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Social media and body image in adults: A theoretical exploration of psychological mechanisms

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Abstract

In the digital age, social media increasingly shapes how adults perceive, experience, and evaluate their own bodies. This article explores the psychological effects of intensive use of social platforms on body image, through a theoretical analysis based on three key processes: social comparison, impression management, and self-objectification.

The first section examines recent empirical findings highlighting a correlation between frequent exposure to aesthetic content on social media and the deterioration of body image in adults. Body image across its perceptual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions appears to be undermined by the pervasive presence of unrealistic physical standards, often associated with thinness, youth, and perfection.

The second section draws on three major theoretical models to understand the underlying psychological mechanisms. Upward social comparison, intensified by streams of idealized images, fosters body dissatisfaction. Online self-presentation, largely driven by impression management, encourages the curation of a self-image that may diverge significantly from lived experience. Finally, objectification theory helps explain how individuals internalize an external gaze upon their bodies, to the detriment of an embodied and authentic relationship with themselves.

The third section emphasizes that these effects vary according to individual factors. Gender shapes the type and intensity of aesthetic pressure experienced, with women more frequently subjected to objectification, while men are increasingly influenced by ideals of muscularity and masculinity. Age also modulates sensitivity to these dynamics, with young adults being particularly vulnerable. Moreover, the frequency and nature of social media use (whether passive or active) emerge as key determinants of the magnitude of these effects.

In conclusion, the article highlights the need to consider social media not merely as communication tools, but as powerful aesthetic norm-setting systems that deeply influence identity formation and body perception. It calls for a critical and multidimensional approach (integrating psychological, social, and technological perspectives) to better understand and mitigate the harmful effects of prolonged exposure to online visual norms.

Keywords: Social media; Body image; Social comparison; Self-objectification

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has taken on a central role in individuals' daily lives, profoundly transforming modes of communication, self-expression, and relationships with the body. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are no longer limited to simple information exchange or social connection; they have become spaces where specific aesthetic norms are imposed, and where self-visibility is largely based on physical appearance. These highly visual and

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interactive digital environments expose users to carefully curated and edited images, fostering a context of constant social evaluation, comparison, and self-presentation.

While the effects of social media on adolescents have been extensively studied, its impact on adults remains underexplored, despite the fact that the psychological dynamics at play do not end with adolescence. Adults whether young, middle-aged, or older also navigate a digital world that promotes certain body types and aesthetic performances. Body image, defined as how an individual perceives, feels, and thinks about their own body, remains a psychologically sensitive construct influenced by social norms, even in adulthood.

In this context, it becomes essential to investigate how intensive social media use affects adults' body image. Through what specific psychological mechanisms do these effects operate, and to what extent do these mechanisms vary according to gender, age, or frequency of platform use? In other words, how can we understand the impact of social media on body perception and experience in adults through key theoretical models from social and clinical psychology?

This article aims to address these questions through a three-part approach. The first section reviews recent scientific literature on the effects of social media use on adult body image. The second section draws on three key psychological frameworks social comparison, impression management, and objectification theory to analyze the underlying mechanisms. Finally, the third section explores individual differences based on gender, age, and intensity of use, offering a nuanced and differentiated understanding of these dynamics.

2. The Influence of social media on Body Image Identification

2.1. Body Image

Rosen (1990) defines body image as an individual's perception of their physical appearance, as well as the impact of these perceptions and attitudes on personal behaviors and emotional responses. Cash (2002) offers a broader conceptualization that includes attitudinal body image, which encompasses the full range of thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors that individuals exhibit toward their own bodies. This contrasts with what is termed perceptual body image, which pertains to the objective, physical perception of the body such as size, shape, and weight.

Drawing on cognitive and behavioral research, Cash (2002) developed a model structured around two main dimensions: investment and evaluation/affect.

- Investment refers to the subjective importance an individual places on their physical appearance. This is expressed through beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. A person highly invested in their body image may define their self-worth based largely on appearance, which can in turn influence their decisions and actions. These dynamics closely relate to the concept of self-objectification, defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) as "a phenomenon in which individuals assess their self-worth in terms of how they believe they appear to others."
- Evaluation, on the other hand, pertains to the judgments (positive or negative) that a person makes about their own body. Negative evaluations reflect a negative body image, characterized by "a set of dissatisfactions and concerns related to physical appearance, weight, or body shape, which can impact various areas of personal and social life to varying degrees" (Thompson, 1999).

The literature has often treated body dissatisfaction as the primary component of negative body image, a view that has been critiqued by Cash and colleagues (2004). They argue that dissatisfaction should instead be understood as "the discrepancy between an individual's perceived current body image and their ideal body image" (Cash, 2004). Body dissatisfaction tends to increase as the gap between the perceived and ideal body image widens.

2.2. Toward a Positive Body Image: A New Approach.

Tylka (2018) offers a perspective that differs from the traditional focus on negative body image. She introduces the concept of positive body image, which she defines as "a set of favorable attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors toward one's own body" (Tylka, 2018). Crucially, she emphasizes that positive and negative body image are not opposite ends of a single continuum, but rather two distinct, independent, and complementary constructs.

According to Tylka, positive body image encompasses several interrelated dimensions:

- Body appreciation: Recognizing and valuing the beauty and capabilities of one's body.

- Acceptance and love: Embracing one's body as it is, without trying to modify it to fit external ideals or societal standards.
- Broad conceptualization of beauty: Redefining beauty beyond media-driven standards, and appreciating the diversity of body shapes and sizes.
- Appropriate investment in appearance: Caring about one's appearance without falling into obsession or excessive control.
- Inner positivity: Cultivating a positive mental and emotional attitude toward oneself.
- Protective filtering of information: Critically analyzing media messages to preserve and protect one's body image.

These factors contribute to the development of a positive, flexible, and resilient body image, shaped in part by an individual's social identities and cultural context.

Moreover, research has shown that body appreciation in women is positively associated with self-esteem, self-compassion, intuitive eating, and proactive coping strategies. Conversely, it is negatively associated with body dissatisfaction, internalization of beauty ideals, and symptoms of disordered eating behaviors (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

While negative body image has been the primary focus of scientific inquiry for several decades, Tylka (2018) advocates for a shift in emphasis toward exploring the protective role of positive body image. She argues that instead of concentrating solely on risk factors and the prevention of negative outcomes, research should also aim to understand the conditions that foster a healthy and supportive body image.

In this perspective, identifying the individual, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the development of positive body image and determining actionable levers to reinforce it becomes an essential goal for both research and intervention.

3. Recent Studies on Adults: An Underexplored Issue

The pandemic context forces individuals to confront particular conditions. Being in a vulnerable situation and facing a Most studies examining the impact of social media on body image have focused primarily on adolescents, paying relatively little attention to the adult population. However, recent research indicates that adults are not immune to the aesthetic norms promoted online.

Psychological mechanisms such as social comparison, self-objectification, and the pursuit of external validation continue to influence individuals well into adulthood. These studies highlight those even adults whose identities are generally more stable and consolidated remain susceptible to the aesthetic pressures amplified by digital media.

Despite developmental maturity, adults still engage with online environments that reinforce narrow beauty standards, suggesting the need for further investigation into how these dynamics affect body image across the lifespan

3.1. Instagram at the Heart of the Most Influential Platforms

Current research shows that certain visually oriented platforms amplify the effects of social media on body image. Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook in particular encourage social comparison through idealized and often retouched images. According to Holland and Tiggemann (2017), users who consume this content passively (without interacting) are more exposed to negative effects, especially regarding body image (Holland, 2017).

Many studies have focused on Instagram's role in the development of body image-related disorders. A PsycInfo database search using the keywords "body image" and "Instagram" identified 50 studies, compared to 65 for the social network Facebook. When adding the keyword "women," the number of Instagram-related studies decreases to 33. Among these, several show that exposure to content on Instagram (understood here as passive use of the platform) can have both positive and negative effects on body dissatisfaction (Cohen, 2019). According to Omnicore Agency (2020), 56% of Instagram users are women, and 30% of users are aged 18 to 24, while 35% are between 25 and 34 years old (Omnicore Agency, 2020).

The effects of active Instagram use defined here as behaviors involving the creation and sharing of content, such as posting selfies are less explored than those of passive use. For example, a 2021 PsycInfo search using the keywords "Instagram," "body image," and "exposure" identified 28 studies, which drops to 12 when "exposure" is replaced by

"selfie posting." Some research suggests that posting selfies may be associated with greater body satisfaction: the more selfies an individual posts, the more likely they are to feel satisfied with their appearance. Conversely, the use of filters applied to posted selfies appears linked to aesthetic concerns and social comparison behaviors (Chang, 2019).

3.2. Impacts According to Gender, Age, and Life Context

The effects of social media on adults' body image vary significantly depending on gender, age, and life circumstances. Among adult women (particularly those aged 30 to 50) content promoting idealized body standards can exert intense aesthetic pressure. The glorification of the "perfect post-pregnancy body," the valorization of eternal youth, and the overexposure of flawless female figures all contribute to the construction of an unattainable ideal. This implicit discourse, often propagated by influencers or celebrities, tends to erase the physiological and emotional realities of this age group and fosters feelings of inadequacy among many women. The pursuit of a body conforming to these perceived norms may lead to chronic body dissatisfaction, which is further exacerbated by filters, retouching, and ubiquitous "before-and-after" images on platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Among adult men, the impact manifests differently but with comparable intensity. Content emphasizing physical performance, muscularity, and traits associated with hegemonic masculinity serve as silent but powerful reference points. The notion that a "successful" man must be strong, disciplined, youthful in appearance, and high-performing across all domains (work, sports, and beyond) creates a demanding norm often disconnected from everyday realities. A study by Tylka et al. (2021) highlighted this phenomenon: for men aged 30 to 55, regular exposure to idealized male role models on Instagram is strongly correlated with increased body dissatisfaction, even among those who previously showed no signs of body image disturbance (Tylka, 2021). This finding demonstrates that vulnerability to imposed visual norms is not limited to youth or individuals already struggling with appearance but can extend to an adult population that is theoretically more psychologically stable.

Life context also plays a key role in this vulnerability. Events such as divorce, parenthood, career change, or the onset of bodily aging can heighten sensitivity to these digital representations. During these transitional or personally challenging periods, adults may experience an increased need for social validation or a tendency to compare themselves to others, particularly via social media. The digital mirror thus becomes a silent yet constant tool for measuring self-worth (Tylka, 2015). Loss of confidence, redefinition of social roles, and the feeling of no longer "fitting" implicit societal expectations further amplify this psychological exposure.

Therefore, social media do not create body dissatisfaction alone but act as a powerful amplifier of preexisting insecurities, especially during times of change or identity vulnerability.

4. Manifestation: Body Dissatisfaction and Social Comparison

4.1. Adults Facing Body Dissatisfaction

Throughout their existence, human beings have been confronted with various events, some simple and without major Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018), analyzing 600 "fitspiration" images posted on Instagram depicting women aged 25 to 45, highlighted a predominance of representations featuring slim and toned women, often accompanied by objectifying elements. The authors note that while these images may be perceived as inspiring, they can also have negative effects on female viewers' body image. Their study reveals a significant correlation between intensive social media use and increased body dissatisfaction among adults living in Australia, the United States, and Europe (Tiggemann, 2018).

Similarly, a survey conducted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) found that adult women spending more time on Facebook were more likely to experience dissatisfaction with their appearance, particularly when comparing themselves to friends or influencers. These effects were not limited to thinness but extended to youthfulness, skin, hair, and overall appearance. Among men, recent studies highlight increasing pressure related to muscularity, the V-shaped torso, and physical masculinity (Fardouly, 2016).

4.2. Social Comparison Among Adults

4.2.1. Social Comparison Among Women: The Pursuit of Unattainable Ideals

Social comparison is a fundamental psychological mechanism through which individuals evaluate their own characteristics by comparing themselves to others. In the age of social media, this process is amplified by constant exposure to carefully curated and edited images, creating a distorted mirror of reality.

Among women, particularly young adults, the tendency to engage in upward social comparisons (i.e., comparing oneself to those perceived as superior) is especially pronounced. One study found that Facebook use was associated with a more negative mood and increased body dissatisfaction among women, especially those with a strong propensity for appearance-related comparison (Fardouly, 2015).

Instagram, a visually-focused platform, further exacerbates this phenomenon. Another study showed that women who spent time on Instagram reported more appearance comparisons, decreased body satisfaction, and more negative mood compared to those using Facebook or gaming apps. This trend is particularly concerning among young women, as it can lead to disordered eating behaviors and low self-esteem (Brown, 2016).

4.2.2. Social Comparison Among Men: Pressure to Attain Ideals of Masculinity

Among men, social comparison is also prevalent but manifests differently. Men are frequently exposed to ideals of masculinity and muscularity, which may lead to comparisons with idealized male body models. One study demonstrated that exposure to images of idealized male bodies on social media was associated with increased body dissatisfaction among men aged 30 to 55, even among those without preexisting body image disturbances (Shingleton, 2015).

Moreover, research conducted by the University of South Australia identified that excessive attention to "likes" and comments on body-related posts could indicate an obsession with muscularity, potentially leading to muscle dysphoria. This disorder, a form of body dysmorphia, involves an excessive preoccupation with not being sufficiently muscular or lean, which can result in extreme dieting, excessive exercise, and social withdrawal (Donnarumma, 2024).

Although social comparison on social media is a natural process, it can have detrimental effects on individuals' body image and mental health. Raising user awareness about these effects and promoting healthy online behaviors is crucial. Interventions should aim to enhance self-esteem, encourage body diversity, and foster a more mindful and balanced use of social media platforms.

Body dissatisfaction, while common in Western societies, represents a concerning marker for emerging eating disorders. This dissatisfaction can progress to more severe pathologies such as eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and self-objectification. These conditions have profound implications for individuals' mental and physical health, particularly among young women.

5. Associated Disorders

5.1. Eating Disorders: Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge Eating Disorder

Eating disorders (EDs) encompass a group of psychiatric conditions characterized by a disturbed relationship with food, body weight, and body image. Among the most studied are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Although these disorders may share certain clinical features, they differ in their underlying mechanisms, symptoms, and physical and psychological consequences. Predominantly observed in females, they increasingly affect males as well. EDs often emerge during adolescence or early adulthood but can manifest at any age. Their etiology is multifactorial, resulting from a complex interplay of biological, psychological, familial, social, and cultural factors.

Anorexia nervosa is defined by a voluntary and severe restriction of food intake driven by an intense fear of weight gain and a distorted body image. Individuals frequently perceive themselves as overweight despite often extreme thinness. This restriction is commonly accompanied by compensatory behaviors such as excessive exercise, prolonged fasting, or laxative misuse. Physiologically, anorexia can have severe consequences including amenorrhea, osteoporosis, hypotension, cardiac abnormalities, and in extreme cases, death. Psychologically, anorexia is often associated with pronounced perfectionism, a heightened need for control, and low self-esteem (Association, 2022). Prognosis depends on multiple factors, including early intervention, presence of psychiatric comorbidities, and family support.

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by recurrent episodes of rapid overeating accompanied by a sense of loss of control. These episodes are followed by inappropriate compensatory behaviors intended to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting, laxative abuse, or fasting. Unlike anorexia, individuals with bulimia typically maintain a normal weight, which can delay diagnosis. Feelings of shame and guilt following binge episodes often lead to social isolation and significant psychological distress. Physical complications include electrolyte imbalances, dental erosion, gastrointestinal disorders, and metabolic disturbances. Bulimia is frequently comorbid with mood disorders, anxiety, and histories of trauma.

Binge eating disorder is marked by episodes of excessive food consumption similar to those in bulimia but without compensatory behaviors. Affected individuals consume large amounts of food rapidly, often without hunger, experiencing loss of control and marked emotional distress. This disorder commonly results in overweight or obesity, accompanied by associated medical risks such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and musculoskeletal problems (Treasure, 2020). Psychologically, binge eating disorder is often linked to low self-esteem, a history of restrictive dieting, and difficulties in emotion regulation. Diagnosis is often delayed due to limited awareness and social normalization of overeating.

Treatment of eating disorders relies on a multidisciplinary approach involving physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, nutritionists, and occasionally social workers. Psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), has demonstrated efficacy, as have family-based and interpersonal approaches. In severe cases, hospitalization may be necessary, especially for anorexic patients at risk of medical complications. Therapeutic goals include restoring healthy body weight, re-establishing a healthy relationship with food, correcting cognitive distortions, and enhancing self-esteem. Prevention is equally critical, focusing on body image education, combating aesthetic stereotypes propagated by the media, and early detection of warning signs.

In summary, eating disorders are complex pathologies situated at the intersection of body and mind, requiring sustained clinical and societal attention. Their understanding and management constitute a major public health challenge, intersecting contemporary medical, psychological, and cultural concerns.

5.2. Body Dysmorphia: An Obsession with Imagined Flaws

Body dysmorphia, also known as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), is a psychiatric condition that remains largely misunderstood by the general public, despite its profound impact on affected individuals' quality of life. This disorder is characterized by an excessive and obsessive preoccupation with one or more perceived bodily defects, which are either nonexistent or minimal but are judged by the individual as deformed, unacceptable, or even grotesque. These concerns can involve any part of the body, although the face (nose, skin, eyes, jaw) is commonly targeted. Unlike a simple insecurity, body dysmorphia is intrusive, occupying several hours of the individual's daily mental focus and significantly impairing social, occupational, and emotional functioning (Phillips, 2005).

Individuals with BDD often engage in repetitive behaviors known as checking or camouflaging rituals. These may include compulsive mirror checking, excessive use of makeup, wearing loose clothing to hide the body, or incessantly seeking external validation. Some systematically avoid social situations out of fear of being judged or mocked for their appearance, even in the absence of external criticism. In extreme cases, patients may resort to cosmetic surgery in an attempt to "correct" the perceived flaw, though this rarely alleviates their distress. Instead, such interventions can exacerbate the obsession or shift it to another body part, illustrating the chronic and evolving nature of the disorder (Veale, 2004).

BDD is officially classified as a psychiatric disorder in the DSM-5, grouped within obsessive-compulsive and related disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It shares several features with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), including intrusive thoughts, rumination, and compulsions. Prevalence in the general population is estimated between 1.7% and 2.4%, but is notably higher in specific groups such as dermatology or cosmetic surgery patients, and adolescents (Bjornsson, 2013). BDD affects men and women equally, although the areas of concern may differ by gender. In men, muscle dysmorphia (or "bigorexia") represents a specific form of BDD, centered on an obsession with not being sufficiently muscular or virile, often leading to excessive weight training, high-protein diets, and sometimes anabolic steroid use.

The causes of BDD are multifactorial and intertwined. Biological factors include a neurobiological vulnerability shared with other obsessive disorders. Psychological factors such as a perfectionistic cognitive style, low self-esteem, and early experiences of teasing or rejection related to appearance play a major role. Sociocultural influences are also significant: the pervasive presence of unrealistic aesthetic standards propagated by the media, social networks, and the beauty industry fosters constant, often unfavorable comparisons. Repeated exposure to idealized, edited, or filtered images can generate profound feelings of inadequacy in vulnerable individuals, triggering or worsening symptoms (Fardouly et al., 2016).

Management of BDD is complex, as many patients do not seek help for their psychiatric symptoms but rather for somatic or aesthetic concerns. Awareness of the pathological nature of their preoccupations is often limited. Psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), constitutes the first-line treatment, aiming to identify dysfunctional thoughts, reduce checking behaviors, and help patients develop a more realistic relationship with their body. Studies

have demonstrated that CBT effectively reduces symptoms and improves quality of life (Rosen, 1995). In moderate to severe cases, pharmacological treatment with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), such as fluoxetine or sertraline, may be prescribed. These medications have shown efficacy in alleviating associated obsessions and compulsions (Phillips, 2008).

It is also crucial to raise awareness among healthcare professionals, especially general practitioners, dermatologists, and cosmetic surgeons, so they can recognize signs of BDD and refer patients to appropriate care. Cosmetic surgery performed on undiagnosed BDD patients can not only be ineffective but may also worsen the disorder. On a societal level, early education about body image, promotion of body diversity, and stricter regulation of advertising and digital filters can help prevent the development of this disorder.

In conclusion, body dysmorphia is often mistaken for mere vanity or excessive grooming, whereas it is a serious, distressing psychiatric disorder. Early recognition, screening, and appropriate psychotherapeutic intervention are essential to help affected individuals develop a healthier relationship with their body image and sustainably improve their psychological well-being.

5.3. Self-Objectification: Perceiving Oneself as an Object to Be Viewed

Self-objectification is a complex psychological phenomenon that occurs when individuals come to view themselves primarily through the lens of their physical appearance, as if they were objects meant to be observed, evaluated, and judged. This dynamic is based on the internalization of external gazes and social aesthetic standards, to the extent that the individual adopts a posture of constant self-surveillance, scrutinizing their own body not for what it is or what it enables them to do, but for what it conveys to others. This phenomenon particularly affects women, in a context where female bodies have historically and culturally been more sexualized, objectified, and exposed than male bodies. However, men are not immune, especially in a contemporary environment saturated with images and unattainable beauty standards.

Self-objectification stems from a process of external objectification, conceptualized by Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, which posits that bodies (especially women's) are regularly treated as visual objects in media, advertising, social interactions, and dominant cultural norms (Fredrickson B. L.). When repeatedly exposed to messages that value appearance as a central criterion of social worth, it becomes almost inevitable that individuals internalize this view. They then adopt an observer's perspective on their own bodies, focusing excessively on outward appearance rather than the lived bodily experience from within. This dissociation between the lived body and the observed body generates a form of constant bodily vigilance, leading to stress, body shame, and diminished self-esteem.

The psychological consequences of self-objectification are numerous and well documented. Individuals with high levels of self-objectification are more likely to suffer from eating disorders, depression, social anxiety, and body dysmorphia. They may also experience decreased cognitive performance on complex tasks, particularly in academic or professional contexts, due to the cognitive load imposed by ongoing management of body image. For example, a study by Fredrickson and colleagues (1998) demonstrated that women subjected to an objectifying situation (such as trying on a swimsuit in a laboratory-like environment) exhibited significant declines in math performance compared to those wearing a loose sweater. This study highlights how self-objectification can consume valuable cognitive resources and impair concentration and task performance (Fredrickson B. L., 1997).

Self-objectification also manifests in everyday behaviors: body monitoring (checking), frequent selfie-taking, use of digital filters, and seeking approval through "likes" on social media. These practices fuel a vicious cycle: the more individuals expose themselves in hopes of validation, the more dependent they become on others' gazes and vulnerable to criticism, social comparison, and body dissatisfaction. Visual social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are particularly problematic in this regard, as they encourage an aesthetic staging of the self often reduced to a single image, a frozen, edited moment frequently disconnected from lived reality.

Self-objectification is not solely an individual issue but is embedded within broader social structures, where individuals' value (especially women's) is too often contingent on conformity to dominant beauty ideals. This constant aesthetic pressure limits subjective bodily experience, reduces bodily autonomy, and contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. By encouraging individuals to focus their psychic energy on appearance rather than skills, creativity, or aspirations, self-objectification acts as an invisible barrier to personal and social emancipation. It is not merely individual distress but a socially constructed form of bodily alienation.

Therapeutic approaches, particularly those derived from cognitive-behavioral therapy and critical media literacy, have been developed to help individuals distance themselves from the objectifying gaze. These approaches aim to strengthen self-esteem based on internal criteria, emphasize the body's functions over its appearance, and cultivate a more embodied bodily awareness. The goal is to learn to inhabit one's body rather than observe it to live through it rather than for what it displays. Such a revalorization of the lived body is essential not only for mental health but also for autonomy and personal freedom.

Thus, self-objectification is a psychological, cultural, and political issue. It challenges us to reflect on how bodies are viewed, evaluated, and regulated in contemporary societies, and on the subtle power mechanisms shaping our relationship with ourselves. To build a fairer and more inclusive society, it is fundamental to question dominant aesthetic norms and promote a body culture grounded in acceptance, diversity, and respect for subjective experience.

5.4. Contributory Factors: Perfectionism, Societal Pressure, and Media Influence

Body image disturbances and related behaviors (such as eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and self-objectification) do not emerge in a vacuum. They arise within a complex network of psychological, social, and cultural factors, among which perfectionism, societal pressure, and media influence play central roles. Though distinct, these three elements often interact synergistically, fostering an internal climate of constant comparison, validation seeking, and chronic dissatisfaction. At the individual level, they act as silent catalysts, subtly shaping how a person evaluates their body, appearance, and, by extension, their self-worth.

Maladaptive perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by the pursuit of unrealistic standards of performance or appearance and an excessively critical self-evaluation. When applied to body image, it becomes particularly destructive. A perfectionistic individual may feel compelled to conform exactly to an idealized image of beauty, yet never fully succeed, fueling an endless cycle of frustration, guilt, and compensatory behaviors. This form of perfectionism is often linked to a deep-seated feeling of never being "good enough," which may originate in childhood, especially within highly demanding or invalidating family environments. It is frequently accompanied by mental rumination, constant social comparisons, and low tolerance for imperfection, including bodily imperfections. Research demonstrates a strong association between perfectionism (especially in its concern over errors and social judgment) and eating disorders as well as negative body image (Flett, 2002).

Simultaneously, societal pressure exerts a normative force that urges individuals to conform to dominant standards of beauty, thinness, or masculinity. This pressure extends beyond the media to daily interactions within families, schools, workplaces, and social networks. It manifests through seemingly innocuous remarks, injunctions to lose weight, stay young, or be "presentable," as well as through the lack of diverse and inclusive representations of bodies in public spaces. This pressure is particularly potent because it is internalized from an early age. It shapes the ideals to which individuals aspire and reinforces the centrality of appearance as a measure of personal worth. Although often unconscious, this internalization reinforces tendencies toward self-objectification, unfavorable social comparisons, and harsh self-judgment based on externally imposed criteria.

The media serve as amplifiers in this system. Both traditional media (television, advertising, cinema) and digital media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) contribute massively to disseminating stereotyped, filtered, and retouched body images that are often disconnected from reality. They promote highly restrictive aesthetic norms that valorize certain body shapes, skin tones, and hair textures, while rendering others invisible or marginalized. Social media has intensified this pressure by introducing a form of constant mutual surveillance, where everyone is simultaneously a broadcaster and receiver of visual content. The "like culture" logic fuels a compulsive need for external validation, frequently based solely on appearance. Numerous studies have highlighted the link between intensive social media use and increased body dissatisfaction, especially among adolescents and young adults, who are more vulnerable to mechanisms of social comparison and identity construction online (Perloff, 2014).

Thus, perfectionism, societal pressure, and media form a formidable triad in the development and maintenance of body image-related disorders. Together, they create a psychological environment in which the body is continually evaluated, judged, controlled, and rarely accepted. The combined effect of these factors constitutes a form of psychic alienation, in which individuals are compelled to conform to a shifting, unattainable, and dehumanizing standard. Consequently, it is essential (both therapeutically and socially) to deconstruct these mechanisms, promote more inclusive standards, and develop resilience tools against pervasive aesthetic injunctions. Awareness-raising efforts targeting youth, critical media literacy education, and the celebration of bodily diversity can help counteract these negative influences. Recognizing that a human being's worth cannot be reduced to appearance lays the foundation for a healthier relationship with oneself and others.

5.5. Consequences and Treatment

Body image-related disorders (whether eating disorders, body dysmorphia, or chronic self-objectification) lead to profound and often invisible consequences that deeply destabilize those affected. These consequences impact physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, schooling, professional life, and overall quality of life. Often dismissed as a mere passing discomfort or an "aesthetic concern," persistent body dissatisfaction can develop into severe disorders with sometimes irreversible effects if not recognized and properly treated.

Physically, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, or binge eating expose the body to extreme suffering. Severe food restriction can cause malnutrition, multiple deficiencies, muscle weakness, osteoporosis, and damage to vital organs, including the heart, kidneys, and liver. Repeated vomiting in bulimia severely disrupts electrolyte balance, increasing the risk of potentially fatal cardiac arrhythmias. Binge eating, on the other hand, leads to rapid and significant weight gain, often accompanied by metabolic disorders like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. These physical issues represent only the tip of the iceberg, as they mask intense psychological suffering that is difficult to express and often minimized by those around the individual.

Psychologically, the consequences are equally serious. Chronic body dissatisfaction is a well-established risk factor for depression, anxiety, social phobia, and in extreme cases, suicidal behavior. Feelings of failure, shame, guilt, and loss of control frequently associated with these disorders erode self-esteem and isolate sufferers. The relationship to one's body becomes a constant source of conflict, rejection, and pain, to the point where some avoid mirrors, social activities, or even human interaction. This withdrawal fuels a vicious cycle, where isolation intensifies psychological distress, which in turn worsens pathological behaviors. Young people especially adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable, growing up in contexts of intense identity and aesthetic pressure, where social scrutiny, notably through social media, becomes a constant source of validation or rejection.

Given this complexity, treatment must be multidisciplinary. It is not simply about restoring a healthy weight or silencing symptoms, but about understanding the deep roots of bodily distress and rebuilding a peaceful relationship with one's body and self. Psychotherapy is central to intervention, with cognitive-behavioral therapies (CBT) proving effective in treating anorexia, bulimia, body dysmorphia, and even reducing self-objectification. These approaches help dismantle erroneous beliefs about the body, interrupt compulsive checking or control behaviors, and foster self-esteem. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based therapies have also shown promising results in helping patients reconnect with bodily sensations without judgment.

These psychological interventions are complemented by personalized nutritional support aimed not only at restoring balanced eating but also at reconciling patients with food and sensations of hunger and satiety. In some cases, particularly when mood disorders or obsessive-compulsive symptoms are present, medication may be prescribed alongside regular therapy. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), such as fluoxetine, are sometimes used, especially in cases of comorbid anxiety or depression.

Beyond individual care, urgent action is needed to address the social and cultural factors fueling these disorders. Promoting a positive body image based on acceptance of diverse body shapes, ages, genders, and skin tones is essential. This requires regulating media content, providing critical media education from an early age, and revaluing the body as a vehicle for experience, strength, and humanity rather than a mere aesthetic object. Awareness campaigns must be sustained not only to inform but also to destigmatize disorders that are still too often perceived as personal weaknesses or superficial issues.

In conclusion, although widespread and frequently normalized, body dissatisfaction should not be seen as a normal life phase or a mere image problem. It can be a sign of deeper distress and escalate into serious pathologies if not addressed with seriousness and compassion. Combating body image disorders requires collective commitment: well-trained healthcare professionals, ambitious prevention policies, responsible media, and a society that values everybody not for its conformity to an ideal, but for what it enables us to live, express, and be.

6. Three Key Psychological Processes

6.1. Social Comparison in the Digital Age: A Contemporary Reinterpretation of Festinger's (1954) Theory Applied to Body Image on social media

Since Leon Festinger first introduced social comparison theory in 1954, it has profoundly shaped our understanding of the psychological dynamics involved in self-evaluation. Festinger suggested that, in the absence of objective means to

assess one's opinions and abilities, individuals tend to compare themselves to others to establish their social standing. In the digital age, this dynamic has intensified, transformed, and become more automatic, especially through the widespread use of social media platforms. These platforms generate a continuous stream of visual and narrative content (often idealized) that amplifies upward social comparisons and deeply influences how users construct their body image.

6.1.1. Social Comparison: Theoretical Foundations and Digital Transformation

According to Festinger (1954), social comparison involves two main types: upward comparison (towards individuals perceived as superior) and downward comparison (towards those perceived as inferior). While downward comparison can have a protective effect on self-esteem, upward comparison is often linked to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, or distress (Festinger, 1954).

In the era of social media, this dynamic has changed significantly. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat encourage constant self-presentation and the portrayal of others through images that are often retouched, filtered, or carefully selected to highlight standards of beauty, success, or happiness that are difficult to attain. Unlike traditional social contexts, users are exposed not only to their immediate peers but also to celebrities, influencers, and highly idealized role models, making comparisons more frequent, more intense, and potentially more harmful.

6.1.2. Social Comparison and Body Image: A Strong Empirical Link

Contemporary research confirms the significant impact of digital social comparisons on body image. Fardouly et al. (2015) demonstrated that exposure to idealized body images on social media is positively correlated with body dissatisfaction, especially among young women (Fardouly J. D., Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood, Body Image, 2015). Similarly, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) highlight that the amount of time spent on social media, as well as the frequency of interactions with appearance-focused content, are linked to increased body preoccupation and lower self-esteem (Tiggemann M. & Slater J., 2014).

These comparisons have also been associated with eating disorders, such as anorexic, bulimic, or orthorexic tendencies (Holland, A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes, Body Image, 2016). By constantly confronting unrealistic representations of the "perfect" body, individuals may internalize these norms as personal goals, leading to extreme or pathological weight-control behaviors.

6.1.3. Specificities and Individual Differences

Gender

Gender is a key moderator in the social comparison process. Numerous studies (Myers, 2009) show that women are more sensitive to appearance-based social comparisons and experience their negative effects more intensely. For women, comparisons typically focus on thinness, youthfulness, or sexualized femininity. For men, comparisons tend to center more on muscularity, physical strength, or professional success, although the gender gap is narrowing with the rise of idealized male role models on social media (Daniel, 2010).

Age.

Age also plays a significant role. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of social comparison, as they are in a critical stage of identity development. However, older adults (especially women) may also feel pressure to maintain a youthful and attractive appearance, particularly in professional or social environments that are heavily influenced by digital media

Frequency of Social Media Use

The more frequent and passive the use of social media (that is, consuming content without interacting), the stronger the tendency toward upward social comparison. Users who spend long periods scrolling through visual content without contributing any of their own are especially susceptible to the negative effects. Alarmingly, some studies indicate that the cumulative impact of such exposure can distort perceptions of body norms where the exception gradually becomes perceived as the standard.

6.1.4. Psychological Consequences: Between Distress and Disorder

The psychological effects of digital social comparison are numerous and significant. They include:

- A decrease in body-related self-esteem

- Increased body shame and self-objectification
- Eating disorders, particularly among young women
- Social withdrawal due to fear of being judged based on appearance
- Heightened vulnerability to depression and anxiety, especially when comparisons are frequent and negative

Although Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison was developed in a pre-digital context, it remains remarkably relevant in analyzing the psychological mechanisms at play on social media platforms. By enabling constant, often upward and unrealistic comparisons, these platforms play a key role in undermining body image for many users especially women and youth. Ongoing research and the development of preventive interventions, particularly in media literacy education, are essential to mitigate the harmful impact of digital social comparisons on mental and physical health

7. Online Self-Presentation: Impression Management in the Age of social media (Goffman, 1959).

With the rise of digital social networks, practices of self-presentation have undergone a radical transformation. Unlike the spontaneity of face-to-face interactions, online environments allow individuals to carefully curate and construct their public image. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, who, in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), conceptualized social life as a kind of theatre in which everyone performs a version of themselves intended to make a favorable impression on others.

In the online world, this impression management becomes highly curated visible in selfies, profile bios, life narratives on Instagram, or digital avatars in games and metaverses. This dynamic strongly influences how individuals perceive themselves and others, creating new forms of social and identity-based pressure, particularly regarding physical appearance.

7.1. Goffman's Theory: From Social Theater to Digital Profiles

Goffman (1959) proposed that social interactions are akin to theatrical performances, where individuals play roles in front of an audience, using "expressive signs" (such as clothing, speech, and behavior) to influence how others perceive them. In the digital age, this performative aspect has been significantly amplified. On social media, every post becomes a stage, every story a scripted line, and every selfie a costume carefully chosen to present a stylized version of the self.

In this context, digital profiles become spaces for identity construction, where individuals selectively display parts of their lives: a flattering photo, a moment of success, a body that aligns with societal standards. This selection process often creates a dissonance between the real self (imperfect and ever-changing) and the idealized self, frequently enhanced through filters and photo editing (Chae, 2017).

7.2. A Highly Curated Self-Presentation: Mechanisms and Effects

Online self-presentation is often shaped by expectations of aesthetic appeal, positivity, and personal enhancement, which can carry significant psychological consequences. Users strive to portray a version of themselves that inspires admiration or envy, even if that means concealing their flaws or everyday realities. This process involves three main mechanisms:

7.2.1. The Curation of the Body and Life

The intensive use of filters, flattering angles, and carefully controlled lighting allows for the creation of an idealized version of the self. On platforms like Instagram or TikTok, these practices are not only common but often expected. Appearance becomes a form of social capital a symbolic currency traded for "likes," praise in comments, and even professional opportunities.

7.2.2. The Pursuit of Social Validation

Social networks introduce an algorithmic logic of instant reward, where each post is subject to others' approval. The number of "likes" or views becomes a measurable indicator of personal success. This dependence on external validation can lead to emotional addiction and a weakening of internal self-worth (Marwick, 2013). Self-presentation is no longer just a mode of communication it becomes a vital source of existential recognition.

7.2.3. Identity Dissonance

As the gap between the displayed self and the lived self widens, some users begin to experience a sense of dissonance, even inauthenticity. Maintaining a flawless image requires constant self-monitoring, which can result in anxiety, psychological exhaustion, and lowered self-esteem (Lee, 2021).

7.3. Psychological Risks of Digital Self-Staging

The pressure to maintain an idealized image in digital environments is not without consequences. Among the most frequently observed effects:

Erosion of personal authenticity: Repeatedly performing an idealized version of oneself can lead to a sense of identity emptiness and disconnection from one's true emotions and experiences (Michikyan, 2014).

Increased reliance on external validation: One's identity becomes dependent on others' perceptions, making individuals more vulnerable to social judgment, criticism, or the absence of feedback.

Performance-related stress: For influencers and highly active users, image management becomes a continuous emotional labor, creating constant tension between the demands of visibility and the need for rest or withdrawal (Duffy, 2015).

7.4. Moderating Variables: Gender, Age, and Usage

7.4.1. Gender

Women tend to engage more in self-presentation practices centered on physical appearance (Chae, Explaining females' envy toward social media influencers, 2017). They are also more frequently subjected to sexualization and objectification. While men are also affected, they often invest in their digital image through performance-based dimensions such as success, social status, or physical strength.

7.4.2. Age

Younger generations (Millennials, Gen Z), having grown up with social media, are adept at mastering the visual and communicative codes of online self-staging. However, this proficiency often comes with increased psychological vulnerability, due to early internalization of social norms. Older adults may be less focused on aesthetic presentation but can still feel social competition especially in professional environments with online visibility.

7.4.3. Frequency of Use.

The more frequently and socially interactive a person's social media use is, the stronger the pressure to maintain a consistent and favorable image. Passive use (mainly consuming content) also reinforces feelings of inadequacy or envy, but without the identity-building benefits of active participation.

Online self-presentation, conceptualized by Goffman as impression management, finds anintensified application in social media. In this digital theater, individuals carefully curate a stylized version of their lives to seek social approval. While these practices can foster creativity and personal expression, they also pose mental health risks through the constant pressure to perform, the reinforcement of unrealistic body standards, and the reliance on social validation cues. It is therefore essential to develop critical and educational interventions to help users (especially younger ones) engage with these platforms in a more conscious, balanced, and authentic way.

8. Self-Objectification in the Age of social media: A Contemporary Reading of Fredrickson and Roberts' Theory (1997)

In a media-saturated world filled with idealized body images, physical appearance has become a central component of perceived personal value. The theory of objectification, proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), offers a powerful framework for understanding how society (particularly through media) sexualizes and evaluates bodies, especially women's as objects to be consumed. When this external objectification is internalized, it leads to a process known as self-objectification, in which individuals begin to view themselves from an outsider's perspective, valuing their bodies primarily in terms of appearance.

In the digital age, this phenomenon is greatly intensified. Social media (with its visual structure, its logic of visibility, and its constant pursuit of validation from others) creates a fertile environment for internalizing the objectifying gaze. This section explores in detail the mechanisms, consequences, and moderators of self-objectification in the context of digital platforms, with a particular focus on body image.

8.1. Objectification Theory: Origins and Core Principles

According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), sexual objectification is a form of societal gaze that reduces individuals (particularly women) to the aesthetic value of their bodies. In societies where this gaze is omnipresent, women are socialized to see themselves as objects meant to be looked at, evaluated, and desired (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This pressure leads to a form of self-objectification, where constant body surveillance becomes habitual.

This phenomenon deeply affects how individuals relate to their bodies: the body is no longer experienced as a feeling, acting subject, but rather as something to be monitored, corrected, and beautified. It disrupts the connection to bodily sensations, diminishes self-awareness, and can trigger a wide range of psychological issues.

8.2. Social Media as Amplifiers of Self-Objectification

Visual-based social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat) are specifically designed to encourage self-exposure through images selfies, videos, challenges, and body transformation content. This media structure reinforces three key dimensions of objectification:

8.2.1. Constant Body Surveillance

On digital platforms, users act simultaneously as both the performer and the audience of their own bodies. Every photo posted is subjected to meticulous scrutiny framing, posture, filters, edits. This continuous performance encourages heightened control over appearance, often at the expense of tuning into internal sensations such as hunger, fatigue, pleasure, or comfort. This aligns with what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) describe as body monitoring: a chronic state of outward-focused bodily awareness.

8.2.2. Sexualization of Content

A large portion of viral social media content is driven by sexualized aesthetic standards: slim, athletic, youthful, smooth bodies. Body-related challenges, physical transformation videos (#glowup), and sexually suggestive dance trends (particularly on TikTok) reinforce the notion that a person's value is tied to their physical (and often sexualized) appearance. Teenage girls are especially vulnerable, as body image plays a central role in identity development during adolescence.

8.2.3. Exposure to Evaluative Gaze

The architecture of social media is built around visibility and public evaluation. Metrics like "likes," views, comments, and shares serve as social barometers of bodily acceptability. This reward system sustains a craving for external validation, reinforces objectifying perspectives, and fuels constant comparison with idealized standards.

8.2.4. Body Shame, Anxiety, and Mood Disorders

Self-objectification is strongly associated with increased body shame, social anxiety, and a heightened tendency to engage in negative rumination about one's appearance (Moradi, 2008). The body becomes a constant source of stress, endlessly monitored for compliance with often unattainable beauty standards.

8.2.5. Eating Disorders and Depression

Numerous studies have established a clear link between self-objectification and disordered eating behaviors (EDs). When the body is perceived primarily as an aesthetic object, it often leads to extreme behaviors: restrictive dieting, an obsession with thinness or muscularity, and compulsive habits. This phenomenon is also tied to depressive symptoms and increased social anxiety, especially among frequent users of visual social media platforms.

8.3. Differences by Gender, Age, and Platform Use

8.3.1. Gender

Women have historically been more exposed to sexual objectification and are therefore more likely to internalize the social gaze on their bodies. However, men are increasingly affected as well. With the rise of idealized masculine

representations (muscular, dominant, high-performing) more men are experiencing a form of male self-objectification, often focused on muscularity or performative masculinity (Daniel, The drive for muscularity in men: Media influences and objectification theory, Body Image, 2010),

8.3.2. Age

Adolescence is a particularly critical period. It marks a phase of identity reconstruction, during which the body changes and becomes central to socialization. Young girls are especially vulnerable to early objectification and the internalization of unrealistic beauty standards. Once established, self-objectification often persists into adulthood, especially among women, who continue to face social pressure to remain desirable.

8.3.3. Frequency of Social Media Use

The more intensive and visually-focused the use of social media platforms (particularly Instagram and TikTok) the higher the likelihood of self-objectification. Repeated exposure to sexualized, retouched, or "perfect" bodies is a major predictive factor of increased body surveillance and dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Slater, NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls, International Journal of Eating Disorders, 2014). Conversely, moderate or reflective use of social media may help mitigate these effects.

9. Conclusion

The impact of social media on adults' body image represents a major psychological concern in the digital age. Throughout this article, we have sought to shed light on the underlying mechanisms, observable effects, and moderating factors that make this issue particularly complex and multifaceted.

In the first section, we demonstrated that intensive use of social media is significantly linked to a deterioration of body image, especially among young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat continuously expose users to idealized images (often retouched or filtered) that promote unattainable body standards. This constant exposure triggers a range of negative consequences: body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, disordered eating, social anxiety, and increased body surveillance. These effects impact the three core dimensions of body image: perceptual (how one sees their body), affective (how one feels about it), and cognitive (how one thinks about it).

The second section provided a deeper exploration of three key psychological processes explaining these outcomes. First, social comparison, amplified by social media, encourages individuals to continuously evaluate themselves against others perceived as more attractive, successful, or desirable thereby intensifying body-related distress. Second, online self-presentation, shaped by impression management strategies, promotes a constant curation and stylization of appearance, often resulting in a dissonance between one's real self and the idealized version displayed online. Lastly, self-objectification, largely driven by the visual culture of social platforms, transforms individuals into observers of their own bodies, with significant consequences for emotional experience, body awareness, and mental health.

The third section emphasized that these effects are not uniform but moderated by individual and social variables. Gender plays a central role: women, who are historically more exposed to objectification, are more vulnerable to developing body dissatisfaction. However, body norms for men are also shifting toward increased pressure for physical performance, muscularity, and dominance. Age also matters: adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable due to ongoing identity formation, but middle-aged adults are not immune to the harmful effects of prolonged exposure to idealized standards. Finally, the frequency and mode of social media use are crucial: more frequent, passive, and visually-oriented use (such as endless scrolling through curated content) is associated with greater psychological risk.

As such, body image in the digital era cannot be fully understood without considering the constant mediation of social media acting as normative filters, distorted mirrors, and powerful agents of socialization. Digital socialization of the body exposes individuals to relentless aesthetic pressure, compelling them to judge, compare, adjust, or even transform their appearance according to external standards of worth.

In light of these findings, it becomes urgent to promote multidimensional interventions:

- On one hand, media literacy education is essential to help individuals developed critical thinking toward digital images and social norms;
- On the other hand, therapeutic and preventive efforts should focus on cultivating a more embodied relationship with the body less dependent on external validation;

- Finally, social media platforms themselves must be held accountable and take responsibility for their role in promoting narrow, unrealistic beauty ideals.

In conclusion, a theoretical analysis of the psychological processes at play offers valuable insight into how and why social media influences adults' body image. But more importantly, it opens the door to envisioning paths of empowerment and resistance ways to reclaim the body as a lived, expressive, and subjective reality, rather than a projected image in the digital mirror.

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