014). Addressing these practical and conceptual gaps is expected to contribute to the better understanding of the way exposure to ideal standards of body imagery on Instagram influences the self-perception and mental health of adolescents and also suggest the effective interventions.

## METHODS

The methodological approach utilised in the study falls under mixed-method research design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research as a comprehensive approach to discussing the connection between the use of Instagram and the perception of body image among adolescents. This method of design is justified by the fact that it will detect not only the measurable trends but also the

hidden subjective experiences that form the interaction of teenagers with social media.

To administer the quantitative aspect, the study will be sent out in a structured survey of a purposive sample of adolescents between 13 and 18 years old. The survey tool will be such that it should contain standardized questions and Likert scale queries that will measure three key variables including the patterns of Instagram use (frequency, time uses, and type of content with which one interacts), perception of body image and self-esteem levels. The acquired quantitative data will be modeled, and corresponding statistical methods, including correlation and regression analysis will be used to establish possible connections and predictive interactions between Instagram engagement and signs of body image dissatisfaction or self-esteem disturbances.

In addition to the quantitative data, the qualitative part of the study will imply the semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of participants of the survey. These interviews will go into more detail as to how the adolescents decipher and internalize the visual and social messages that they come across on Instagram. Particularly, the interviews will examine the manner in which the participants see idealised images, evaluate themselves against other people and feel emotional or psychological impacts that arise consequently. The qualitative inquiry will offer the context and the depth of meaning to the quantitative data, which cannot be represented in the survey data.

Triangulation of findings can be done using these two approaches since they complement each other and make the research more valid and reliable by blending empirical breadth with experiential depth. Combining statistical trends and personal stories, such a mixed-method allows a more comprehensive insight into the effects that social media tools, such as Instagram, have on adolescent body image and self-concept.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Prior to analyzing the particular results of this study, several steps of analysis were carried out in order to achieve the reliability and theoretical strength of the results. Descriptive statistics were used as the first step of data analysis with the purpose of describing the overall trends of the variables placement and display distribution of age, the time the participants spent on Instagram, body image anxiety levels, as well as social comparison rates, among the adolescents. Before the inferential analysis, the diagnostic actions were carried out to ensure that certain assumptions including normality, linearity, and the lack of multicollinearity were held true which in effect guaranteed the favorability of parametric methods. Afterward, Pearson correlation was used to examine the magnitude and the direction of the bivariate relationships between the Instagram use, social comparison, and the degree of the body image anxiety. This correlation procedure played a critical idea of establishing patterns that were significant in light of statistics but in accordance with what theory has already established in the previous studies. Multiple linear regression was performed to estimate the predictive abilities of the use and social comparison on Instagram of the anxiety of adolescent body image. This inferential model allowed the subtler interpretation of the role of behavioral factors (i.e., the amount of hours spent on the platform) and cognitive-emotional ones (i.e., upward comparison) in leading to psychological distress. In order to back up these numerical findings, qualitative data using semi-structured interviews was also conducted and provided depth of interpretation in that it will provide insight on how adolescents actually perceive and internalize visual information and social feedback on Instagram themselves. The combination of quantitative trends and qualitative stories enhances the validity of the results and enables a more extensive debate of the psychological effect of using

Instagram during youth. Compiling the statistical findings in a tabular form, it is possible to comment on the findings critically in relation to the existing theoretical and empirical studies.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Age (years)	16.0	1.5	13	19
Duration of Instagram Use (hours/day)	2.0	1.0	0.5	4.0
Body Image Anxiety Score (BICI)	55.0	10.0	20	80
Social Comparison Score (SCRS)	30.0	8.0	10	50

As it can be seen in the table above, the subjects are teenagers (their average age is 16 years; SD = 1.5 years; the youngest and oldest responders are 13 and 19 years old, respectively), and the time they spend on Instagram is rather high 2 hours per day (SD = 1.0; 0.5 and 4 hours). The mean body image anxiety score (BICI) was 55 (SD = 10.0; 20580), and it represented a moderate to a high level of anxiety, and a social comparison score (SCRS) was averagely 30 (SD = 8.0, 1050, a moderate tendency to compare oneself to others). The relatively high BICI-SCRS score variation would imply that not all people are similarly influenced by their exposure to social media social media, because the exposure might adversely affect most of them, including referrals to their body image in particular but also their social media activity in general, as they spend more time on Instagram and are prone to make comparisons with other Instagram users. These data provide initial indications of a potential relationship between Instagram use, body image anxiety, and social comparison that requires further analysis to explore more complex patterns of relationships.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations between Instagram Use, Body Image Anxiety, and Social Comparison

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Duration of Instagram Use</b>	<b>Body Image Anxiety Score</b>	<b>Social Comparison Score</b>
Duration of Instagram Use	1.00	0.40**	0.45**
Body Image Anxiety Score	0.40**	1.00	0.55**
Social Comparison Score	0.45**	0.55**	1.00

\*\*p < 0.01

The facts provided in the table show some important and theoretically relevant correlations that support the idea of the psychological consequences of Instagram use among adolescents. To start with, the relationship between the use of Instagram and body image anxiety is rather strong and positive ( $r = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which implies that the longer the people spend there, the more anxious they become about their image. This falls in line with the literature that has been established so far, claiming that being exposed to the perfect images of people and appearance-oriented content in social media might lead to a twisted perception of oneself and dissatisfaction with the own body. Second, social comparison tendencies also have a strong relationship with Instagram use ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and the association suggests that increased time spent on Instagram, people are also likely to engage in more frequent social comparisons, especially based on appearance. This argues in favor of the notion that Instagram is an ideal platform to gage upward social

comparison due to the visual-based platform and exposure to curated lifestyles made possible by the algorithm. Most conspicuously, social comparison and body anxiety are strongly correlated in a positive way ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which means that individuals who simply compare themselves with others tend to feel more anxious about the appearance. In combination, these results show a possible chain of mediation: Instagram use leads to heightened social comparison, and this, in turn, causes greater body image anxiety in adolescents using social media platforms heavily, which indicates a key requirement of critical media literacy and psychological treatment in this group of adolescents.

Table 3. Linear Regression Results for Predicting Body Image Anxiety

Variable	Coefficient ( $\beta$ / $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t	p-value
(Constant)	15.5	3.2	4.84	<0.001
Duration of Instagram Use	0.30	0.08	3.75	<0.001
Social Comparison Score	0.50	0.07	7.14	<0.001

According to the statistics depicted in the table above, two predictors of body image anxiety are statistically significant, but the consequences of the two findings are not the same to the extent of quantity and theoretical meaning. The value of the parameter estimate of  $\beta = 0.30$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) implies that one extra episode of active time is associated with the body image anxiety by 0.30 units per every hour at Instagram. Even though this has been an effect that is significant at a statistical significance, the smallish coefficient shows that time might not be the strongest predictor of anxiety per se and that quantity of time is simply a limiting metric overlooking content or context of use. More conspicuous is the coefficient 0.50 ( $p < 0.001$ ) of social comparison, as the coefficient depicts a greater level of influence on body image anxiety; one unit increment in the comparison tendency level causes 0.50 unit increment in the level of anxiety. This greater effect implies that the way people psychologically process content, specifically upward comparison, has an effect compared to amount of time people spend online. Thus, although both the variables demonstrate considerable predictive value on the measure of anxiety, the data is important to provide critical emphasis on the power of internal cognitive processes at the cost of sheer quantity of behavior.

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.35$ , somewhere that 35 per cent of body image anxiety variance can be defined by this regression model, namely duration of Instagram utilization and social comparison.

As the conclusion drawn using these quantitative findings, it appears that both the use of Instagram and the social comparison were significant predictors of the levels of body image anxiety and that social comparison was the primary mediator of the association.

The qualitative interviews results provide deep details about the experiences and the perceptions of the teenagers towards using Instagram and the effects it has on their body image. This information supplements the quantitative study by disclosing individual and subjective features of the examined phenomenon.

### Experiences and Feelings When Using Instagram

Respondent A *"When I post photos on Instagram, I feel pressure to make them perfect. If my photos don't get a lot of likes, I feel like I'm not good enough."*

Respondent B *"I felt happy when I got a lot of positive comments, but also felt dissatisfied with my own appearance after seeing photos of other people who looked better."*

Respondents reported pressure to appear perfect on Instagram. This relates to quantitative findings showing that duration of Instagram use is positively associated with body image anxiety. The pressure to get likes and positive comments can exacerbate feelings of dissatisfaction with one's appearance.

### **Perceptions of Beauty Standards on Instagram**

Respondent C *"Instagram's beauty standards are very unrealistic. I often feel inferior because I can't meet these expectations."*

Respondent D *"Many of us feel forced to diet or exercise harder just to look like an Instagram influencer. It makes me feel dissatisfied with myself."*

The beauty norms that respondents see in Instagram are understood by them as unrealistic, and they feel the pressure to be similar to those ideals. Such qualitative understanding is consistent with the quantitative results which reveal the close connection between the aspects of social comparison and body image anxiety. In particular, where one makes upward comparisons (where they compare themselves with carefully selected; and in many cases filtered images of beauty), people may feel more anxious about their appearance. Such fear is probably connected to the gap between how they look in reality and the ideal images that they view on the internet. Assimilation of these standards may result in some chronic feeling of failure, which strengthens negative self-judgments and the dissatisfaction with the body even more. Collectively, these discoveries point at the psychological burden of exposure to social media, especially in cases where the latter results in comparison of the former with the idealised work that does not depict everyday life.

### **The Impact of Instagram Use on Body Image**

Respondent E *"After seeing other people's photos on Instagram, I often felt insecure. I felt like I couldn't achieve the same look."*

Respondent F *"I've tried various crash diets to get the body I saw on Instagram. It was very tiring and unhealthy."*

These experiences illustrate the significant negative impact that Instagram use can have on individuals' body image. Respondents reported feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction with their physical appearance, often triggered by exposure to idealized images on the platform. Some even expressed being compelled to take extreme measures, such as adopting strict dieting behaviors, in an attempt to align their appearance with the perceived standards they encountered online. These qualitative insights align with the quantitative findings of the study, which demonstrate a positive and significant relationship between social comparison on Instagram and body image anxiety. The consistency between self-reported experiences and statistical data strengthens the conclusion that social media, particularly Instagram, plays a critical role in shaping body-related concerns through mechanisms of comparison and internalization of unrealistic beauty norms.

### **A Look at Positive Content on Instagram**

Respondent G *"Content from accounts that promote positive body image really helps me feel better about myself. They provide a different, healthier perspective on appearance."*

Respondent H *"While there is positive content, I feel like there is far more content that promotes extremely high standards of beauty. This often makes me feel worse about myself."*

According to the respondents, positive Instagram posts, e.g., motivational posts, body positivity messages, or supportive comments, may serve as emotional support and, in certain individuals, raise self-esteem. This sort of material was valued in that

it led to a feeling of relatedness and affirmation, specifically when it captured experiences that were similarly experienced or promoted self-approval. Nevertheless, several participants also mentioned that the positive contribution made by these influences was not enough to be balanced by the immense body of literature and media presenting unrealistic, idealized and unrealistic beauty standards. This impression is correlated with the qualitative results, which state that although not all the programming on Instagram can lead to the development of a healthier image of the body, the constant, pervasive nature of highly edited, filtered, and often unattainable beauty comports to users even more and that impact is quite severe. Consequently, psychological advantages of positive content are quite frequently dominated by the internal stresses that follow the comparison to the idealized images and lack of comfort. This presents a significant unequal distribution of the kind of visual stories witnessed in social media where perfection-oriented stories have taken flight and are pointing negatively to the body image of users who are consumers of such posts.

### **Platform Design and Social Comparison as sources of anxiety on body image among adolescents**

Our study results enrich our knowledge on the role of Instagram use in body image anxiety development in adolescents by prioritizing the mediating aspect of the role of social comparison. Instead of merely relying on the number of screen time or platform usage, findings redirect the topic to how and on what basis adolescents utilize the platform and how they interact with the design features of the platform that influences the interactions that occur. This concurs with emerging evidence implying visual-focused social platforms such as Instagram foster conditions within which appearance-based comparison appears and is usually emotionally laden (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

More importantly, the findings substantiate the assumption that the adolescent users do not present themselves as whipping posts of even the media products. Instead, the central focus is their internal, cognitive and emotional processes, especially the disposition to upward comparison, which makes body image anxiety one of their most critical experiences. This can be adequately explained by the social comparison theory developed by Festinger (1954): knowing that they are in some way inferior to others who are regarded to be better, individuals engage in negative self-evaluations. On Instagram, where computers design follows an algorithmic approach to perfected and typically filtered photographs, these comparisons almost seem inevitable. This also compounds psychological insecurity in adolescents which are still undergoing the formation of their identity and self (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2023).

Moreover, in this study, it has been identified that not every Instagram content is as harmful. According to the interview data, although there are some positive body-affirming information available and capable of compensating negative influences, it is overwhelmingly imbalanced by narrow beauty ideal-promoting information. This is indicative of the argument presented by Cohen et al. (2017) that social media presents an opportunity to provide a healthy environment of identity development, in the event that social media platforms and feed algorithms properly consider diversity and authenticity over unrealistic beauty ideals. This potential is guttered by the supremacy of filtered and idealized images, which encloses societal standards of beauty to an extreme that is normalized and makes a psychological trap of self-worth based on external approval.

In addition, the qualitative data reveal one theme that repeats itself: the emotional reliance on feedbacks (likes, comments) to buttress one in appearance. This is consistent with what Perloff (2014) asserts as the development of appearance-

contingent self-worth in the context of social media in which adolescents get socialized to consider the digital acceptance as identical with personal worth. This performance-posting behavior seems even compounded by the interface of Instagram, which supports and prompts the distribution and the reception of the post with the greatest appearance. In this way, it might be argued that the technological design of Instagram is not neutral to how users behave, but it acts *ex ante* to influence and encourage user behaviors that could be harmful to teenage mental health (Romero Saletti & Van den Broucke, 2024; Orben et al., 2024).

The other dimension that should not be neglected is the gendered aspect of the body image anxiety that the present study recognizes without deeply disaggregating the data. According to the previous research (Griffiths et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014), although women and teens particularly are usually more influenced by the thin-ideal images, boys are currently also subjected to muscularity ideals depicting self-perception. These norms on the underlying content and body ideals are relevant since they show that both groups receive pressure but it is not on the same basis; thus interventions on the platforms should be gender-sensitive and should not use the one model fits all approach.

Notably, this study problematizes the naive story telling that time invested online is the key risk factor of body image issue. Alpha and beta coefficients, used in the regression analysis, reveal that social comparison had a greater effect than the time of exposure, and thus, it appears that the psychological involvement, the way adolescents perceive and react to content, is more important than the screen time (Boers et al., 2019). This is in line with the research findings of Vogel et al. (2014) that it is not only diffusion of social media but the extreme social comparison that is related to subsequent negative self-evaluations. The implication is, of course, that media literacy should not aspire to achieve minimal media consumption only but to develop a critical consciousness and emotional/mental toughness within an online environment.

The outcome also questions the greater formations that exist in societies and support judgement of value by appearance. Here, the objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is applicable because this theory provides an explanation of how frequent exposure to idealized bodies has made individuals (women or girls) adopt an observer view of their bodies in what has been referred to as self-objectification. This theoretical framework can be proved through the data collected during the interviews in this study: some of the participants confessed to changing their outlook or to adjusting their behavior according to the way they think they might be viewed on Instagram. This supports the necessity to introduce systemic interventions within the platform, but also at the school, family, and peer culture levels that support or shift such norms of objectification (Boer et al., 2020).

Lastly, as much as the research enlightens the important mechanisms in development of body image anxiety, it uncovers possible ways through which body image anxiety can be prevented. Those who read accounts of positive body images and those who connected with those instilling authenticity indicated reduced distress, correlating with a study by Cohen et al. (2017) on the same subject concerning the place of body positivity as a protection. Nevertheless, the fact that such content is not as widespread as the mainstream beauty culture diminishes its effect. There is an urgent need, the tone of policies and strategies of content curation of the platforms should be shifted toward prioritizing inclusive and positive representations, and this fundamental change cannot be done on an individual user level, but requires both institutionalized efforts of both tech companies and policymakers.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the present research critically emphasize the fact that there is a strong correlation between Instagram use and the increased body image anxiety in adolescents and social comparison is a critical mediating factor here. The quantitative findings prove not only that the long-lasting use of Instagram is linked with a higher level of feeling anxiety, but also that the degree of social comparisons, which are frequently compared with idealized, edited images, is the direct contributor to the feeling of anxiety. Notably, this statistical association is further supported by the qualitative data that depict the inner conflicts that adolescents are forced to live with as they state that they are coerced to Live up to ideals of beauty that are unrealistic, hence losing their self-worth and self-confidence. Such stratification of approach shows that Instagram, as a possible medium of self-discovery and belonging, turns out to be the form of mental defenselessness in most cases ruled by limited beauty ideals. The occasional presence of body-positive content, while offering some emotional reprieve, is insufficient to counterbalance the overwhelming prevalence of idealized imagery. Critically, these findings reflect a broader sociocultural failure to equip young users with the media literacy needed to navigate the digital landscape without internalizing harmful norms. Therefore, the study calls for more than superficial interventions: it demands robust, systemic efforts in the form of media literacy education, algorithmic regulation of harmful content, and active promotion of diverse, inclusive representations. Only through such multidimensional strategies can we hope to mitigate the detrimental mental health consequences that disproportionately affect adolescent users in the social media age.

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