The Impact of social media on Adolescents' Concepts of Beauty and Its Reflections on Their Mental Health

تأثيروسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على مفاهيم الجمال لدى المراهقين و انعكاساتها على صحتهم النفسية

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of social media use on shaping unrealistic aesthetic perceptions among adolescents, revealing the repercussions of these perceptions on their mental health. Applying a mixed-methods approach to a purposive sample (n=60), and relying on (BSMAS, SATAQ-4, GHQ-28) scales supported by content analysis of interviews and adolescents' posts on their pages; the results showed a strong positive correlation between intensity of use and adoption of those false standards (r=0.72), met by a clear negative impact on mental health (r=-0.65). The qualitative analysis also revealed that 75% of the content published or followed by adolescents promotes an artificial body ideal, leading to appearance dissatisfaction among 70% of the participants. The study concludes the necessity of activating media literacy programs and guidance intervention to promote self-acceptance.

- Key words: social media, beauty concepts, adolescents, mental health, body image.

- الملخص: تستقصي هذه الدراسة تأثير استخدام مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي في تشكيل مفاهيم جمالية غير واقعية لدى المراهقين، مع الكشف عن انعكاسات هذه المفاهيم على صحتهم النفسية. وبتطبيق المنهج المختلط على عينة قصدية (ن=60)، وبالاعتماد على مقاييس (BSMAS, SATAQ-4, GHQ-28) مدعومة بـ تحليل محتوى المقابلات ومنشورات المراهقين في صفحاتهم؛ أظهرت النتائج ارتباطاً طردياً قوياً بين كثافة الاستخدام وتبني تلك المعايير الزائفة (r=0.72)، يقابله أثر سلبي واضح على الصحة النفسية (r=-0.65). كما كشف التحليل النوعي أن 75% من المحتوى الذي ينشره أو يتابعه المراهقون يروج لمثالية جسدية مصطنعة، مما أدى لعدم الرضا عن المظهر لدى 70% من المشاركين.

وتخلص الدراسة لضرورة تفعيل برامج التربية الإعلامية والتدخل الإرشادي لتعزيز قبول الذات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، مفاهيم الجمال، المراهقون، الصحة النفسية، صورة الجسم.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the rapid emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others has led to major changes in how people communicate and interact. Facebook is currently considered the largest social networking site, with more than one billion active users, and this

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number is expected to increase significantly over time, especially in developing countries. Facebook is used for both personal and professional interaction, and its spread has led to many positive effects on communication, idea exchange, and online learning (Pantic, 2014).

In the digital age, social media has become an influential force in shaping opinions and social perceptions. Among the perceptions most strongly affected are concepts of beauty and physical appearance. Media, as one of the sources of social influence, plays a fundamental role in spreading body models and beauty standards, which are exclusively limited to the slim and carefully shaped body achieved through exercise. In this context, media is considered one of the most important factors leading to body dissatisfaction, which negatively affects individuals' lives and causes frustration, guilt, shame, depression, low self-esteem, and reduced quality of life (Souza & Alvarenga, 2016).

One of the main factors related to existing mental health problems is cultural and social pressure in contemporary society. Within the cultural and social context, an unhealthy beauty standard has been developed, which has increasingly become unrealistic and unattainable (Clay et al., 2005). Media is interpreted as a strong contributor to these sociocultural standards due to its wide reach and influence. The inability to achieve these beauty standards negatively affects individuals' self-image and psychological well-being (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

Images found on social media platforms are idealized and unrealistic due to digital modifications that create high expectations for individuals in society. Flaws are removed using digital beauty applications that whiten teeth, narrow waists, and reduce body sizes in order to be accepted as beauty standards (Farid, 2009). These techniques may lead to negative consequences such as increased body dissatisfaction, body modification, and low self-esteem issues. Unrealistic images of femininity, beauty, success, and body shape promoted by social media are associated with the

development of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction disorders (Hesse-Biber, 2006; Grogan, 2021).

Individuals immerse themselves in the virtual world to an extent that there is a socially distorted perception of the female body. Women feel social pressure to modify the visual appearance of the images they publish, as the discrepancy between online images and reality leads to anxiety and dissatisfaction, and is linked to problems in behavioural and emotional regulation (Mills et al., 2018; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Tiggemann, 2005). These aspects result in an unusual phenomenon where young girls are unable to distinguish between real bodies and edited images, as thinness and body proportions become unnatural, and flawless skin and "perfect" faces appear as the "natural" beauty standard online (Meier, 2013; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

In addition, the literature shows a strong relationship between photo sharing and "selfies" on Instagram and body dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Kleemans et al., 2018). This effect is linked to perceived social pressure to conform to stereotypes and to higher levels of social comparison, which leads to fear of judgment by others regarding body image. However, this relationship has been studied more frequently among female samples, with specific consequences for self-esteem, eating behaviours, and overall well-being (McLean et al., 2015; Meier, 2013; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

With the rise of social media, society has become obsessed with the concept of displaying an ideal appearance that includes being productive, successful, and likable. In a society that places high value on looking one's best, social media platforms have exploited this trait. People have been influenced by social media, whether subtly or clearly, to believe that appearance is extremely important for having a positive and successful personal experience.

Considering that social media may negatively affect adolescents' mental health, it is therefore seen as a contributing factor to low self-esteem among adolescents. Burch stated that "more than half of these adolescents indicated that the feeling was related

to their bodies" (Burch, 2020). These reports show that social media imposes unrealistic and destructive standards, increasing peer pressure on adolescents at an early age. The effects of social media on health vary from person to person, but they remain profound. Adolescents who face pressure from social media to conform to a narrow beauty standard engage in negative comparisons between their bodies and what they perceive as "ideal" bodies. In turn, these comparisons can generate low self-esteem and bad body image, both of which are considered risk factors for developing unhealthy weight-loss strategies, eating disorders, and mental health disorders such as depression in both male and female adolescents (Body Image: Pre-teens and Teenagers, 2019). Adherence to the ideal body standard can have harmful consequences, especially among adolescents who are more vulnerable to influence (Phan & Dinh, 2022, p. 01).

Technological development has been closely associated with the widespread reliance on the internet, particularly through various forms of media. This influence began with television and films and has now extended to videos and streaming media. Over the past few decades, these rapid technological developments have significantly affected individuals, especially the younger generation that grew up in this media-focused era. These positive and negative effects are particularly clear in the way unrealistic beauty standards were formed. While societies have always valued beauty ideals, the spread of media and easy access to the internet have greatly amplified this phenomenon in the digital age. Young people, in particular, are constantly exposed to distorted images and models that depict ideal body standards, which in turn define beauty standards. Social media platforms play a crucial role in reinforcing these standards (Xie, 2024, p. 143).

Recent studies have revealed the important role of media exposure in shaping young people's perceptions of body image. A study conducted by Perloff (2014) examined the distinctive and influential characteristics of social media and its content. It found that social media has a significant impact on body image issues through unfavourable social comparisons. According to this study, exposure to "ideal bodies"

on TikTok and Instagram was frequently associated with negative comments related to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem (Perloff, 2014).

Based on this premise, there is an urgent need to explore the close relationship between the use of social media and the formation of unrealistic aesthetic concepts among adolescents, and to determine the extent of the impact of these concepts on their mental health. The research aims primarily to determine the nature of the association between exposure to these media and the adoption of distorted aesthetic standards, while monitoring the repercussions of this on their mental health. It is hoped that the results of this research will contribute to deepening the understanding of the effects of social media, and provide a scientific database that enables specialists and educators to design effective preventive programs and counseling interventions, aimed at enhancing the psychological resilience of adolescents in the face of digital societal pressures.

In this context, the present study is guided by the following main research question: What is the nature of the relationship between social media use, the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts, and adolescents' mental health?

The study is further directed by the following sub-questions:

1. What is the relationship between the intensity of social media use and the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts among adolescents?
2. What is the relationship between the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts and adolescents' mental health?
3. How are unrealistic beauty standards expressed among adolescents on social media, and what psychological effects do they report?

Methodology:

1/ Research Method:

The study adopted a mixed methods approach with a sequential design to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring a deep understanding and triangulation of data on the impact of social media on adolescents' perceptions of

beauty and mental health, thereby enhancing the validity of the results and their contextual interpretation.

2/ Participants:

The study sample included 60 adolescents (35 females, 25 males) who were selected using purposive sampling from educational institutions and social media platforms. The average age was 15.7 years (SD = 1.8). Inclusion criteria included active use of platforms (more than two hours per day on at least three platforms), verbal expression ability, and no previous diagnoses of mental disorders. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents in accordance with research ethics.

3/ Instruments:

The three measures underwent a back-translation protocol to ensure cultural alignment, whereby they were translated into Arabic and then back into English by independent translators. The process achieved high levels of agreement ranging from 0.82 to 0.89 according to the Kappa coefficient, confirming the semantic equivalence of the Arabic versions and their suitability for field use.

3.1/ Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS):

The study used a scale to assess pathological use behaviors of social media platforms over the past 12 months. The scale consists of six items on a five-point Likert scale (from 1: very rarely to 5: very often), with a total score ranging from 6 to 30 (Sherer & Levounis, 2024). The scale measures dimensions such as "use to escape personal problems." In the current study, the scale achieved high reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = 0.88) and good fit indices (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05).

3.2/ Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-4) :

The enhanced version was used, which aims to assess social pressures and internalization of beauty standards (thinness, muscularity) in both genders. The scale includes 5 sub-dimensions: (internalization of thinness/low body fat, internalization of muscularity/athleticism, family pressures, peer pressures, and media pressures) (Lim,

2016). The results in the current environment showed a significant discriminant validity ($t=5.23$, $p<0.001$) and test-retest reliability of 0.85.

3.3/ General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28)

The study adopted the Goldberg (1978) version as a screening tool for detecting psychological disorders. It consists of 28 items distributed across 4 sub-dimensions: (somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, and severe depression) (Sterling, 2011). The scale is characterized by its rapid application and high predictive ability, and in this study, it achieved concurrent validity with the Beck scale ($r=0.72$) and a reliability coefficient ($\alpha=0.86$).

3.4/ The semi-structured interview:

The study adopted a semi-structured interview designed by the researcher to investigate the subjective experiences of adolescents regarding representations of beauty and digital pressures. The interview guide was built based on theoretical literature and presented to a committee of expert reviewers to ensure its face validity.

The interview included five main themes: (1) digital usage patterns, (2) perceptions of beauty and appearance, (3) the impact of digitally altered images and filters, (4) social pressures and comparison mechanisms, (5) and perceived psychological reflections such as anxiety and self-esteem.

The researcher conducted the interviews (45-60 minutes per interview), recording them audio and transcribing them verbatim to ensure data accuracy. To enhance reliability and reduce bias, researcher triangulation was applied with the participation of an independent analysis team (the researcher, a university professor, and a psychologist); the texts underwent thematic analysis separately before matching the results. Cohen's kappa coefficient of agreement among the analysts reached 0.85, confirming the objectivity of the qualitative conclusions drawn.

Results:

1/ Quantitative Results: Correlational Relationships:

Sub-question 1: What is the relationship between the intensity of social media use and the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts among adolescents?

The results of the Pearson correlation coefficient showed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between the intensity of social media use and the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts ($r=0.72$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the higher the rate of use, the greater the tendency of adolescents to adopt extreme aesthetic standards.

Sub-question 2: What is the relationship between the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts and adolescents' mental health?

The results revealed a strong inverse relationship between the adoption of these aesthetic concepts and mental health ($r=-0.65$, $p<0.01$); this means that the deep internalization of unrealistic beauty standards is associated with a deterioration of mental health indicators in the sample.

2/ Qualitative Results: Content Analysis

Sub-question 3: How are unrealistic beauty standards expressed among adolescents on social media, and what psychological effects do they report?

The study relied on quantitative content analysis as a primary tool for processing data extracted from adolescents' pages and interviews. The content of posts and participants' responses were transcribed and converted into specific thematic categories. This type of analysis allowed for monitoring the frequency of each category among the sample members and calculating its percentage, in order to identify the most common aesthetic patterns and the most influential digital pressures on them. The following tables (01) and (02) summarize the results of this analysis, where the first table presents the digital content analysis of their posts, while the second table reviews the results of the interview content analysis.

2-1/ Content Analysis of Adolescents' Beauty-Related Posts on Social Media:

Table (01): Results of Digital Content Analysis Regarding Beauty Standards (N = 60).

Category	Main themes	Sub-themes	Number of participants (60)	Percentage of posts (%)
Idealistic and unrealistic beauty standards	- Focus on ideal thinness - Promotion of cosmetic and beauty products - Emphasis on external physical beauty	- Images edited with filters - Images of influencers and celebrities - "Before and after" images - Indirect advertisements for products such as slimming creams and cosmetic surgeries - Promoting appearance as a main criterion for self-worth	45	75%
Realistic and healthy beauty standards	- Encouraging body diversity - Promoting health over ideal beauty	- Success stories about self-acceptance - Diversity of natural body shapes - Focus on sports and healthy nutrition - Avoiding photo edits and filters	9	15%
Neutral or beauty-unrelated posts	- Content not directly addressing beauty issues - Neutral posts	- Posts about travel, education, and personal hobbies - Posts that neither promote nor criticize beauty standards - Posts reflecting daily life without focusing on beauty as a criterion	6	10%

Results of the content analysis of posts indicate the following:

- Dominance of unrealistic beauty standards: 75% of posts focus on ideal and unrealistic beauty standards. This indicates a wide spread of content that promotes unrealistic body images and exaggerated beauty standards on social media.

-Limited positive and realistic content: Only 15% of posts promote realistic and healthy beauty standards. This points to a significant lack of content that encourages self-acceptance and body diversity.

- Small proportion of neutral content: 10% of posts were neutral or unrelated to beauty standards, confirming the clear dominance of appearance- and beauty-related content.

2-2/ Content Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews with Adolescents:

Table (02): Thematic Analysis Results of Adolescent Interviews on Beauty Representations and Psychological Reflections (N = 60)

Category	Main themes	Sub-themes	Number of participants (60)	Percentage
Social media use	- Intensive usage time - Impact of social media on daily routine	- 3–5 hours daily - Preferred applications are Instagram and Snapchat - social media affects daily lifestyle and social interaction	48	80%
Perceptions of beauty and physical appearance	- Ideal beauty online - Pursuit of physical changes	- Comparing oneself to what is displayed online - Feeling dissatisfied with physical appearance - Thinking about undergoing cosmetic surgeries - Changes in eating habits and appearance care	42	70%
Impact of social media on personal beauty concepts	- Continuous exposure to unrealistic standards - Adoption of these standards in daily life	- Influence of influencers and celebrities - Attempting to imitate these standards in daily life - Efforts to improve appearance based on what is displayed	39	65%

Social pressures related to appearance	- Need to meet social expectations - Impact of pressure on social relationships	- Pressure from friends and negative interaction with comments - Tension in relationships due to trying to maintain an ideal online appearance	36	60%
Impact of social media on mental health	- Low self-esteem - Increased anxiety and depression	- Feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with physical appearance - Comparing adolescents' appearance with unrealistic beauty standards - Increased levels of anxiety and depression due to pressure to achieve ideal beauty standards	33	55%

Results of the interview content analysis indicate the following:

-Intensive use of social media: 80% of participants spend 3–5 hours daily on these platforms, indicating their deep integration into users' daily lives.

-Negative impact on beauty and body perceptions: 70% of participants compare themselves to what they see online and feel dissatisfied with their physical appearance, indicating a strong influence of content on self-image.

- Adoption of unrealistic beauty standards: 65% of participants are influenced by influencers and celebrities and seek to imitate unrealistic beauty standards, reflecting the strong impact of these models on users' behaviours.

-Social pressures related to appearance: 60% of participants experience appearance-related social pressure, which affects their personal relationships and shows how social media influence extends into real life.

-Negative effects on mental health: 55% of participants reported negative effects on their mental health, including low self-esteem and increased anxiety and depression, highlighting the serious psychological consequences of this phenomenon.

Discussion:

The quantitative data painted a compelling, and somewhat concerning, picture: a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$) exists between the time adolescents spend on social media and their embrace of unrealistic beauty ideals. What this suggests is that platforms like Instagram or TikTok have evolved beyond simple entertainment; they now act as a powerful socio-psychological ecosystem that fundamentally recalibrates how young people judge their own worth. When a teenager is constantly immersed in a feed of "perfect," digitally-polished faces, they enter a state of perpetual social comparison. In this digital landscape, an artificial benchmark becomes their new reality. This phenomenon is a classic manifestation of Social Comparison Theory, where self-evaluation is driven by comparisons with those perceived as more successful or attractive. These findings strongly echo the earlier warnings of (Perloff, 2014) and (Farid, 2009) regarding body dissatisfaction and the rise of "unattainable" aesthetic expectations-a trend that only seems to be intensifying in the current digital climate (Xie, 2024). This narrative is further deepened by our qualitative analysis. A staggering 75% of the content analyzed centered on idealized physical perfection, often achieved through filters and careful curation. We are witnessing what could be called the "normalization of the impossible." When the exception becomes the rule, adolescents begin to internalize these narrow standards as universal truths. While (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) identified this role of media years ago, our results suggest that the sheer interactivity of social media has amplified the effect, making the pressure feel both more personal and more relentless.The psychological toll of this shift is palpable. Our study found a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.65$, $p < 0.01$) between these beauty ideals and mental wellbeing. This was not just a statistical trend; 55% of the adolescents we interviewed spoke candidly about feeling anxious or "not good enough." There is a widening "cognitive rift" between their real-life selves and the idealized versions they see on screen. As researchers like (Souza & Alvarenga, 2016) and (Clay et al., 2005) have long argued, this gap is a breeding ground for body dissatisfaction. Interestingly, as

(Burch, 2020) notes, the harm isn't just in what they see, but in the rhythm of their interaction-the constant, repetitive checking that keeps these insecurities alive. Perhaps the most human element of our findings came from the interviews, where 70% of participants admitted to being caught in a cycle of constant comparison. The "social circle" has expanded from the school hallway to a global digital stage, making it almost impossible for adolescents to feel physically adequate. This environment directly links to the body image disorders and disordered eating behaviors discussed by (Hesse-Biber, 2006) and (Grogan, 2021). Furthermore, the role of influencers-cited as a major influence by 65% of our sample-cannot be overstated. These figures serve as "normative models," blurring the line between a curated persona and a real person, a confusion that (Mills et al., 2018) and (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016) identify as a primary source of appearance-based anxiety. Finally, we must consider the social weight of being "always on." Roughly 60% of our participants felt a constant sense of being watched and judged, a digital version of "social surveillance" that (McLean et al., 2015) and (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019) have identified as a hallmark of the social media age. This is particularly difficult for younger users who, as (Meier, 2013) and (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013) pointed out, often lack the media literacy to distinguish a filter from reality. Given that 80% of our participants spend 3 to 5 hours a day on these platforms, the psychological immersion is almost total. As (Pantic, 2014) have argued, the deeper the engagement, the more profound the impact. In short, social media has become the primary cultural lens through which adolescents see themselves. To mitigate the negative mental health outcomes we've identified, there is a clear and urgent need for education that helps young people deconstruct the digital illusions they encounter every day.

Study Limitations:

The limitations of this study include the following:

Sample size and nature: The study used a purposive sample of 60 adolescents, which may affect the generalizability of the results. A purposive sample is not representative

of all social and cultural groups, and therefore may not reflect the diverse perspectives and experiences of adolescents in different communities.

Self-reporting: The research relied on data collected through questionnaires and interviews, which requires participants to provide honest responses. Social pressure or the desire to present a certain image may influence how participants respond, leading to potential bias in the data.

Exposure to social media content: The study did not precisely measure the type or nature of content participants were exposed to. As a result, unmeasured factors, such as peer interactions or friends' influence, may have affected beauty perceptions and mental health.

Temporal changes: Beauty concepts and psychological effects may change over time, and this study does not take into account time-related factors that could influence the results.

Conclusion:

In light of the findings of this study, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between social media use and the adoption of unrealistic beauty concepts among adolescents. The study also showed a negative association between these unrealistic beauty concepts and adolescents' mental health.

These findings highlight the important role social media plays in shaping beauty perceptions and body image among young people, as well as its impact on mental health and social relationships. The large volume of content focused on ideal and unrealistic beauty standards, combined with the long-time adolescents spend on these platforms, represents a major challenge that requires serious attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers.

These results point to the need for developing multi-dimensional strategies to address this phenomenon, including awareness programs, psychological interventions, and content regulation on social media platforms. They also emphasize the need for further future research to understand the long-term effects of this phenomenon and to

develop effective interventions that promote mental health and self-acceptance among adolescents in the digital media age.

Finally, this study stresses the importance of cooperation among all relevant stakeholders—including families, schools, communities, and technology companies—to create a healthier and more positive digital environment for adolescents, one that promotes self-confidence and acceptance of beauty diversity rather than the promotion of unrealistic beauty standards.

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