

**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL COMPARISON ON BODY
IMAGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

In today's modern digital era, social media serves a significant role in shaping perceptions of body image, influencing self esteem, and reinforcing societal beauty standards. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter/X and Facebook feature curated images, beauty trends, and fitness influencers, which can lead to both positive and negative self perception among the users. Some individuals could find satisfaction in these trends, while some experience body dissatisfaction and face mental well - being challenges. Conversely, the rise of body movements seek to counteract these effects by promoting self acceptance and diverse representations of beauty. This study examines the intricate dynamics revolving social media engagement, body image, and social comparison, analyzing how different types of content consumption affects self perception. Using a sample size of 121 participants, the research investigates social media habits, engagement levels, and demographic influences to assess the psychological influences of social media on body image. Furthermore, it evaluates the effectiveness of body positive initiatives in fostering self acceptance. The findings aim to provide deeper understanding into the dual role of social media in both perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards and supporting body diversity, contributing discussions on mental health and digital well - being.

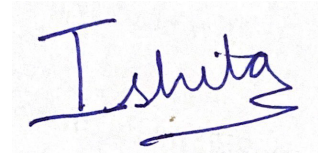
Key words: social media, social comparison, body - image, self - perception, mental well being, beauty standards.

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Exploring the impact of Social Comparison On Body Image and Social Media Addiction” is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters of Arts in Psychology presented in the Thapar School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala.

This is a bona fide piece of research carried out under the supervision of Dr. Ipshita Chowdhury, Assistant professor at Thapar School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala, and no part of this research has been submitted for the award of any other degree.

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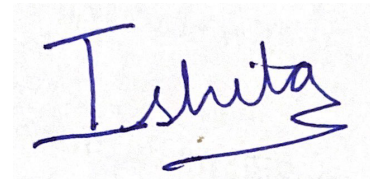
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CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work submitted in this thesis titled, The interaction of framing and decoy effect on risk preference completed in partial fulfilment of requirement of the ent for award of the degree Master of Arts in Psychology, presented in th Thapar School of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala, ia original record of my work done under the supervision and guide of Dr. Ipshita Chowdhury, Assistant Professor, Thapar School of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala and cites another researcher's work which are duly listed in the reference section

The subject matter contained in this thesis has not served as the basis for the awarding of any other degree at this or any other university.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Cultural standards of beauty are a primary reason why bodies become perceived poorly. In a study by Rogers, Fuller - Tyszkiewicz, Lewis, Krug, & Richardson (2017), it was stated that individuals have ample chance to compare themselves negatively to models of these standards because they are not realistic and often unattainable. Based on the research on mass media, individuals' psychological well-being is likely to be diminished when they comparatively compare themselves to idealized depictions of physical attractiveness standards in the media (Hargreaves and Tiggeman, 2004). However, in the past 15 years, the emergence and immense popularity of the social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram, along with the widespread availability of smartphones and other smart devices, has completely transformed the media landscape, and has drawn a lot of public and scientific interest.

The connection between social media and how people perceive themselves, especially their body image, is frequently analyzed from the perspective of social comparison theory, which states that individuals assess themselves by comparing their attributes to those of similar others. In instances of upward social comparison, individuals assess themselves in comparison to those that they perceive as superior (Festinger, 1954). This theory has a rich historical background and has informed research across various fields for nearly five decades. Festinger (1954) established the foundational framework for social comparison theory, highlighting it as an inherent process through which the individuals seek information about specific traits or characteristics. Within the context of body image issues, the social comparison models have significantly influenced a range of studies, from fundamental laboratory research to clinical interventions (Cash, 1996, 1997; Thompson, 1996). A pivotal study in this domain by Cash, Cash, and Butters (1983) involved exposing women to magazine images under three different conditions: images of physically attractive individuals only, images of physically attractive individuals identified as professional models, and images of those deemed not physically attractive. Participants who viewed only the physically attractive images rated their own attractiveness inferior to those in the other two groups. Cash et al. (1983) put forward the idea that the specificity of this contrast effect

underscored the greater significance of peers as comparison targets, rather than professional models, indicating a preference for particularistic over universalistic targets.

Social theory plays a crucial role in elucidating issues related to body image. In a study by Heinberg and Thompson (1992) involving 297 participants, comparing both genders, the researchers examined the impact of various comparison groups, such as peers, family members, and celebrities, on body dissatisfaction. The results indicated that, for women, a greater emphasis on these comparison groups was significantly associated with increased body dissatisfaction, a trend that was not as much significant in men. Interestingly, the degree of this relationship was comparable regardless of whether women were comparing themselves to peers or celebrities.

In a subsequent study, Heinberg and Thompson (1995) subjected women to advertisements that showcased idealized standards of female beauty. The findings revealed that, in contrast to a control group exposed to ads unrelated to appearance, these women reported a decline in both mood and body satisfaction. Further investigation by Cattarain, Thompson, Thomas, and Williams (2000) involved a direct manipulation of social comparison. Participants were instructed to either concentrate on comparing their appearance to models presented in a video or to divert attention from such comparisons. The results indicated that those in the comparison group were engaged in more self - to - model comparisons and displayed a slight increase in body dissatisfaction compared to participants in neutral or distraction conditions. Collectively, these findings underscore the significance of the effect of social comparison on worsening negative body image, especially among women.

The mass media are said to perpetuate unrealistic beauty ideals and are leading causes of body dissatisfaction and eating disorder formation and maintenance (Frederick et al., 2017; Grabe et al., 2008; Levine and Murnen, 2009). Use of social media has also become more of an ever-present mode of media use, with 89 percent of young adults saying they have one or more uses of a social media website per day (Pew Research Center, 2018). There has been a lot of evidence over recent years to indicate that the use of social media is linked to body image issues (Holland and Tiggeman, 2016). Photobased sites, such as Instagram, are especially prominent given that they are trending, display the images displayed idealized, thinspiration (weight loss content to inspire) and fitspiration (fitness content to inspire goals), and with infinite choices for

appearance - comparisons they foster (Cohen et al., 2017; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Content examination of fitspiration and thinspiration social media images has identified that these images will most often depict thin, toned bodies in sexually objectifying positions with diet, weight, and exercise guilt-inducing messages (Boepple and Thompson, 2016; Carrotte et al., 2017; Ghaznavi and Taylor, 2015; Simpson and Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggeman and Zaccardo, 2015). With the increasing popularity of instagram handles that show idealized photos, there has been a growth of a movement called 'body positivity' on social media. Body positivity is a campaign that seeks to combat prevailing appearance standards; promote respect and acceptance of all bodies in shape, size and form; and emphasize appreciation for the functioning and health of the body rather than an interest in how it appears (Sastre, 2014).

In recent years, clinicians and researchers have become increasingly interested in the process of body image for men's health and well-being (e.g., Gorman, Sheffield, Clark and Griffiths; 2019; McNeill and Fireman, 2019). Traditionally, body image was mainly considered a female issue and typically associated with clinical disorders like bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. Nevertheless, recent research shows that men have body image concerns in different ways than women, making it difficult to conduct research in this field (McCabe and Ricciardeli, 2002). For example, women will normally obsess over thinness, relating lower body weight to increased body satisfaction (Muren and Karazsia, 2017). Conversely, men tend to vacillate between issues of having too much body fat and not enough body weight for muscularity (Griffiths, Mond, Murray, and Touyz, 2015; Smolak and Murnen, 2008). Evidence shows that the activity to change one's body is an indicator of the importance men place on appearance, especially as it relates to Western notions of masculinity (Gattario, Frisen, Fuller - Tyszkiewicz, Ricciardelli, Diedrichs, Yager, and Smolak, 2015; Murray and Lewis, 2012).

Traditional masculine ideals highlight characteristics such as bravery, self assurance, and assertiveness, which together shape societal definitions of manhood (Darcy et al., 2012; Muren and Don, 2012). These ideals also dictate certain physical traits—such as height, low body fat percentage, and a lean muscular build—as indicators of masculinity (McCreary, 2002; Olivardia et al., 2004). Historically, the standards for men's body image focused on practical utility, emphasizing attributes like strength and endurance necessary for physical tasks (McCabe & McGreevy, 2010). However, over the last thirty years, there has been a significant shift towards

prioritizing aesthetic appeal over functionality (Law & Labre, 2002). This change has resulted in increased participation in activities aimed at muscle development, the use of dietary supplements, and various body modification practices (Leit et al., 2001; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Muscularity, in terms of both size and definition, has become the primary concern regarding body image among men (Morrison et al., 2004).

The Masculinity Hypothesis (Blishill, 2011) suggests that a muscular physique acts as a visible symbol of masculine success, thereby reinforcing societal expectations (Christensen & Jensen, 2007; Lefkowich et al., 2017). Media portrayals, such as Hugh Jackman's role as Wolverine and Brad Pitt's character in *Fight Club*, illustrate these ideals by presenting extreme leanness and significant muscularity as defining features of masculinity (Tylka, 2011).

Alternative viewpoints advocate for a wider acceptance of various male body types (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Current standards have evolved to embrace a range of ideals, from fashion models to professional athletes, each differing in terms of muscularity, height, and body composition (Leit et al., 2002; Parent & Bradstreet, 2017). Nevertheless, attaining these often unrealistic ideals frequently necessitates extreme approaches, including the consumption of performance-enhancing substances or strict dieting (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Kouri et al., 1995; Matthews et al., 2016; Mulgrew & Cragg, 2016).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The widespread impact of social media has notably altered how individuals view themselves and their body image, especially among teenagers and young adults. The selective nature of online content often showcases idealized body ideals, resulting in heightened engagement and, in some cases, problematic patterns of use. The rising trend has raised significant concerns about the potential psychological consequences of increased social media engagement, which includes the risk of social media addiction.

Social media addiction, as per Cheng, Ebrahimi, and Luk (2022), refers to a behavioral addiction characterized by compulsive social media use that significantly interferes with significant areas of life including personal relationships, work or academic achievement, and physical well-being. Research indicates that this condition may contribute to a variety of detrimental outcomes. A notable effect is the disruption of body image and self - perception, as individuals often find themselves comparing their own bodies to the frequently unrealistic standards depicted online. Such comparisons can foster body dissatisfaction and a decline in body appreciation, ultimately leading to an impact on the overall well - being.

To achieve a better comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, this literature review will examine the connections between social media engagement and addiction, body image, body appreciation, and social comparison. The review will initially detail the theoretical frameworks that support these concepts, including Social Comparison theory, Self - discrepancy theory, and Looking glass - self Theory. It would then focus on the definition and representation of each key concept, followed by a review of the empirical literature that investigates their relationships. The review will also address the measurement tools used in pertinent studies, such as the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), the Iowa Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), and the Body Appreciation Scale 2 (BAS 2). Lastly, the chapter will point out existing gaps in the literature and offer a rationale for the current research, emphasizing the potential implications to the field.

2.1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS -

1. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) -

The Social Comparison Theory (SCT) was introduced by Leon Festinger in 1954 as a significant effort to comprehend how individuals assess their own abilities and opinions. Festinger asserted that self - evaluation is a basic human motivation, and when objective, nonsocial methods of appraisal are unavailable, individuals resort to social comparisons for self - understanding (Goethals, 1986, p. 261). This motivation to evaluate oneself is at the heart of much social behavior, particularly in situations that are ambiguous or uncertain. Festinger suggested that people tend to compare themselves with others who possess similar traits, since comparing with those who are different may not provide meaningful comparisons or accurate self - evaluations. Therefore, similarity emerged as a key concept in the initial formulation of SCT, based on the idea that comparable others offer more valuable diagnostic information.

Festinger's early ideas established a foundation for a broad field of research that has since diversified extensively. One such avenue explores the motivational aspects of comparisons. Initially, it was thought that individuals primarily engaged in comparisons to assess their performance or judgements. However, researchers quickly recognized that comparison processes fulfill a broader range of psychological purposes, including self - enhancement, self - improvement, and self - verification. As Goethals (1986) explains, individuals actively seek social information as agents rather than merely receiving it passively, choosing comparison targets strategically based on their objectives. For instance, when the aim is to feel competent or superior, individuals may opt for downward comparisons - contrasting themselves with those who are less fortunate. Conversely, when pursuing growth or self - improvement, upward comparisons - toward those seen as more accomplished - are more likely to take place (p. 263)

- *EMPIRICAL EXPANSIONS AND THEORETICAL REFINEMENTS -*

One of the most influential developments beyond Festinger's original formulation is the concept of **downward comparison**, most notably articulated by Thomas A. Wills (1981). Wills proposed that in situations of threat or diminished self-esteem, individuals are especially likely to compare themselves to those who are worse off to protect or restore their self-concept. This defensive comparison became foundational for understanding social comparison in coping processes and

emotional regulation. Empirical support for this idea emerged from laboratory and field studies, including work by Morse and Gergen (1970), who demonstrated that self-evaluations were significantly influenced by the presence of either competent or incompetent others in the immediate environment. Participants who interacted with clearly inferior others (e.g., a disorganized, unkempt job applicant) reported higher levels of self-confidence than those who engaged with superior individuals. These findings validated that comparison targets are selectively chosen not just based on similarity but also on strategic self-evaluative motives. Goethals (1986) further critiques and builds upon the assumption that similarity is the dominant determinant of comparison choice. While Festinger emphasized the value of similarity for accurate self-assessment, Goethals highlights how people may also be drawn to dissimilar others under certain motivational circumstances—particularly when their aim is aspirational rather than confirmatory. This perspective introduces the concept of **value-expressive comparisons**, where individuals engage in comparison not just to evaluate themselves but to affirm deeply held beliefs or values. This is particularly relevant in social contexts where identity and ideological alignment are at stake, such as within social movements or online communities.

- *THE ROLE OF COMPARISON IN UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION AND AFFILIATION -*

Another early influence on SCT was provided by the work of Stanley Schachter (1959), who examined the affiliation and social comparison relationship. Schachter discovered that when people were in a state of anxiety or uncertainty, they turned to others in comparable states, not so much for affective support but to compare cognitive and affective reactions. This emphasized the social utility of comparison under states of ambiguity, and that affiliation and comparison processes are highly integrated. As Goethals (1986) points out, this observation uncovered that social comparison is not necessarily an independent, solitary cognitive process—it is situated in the texture of social interaction and group processes. Individuals join to compare, and they compare to join, thereby merging motivational and informational requirements in a dynamic psychological process.

Furthermore, Goethals highlights the contextual and strategic nature of comparison behavior. He refutes previous assumptions that social comparisons always occur spontaneously or unconsciously and instead refers to evidence that others selectively compare others depending on

their individual aspirations and the context of the society. For instance, in competitive settings, upward comparisons can become prevalent, instilling feelings of inferiority or heightened motivation based on the gap's interpretation by the individual's coping resources. Conversely, in supportive settings, downward comparisons might dominate to create reassurance and solidarity.

- *CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND THEORETICAL LEGACY -*

Goethals (1986) introduces SCT as not just a legacy of mid-20th-century psychology but a theory of continued significance, especially in view of contemporary advances in media and communication. Writing before the social media age, he anticipated the role of mass media and interpersonal feed systems in influencing self-concept through comparison. In the current context, in which social media serves as an easy gateway to others' controlled self-presentations at all times, SCT principles are more relevant than ever. The difference between upward and downward comparisons, the motivational underpinning of choosing comparison targets, and the psychological implications of such comparisons are at the heart of understanding phenomena like social media addiction, body image issues, and online self-esteem management—all of which are directly relevant to your thesis topic.

Notably, Goethals warns against using SCT as a closed, fixed system. Rather, he proposes the understanding of it as an open "lost and found" collection of psychological principles that can be reinterpreted and applied to multiple domains. In presenting SCT as an open framework and not as a strict doctrine, he encourages researchers to synthesize it with other theories of self-concept, motivation, and emotion, enhancing its explanatory potential and practical utility.

2. Self Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) -

Self Discrepancy Theory (SDT), which was given by Higgins (1987), provides a strong conceptual framework to describe how structure of the self can generate some emotional vulnerabilities. SDT has been extensively applied in body image research to explain how differences among individuals' self-conceptions result in body dissatisfaction and resultant psychological morbidity. Vartanian (2012) details the building blocks of SDT and its meaning for explaining maladaptive consequences, especially concerning internalized appearance standards.

SDT assumes that individuals possess different self-representations that broadly cluster into three groups: the actual self, ideal self, and ought self (Higgins, 1987). Actual self is what people perceive themselves as being currently; ideal self represents the qualities that they would like to have, i.e., wishes and desires; and ought self has the qualities that they think they should possess, i.e., obligations, responsibilities, or others' perceived expectations. Each of these domains can be approached from two vantage points: one's own (own self-guides) and important others' vantage points (other self-guides), generating six possible self-state representations (e.g., actual/own, ideal/other).

The affective implications of these discrepancies vary depending on the type of misalignment. Actual–ideal self-discrepancies, when people perceive they are not meeting their ideal self, correlate with dejection-related affect, including disappointment, sadness, and dissatisfaction. Actual–ought discrepancies, when people perceive they are failing to meet perceived shoulds or oughts, correlate with agitation-related affect, including self-loathing, worry, and guilt (Higgins, 1987; Vartanian, 2012).

This theoretical model is specifically applicable to the examination of body image. Vartanian (2012) points out that body dissatisfaction usually arises from the discrepancy between the actual body (as perceived by the individual) and the ought or ideal body (as acquired from culture or interpersonal environments). In contemporary society, where the media and social pressures tend to support unattainable appearance ideals—e.g., excessive thinness in females and hyper-muscularity in males—individuals are most likely to experience chronic self-discrepancies. These differences in turn are likely to predict not only body dissatisfaction but also more extreme outcomes, for example - low self esteem, depression, and eating disorders.

In addition, SDT brings to the foreground the influence of sociocultural forces in structuring self-guides. Peer groups, media, and even family members usually convey normative standards of beauty, which get internalized as one's ideal and ought selves. These societally induced self-guides can become a chronic source of discrepancy, especially if the individual feels that his or her actual appearance is grossly inadequate. For instance, when people take media-stimulated thin ideals as their own standards, they can feel actual–ideal body discrepancies that cause dejection. Likewise, when they internalize family or peer expectations about how they ought to

look, they can experience actual–ought discrepancies and feel anxious or ashamed upon failing to achieve these standards (Vartanian, 2012).

Vartanian also mentions empirical evidence for SDT in body image literature. Multiple researches have provided evidence that self-discrepancies predict psychological distress. For example, larger discrepancies between actual and ideal body representations have been found to be related to increased body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms, while actual-ought discrepancies have been found to relate to anxiety, self-criticism, and eating restraint. These results highlight the predictive value of SDT in detecting those at risk for body image disturbances and related psychopathology.

Crucially, SDT provides information on possible intervention tactics. Interventions can try to lessen the frequency and severity of self-discrepancies by focusing on the unrealistic or externalized ideals that serve as the foundation for ideal and ought self-guides. According to Vartanian (2012), therapies that assist people in realigning their self-guides—either by questioning cultural norms or encouraging body acceptance—may lessen adverse emotional effects. Furthermore, the emotional strain brought on by body-based self-discrepancies may be lessened by cognitive-behavioral techniques that reorient attention from appearance-based self-worth to more internal and functional attributes.

In short, Self - Discrepancy Theory offers an engaging model of the psychological fallout from misfit between perceived and ideal selves. In body image research, SDT illustrates the ways in which internalized standards of appearance, typically influenced by sociocultural pressures, become sources of distress, dissatisfaction, and unhealthy behavior when they greatly mismatch people's perceptions of their own bodies. It is therefore an important theory for examining the connection between body image, emotional well-being, and the wider social environment in which self-concept is formed and sustained.

3. Looking Glass - Self theory -

Charles Horton Cooley in 1902 was the first to suggest the Looking-Glass Self, which is a theory within sociology and states how people define their concept of self using mental images of the way other people think of them. This process, as according to Cooley, works on three aspects: (1)

imagining oneself the way other people perceive you, (2) imagining that people judge how they see one's appearance, and (3) creating a feeling based upon imagined judgments. This internalization of the "other's gaze" positions social feedback perceived or real at the center of how one negotiates their identity.

While Cooley's theory was developed in the early 20th century, its applicability continues, particularly within the framework of body image and media effects. In today's contexts, the "mirror" in which people envision themselves reflected is increasingly filled with constructed media content and idealized representations of beauty. According to the Looking-Glass Self theory, people who regularly consume material that places a strong focus on appearance are more apt to internalize those perceived standards into their self-concept. The process creates an externally contingent self-worth that is socially dependent and based largely on social validation of appearance. Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory affirms Cooley's work, though from a feminist psychological model. The concept of self-objectification—whereby self is seen from a third-person point of view—is structurally similar to Cooley's Looking-Glass Self. Both involve the internalized other's expectations and judgments shaping self, typically causing habitual self-monitoring, appearance concern, and body shame.

This dynamic is especially strong in the lives of women and girls, who are taught to measure their worth through physical beauty and desirability. As social media and online platforms amplify these standards, users—particularly female users—can feel increased psychological pressure as they manage their perceived exposure and judgments online (Perloff, 2014).

2.2: THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

- *BODY IMAGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT -*

The interplay between Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), and the Looking-Glass Self (Cooley, 1902) gives rise to a multi-dimensional model of comprehension of body image issues in social media communication.

Social media platforms encourage interactive environments for appearance-based social comparison. Social Comparison Theory states that individuals evaluate their appearance and self-worth by comparing themselves to others, especially in uncertain or evaluative contexts.

With Instagram and TikTok platforms full of idealized and edited images, upward comparisons prevail, and dissatisfaction and envy follow (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Simultaneously, Self-Discrepancy Theory explains the emotional impact of such comparisons. Users experience a dissonance between their actual self (how they see themselves) and ideal self (how they wish to be perceived), creating negative effects such as shame and low self-worth. Such discrepancies are strongest where appearance prevails in what it means to be valuable, generally reinforced by "likes," comments, and algorithmic endorsement.

The Looking-Glass Self, which explains internalization of perceived judgments from others, is superimposed over these mental processes. Social media users project and wait to see the way others might view content and appearance in addition to comparing themselves. Self-concept is strongly influenced by this projected gaze, which promotes self-awareness and outside validation.

Altogether, these ideas describe how social media fosters an atmosphere that reinforces self-critical comparisons, internalized social standards, and judgements based on appearance. This integration is able to explain why body image distress has increased with the rise of social media use, and why it often co-occurs with higher risk of depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

2.3: CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND DEFINITIONS -

- *BODY IMAGE -*

Body - image can be defined as a person's cognitions, emotions, & conduct in terms of their physical body. It is both perceptual and attitudinal and is either positive or negative. Negative body image, or body dissatisfaction, has been investigated as a risk for a range of psychological difficulties, such as low self-esteem, eating disorders, and depression (Grogan, 2021). In men, the body issues manifest as a desire for more muscularity or leanness, frequently driven by social expectations and media representations of the "ideal" male physique (Flice et al., 2020).

- *BODY POSITIVITY -*

Body positivity is a sociocultural movement that promotes the appreciation of all body types, by size, shape, or form. It advocates self-acceptance, acceptance of others, and against societal beauty standards. On social media, the hashtags #BodyPositivity and #BoPo are internet based platforms that allow the users to participate in discussions that affirm varied body forms (Czeczor-Bernat et al., 2025). Although a great deal of the movement has focused on women's lives, body positivity for men is becoming increasingly prominent as a counter-narrative to hypermasculine ideals depicted in fitness and fashion cultures

- *BODY APPRECIATION -*

Body appreciation is something that can be understood from the broader positive body image construct. Being a respect for, acceptance of, and positive attitudes toward one's body, it also involves rejecting external appearance standards and an appreciation of the body's functionality (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) is one such commonly used instrument which assesses these dimensions, thereby contributing a lot to the understanding of male body image protective factors.

- *SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT -*

Social media usage can be defined as a user's active and passive use of web-based platforms. It encompasses scrolling, liking, commenting, and posting. Measuring potentially problem or addictive usage is the function of the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), and measuring how frequently individuals compare to others is that of the Iowa Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM). This is very important in the visual-oriented setting of Instagram. These measures are crucial in learning how patterns of engagement shape body perception and mental health outcomes.

2.4: Empirical Evidence Linking Social Media to Male Body - Image -

The convergence of social media activity, body - image, and body positivity has been the focus of extensive academic research over the last few years. Consistent research findings have presented that social media sites—most notably those focused on visual content like Instagram—have the ability to enhance negative body image by way of appearance comparisons and internalization of impossible beauty ideals. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) noted that social

media appearance-focused image exposure is linked to greater body dissatisfaction in both experimental and longitudinal designs, and to a large extent mediated by upward appearance-based social comparisons. Although much of this research focused on female samples, newer research is starting to examine these dynamics in male samples. For instance, Gerrard et al. (2020) examined body dissatisfaction in college men, and internalization of the mesomorphic ideal (lean and muscular) was found to predict appearance anxiety and disordered exercise attitudes. Czepczor-Bernat et al. (2024) also surveyed male participants looking at #BodyPositivity-related content, showing that body appreciation was a buffering factor for undesirable body attitudes and muscle dysmorphia—indirectly, that is, body-positive material might have the effect of alleviating some of the unwanted psychological consequences more conventionally found related to social media use.

In addition, Sullivan et al. (2024) experimentally tested the impact of two forms of Instagram posts—text-based self-compassion and photo-based body-positive content—and discovered both had a significant positive effect on body image perceptions. Yet their sample was predominantly female, suggesting there was no gendered analysis. Cohen et al. (2023) also determined that exposure to body-positive material was associated with increased body appreciation and lower self-objectification, although again the study mainly involved female participants. Chen et al. (2023) used latent profile analysis to group users according to social media addiction level and determined that those with high usage had lower psychological well-being. While not body image-focused, per se, these results underscore the importance of problematic social media use as a significant variable when examining psychological and self-perception consequences.

To measure these constructs quantitatively, researchers have employed a number of strong psychometric measures. The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) used by Chen et al. (2023), measures social media addiction on six criteria like salience, mood modification, and conflict. With proven internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$) and wide population validity, the BSMAS is a stable measurement instrument for quantifying social media use based on behavioral engagement. For the measurement of personal predispositions to social comparison, the Iowa Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) has also been used extensively, for example, in the initial study by Fardouly et al. (2016). This 11-item measure taps both opinion-based and ability-based comparison orientations, with high psychometric support (α

> .85). For the measurement of positive body image, the Body Appreciation Scale 2 (BAS 2) has been a gold standard. It assesses the extent to which individuals have positive opinions about, accept, and respect their bodies, and has produced consistently high reliability ($\alpha > .90$) in a variety of demographics (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH GAP, OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

3.1 Research Gap

Despite increasing volumes of research on the association between social media and body image, several important gaps persist in the existing literature. First, the majority of attention is directed toward the adverse effects of social media—such as body dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety, and disordered eating—whereas comparatively fewer studies focus on its ability to foster body positivity, self-acceptance, and empowerment through positive content and supportive online groups. Second, there is an evident geographical imbalance in the studies, with most research conducted among Western populations. This renders it challenging to generalize results to culturally heterogeneous or non-Western contexts, where media consumption habits and body ideals may be quite different.

Third, the majority of previous studies employ cross-sectional designs that only take a snapshot of users' experience and that rule out inferring causality or long-term effects of social media usage on body image. Fourth, the body of literature is concentrated on well-established platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, with a tendency to overlook the unique dynamics of more recent ones such as TikTok, which revolve around algorithm-based video content that could have varying psychological impacts. Lastly, and perhaps most critically, the literature suffers from a significant lack of representation of gender diversity with the majority of studies only focusing on women populations. They include men, trans, and non-binary individuals who are primarily left out, though it can be said there exists proof indicating that they as well have terrible body image.

In light of this backdrop of these lacunae, the current research mainly focuses on encouraging a more expansive understanding of how body image is affected by social media use through bringing together the negative and positive aspects of experiences online. It does so while moving beyond the traditional deficit discourses and acknowledging the potential for social media as a space of body acceptance and diversity promotion. Furthermore, this study aims to augment the international body of literature through its examination of cultural contexts formerly under-represented in the research, thus the relevance and utility of its findings will be increased across diverse populations. The study also aims to capture the dynamic nature of online activity

through consideration of sites such as Snapchat, and Twitter/X whose format-specific content and contagious capacity may shape body image constructs in different ways.

Also, through adopting a gender-inclusive paradigm, the current research identifies and incorporates male, non-binary, and trans users' points of view, hence offering an expansive and equitable reflection of the psychological effects of social media. In doing this, the study not only closes gaps but also establishes the foundation for developing inclusive mental health and media literacy frameworks.

In short, whereas existing literature is rich in body image and social media information, it is of limited scope, representativeness, and methodological sophistication. Excessive focus on negative effects, limited demographic coverage, and outdated platforms is inadequate to communicate the richness of modern digital ways of life. By articulating these limitations, the current research highlights the necessity of a more context-rich, expansive, and balanced examination of social media's role in shaping body image. This is significant for more effective intervention as well as furthering academic understanding of the complex interplay between online behavior and self-concept.

3.2 Aim

The research aimed to explore the impact of social comparison on body image and social media addiction

3.3: Hypothesis

H1 - More social media use will be strongly related to more upward social comparison (in both ability and opinion)

H2 - there is a negative correlation among social media addiction and body appreciation

H3 - There shall be an important disparity between among the age groups in social media engagement upward & downward social comparison, and body appreciation

H4 - the 18 - 21 participants will have lower body appreciation than the 22 - 25 participants

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1: Sample

A total of male individuals aged 18 to 25 years participated in the study. Recruitment was conducted through a convenience sampling approach utilizing online platforms such as social media (including Instagram and Twitter) and university mailing lists. To be eligible for participation in the study, participants were required to (a) be male, (b) be between the ages of 18 and 25 years, and (c) be frequent users of at least one social media site. Individuals failing to meet these parameters were excluded from participation.

4.2: Research Design

This research utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design. This methodology was selected to investigate the connections between social media engagement, social comparison, self-esteem, and body image among young adult men at a specific moment.

The quantitative component enabled the collection of structured numerical data through standardized psychometric questionnaires, which facilitated statistical analysis of the relationships among the variables. The cross-sectional design involved obtaining data from participants at a single point in time, rather than over an extended duration. The correlational aspect focused on determining the strength and direction of the associations between the variables, without manipulating any conditions or presuming causality.

4.3: Tools used

1. The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) - BSMAS is used to measure problem social media usage (PSMU), with six items rated on a 5 - point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often). The items were constructed to capture the extent of preoccupation with social media, such as amount of thinking about or intending to use social media, wishing one could use social media more, using social media as a means of distracting oneself from personal problems, having tried and failed to reduce

consumption of social media, getting annoyed or irritated being unable to use it, and the detrimental effect excessive use of it has on work or study.

scoring - The score of the BSMAS can vary between 6 and 30, where the more points one has, the more risk of PSMU. According to research that utilized the Item Response Theory (IRT), scores over 26 on a scale of 30 signify that there is an increased risk of PSMU.

Psychometric properties -in a study by Daniel Zarate, Ben A Hobson, Evita March, Mark D Griffiths, Vasileios Stavropoulos (2022), The internal consistency of the scale was high in this study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.88$).

2. The Body Appreciation Scale 2 (BAS 2) - The BAS - 2 consists of 10 - items. These items are rated on a 5 - point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always), where higher total scores signify increased body appreciation. This scale is widely used in research on body image, body positivity, and self-perception.

Scoring - A total BA score, ranging from 5 to 50, is obtained by adding all the scores of individual items.

psychometric properties - Previous research evidenced a unidimensional construct with high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$), construct validity and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.90$). Moreover, the internal consistency of BAS-2 in the work of Daniel Zarate, Joshua Marmara, Camilla Potoczny, Warwick Hosking & Vasileios Stavropoulos was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.954$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.956$).

3. Upward and Downward Social Comparison Scale (INCOM Scale) - is an 11 items scale used to assess an individual's tendency to compare themselves to others, particularly in the context of social comparison theory. It measures both non-directional (general tendency to compare) and directional (upward vs. downward) social comparison tendencies. they can respond on a five-point scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree.

Scoring - The response of each participant to each of the 11 items is measured. Items 5 and 11 are reversely scored. All 11 items' scores, including the reversed scores of items 5 and 11, are summed up. The total score is the participant's overall tendency to make social comparisons, with a higher score indicating a higher tendency. A higher score indicates a higher tendency to make social comparisons.

psychometric properties - The scale has reported Cronbach's alphas of .78 to .85 over 10 American samples and .78 to .84 over 12 Dutch samples, including .83 when given to American high school students. The scale has several and well-documented construct and criterion-related validity tests. Confirmatory factor analysis verifies its two-factor model (interest in ability-related and opinion-related comparisons) with Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness-of-fit Index (AGFI) both $> .95$ (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

4.4: Procedure

The data for the research was collected using Google Forms. On the initial page of the form, participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form. Informed consent was obtained before the participants could continue with the survey.

The questionnaire had the following sections: demographics, social media engagement (BSMAS), social comparison (INCOM), and body appreciation (BAS-2). The survey took around 10 to 15 minutes to be completed. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, allowing participants the option to withdraw at any time before submitting their answers. No personal identifying information was gathered.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Independent t test, correlational analysis and regression analysis were computed and the following results were obtained.

5.1: Table 1: Independent sample test to examine the difference between two age groups (18 - 21 & 22 - 25), in their levels of social media addiction, social comparison (two subscales - abilities & opinions), body image.

| Variable | Age group | N | Mean | SD | t (df) | p |
|-------------------------------|-----------|----|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Social media addiction | 18 - 21 | 52 | 16.58 | 5.51 | 119 | .710 |
| | 22 - 25 | 69 | 16.20 | 5.42 | | |
| Abilities | 18 - 21 | 52 | 15.44 | 5.60 | 119 | .129 |
| | 22 - 25 | 69 | 17.01 | 5.60 | | |
| Opinion | 18 - 21 | 52 | 12.94 | 4.01 | 119 | .773 |
| | 22 - 25 | 69 | 12.74 | 3.67 | | |
| Body Image* | 18 - 21 | 52 | 16.58 | 5.51 | 119 | <.001 |
| | 22 - 25 | 69 | 30.71 | 10.79 | | |
| Total comparison | 18 - 21 | 52 | 28.38 | 8.80 | 119 | .371 |

Significant differences were found in Body Image scores between the two age groups : participants aged 22 - 25 (M = 30.71, SD = 10.79) reported significantly higher body image scores than those aged 18 - 21 (M = 16.58, SD = 5.51), $t(106.23) = -9.38, p < .001$.

However, there were no significant differences found between the age groups, for the following variables; social media addiction, abilities, opinions, and total comparison.

5.2: Table 2: Pearson correlational analysis was conducted to explore the relationships among social media addiction, subscales of social comparison; abilities and opinions, and body image.

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------|---|
| 1. Social Media Addiction | — | | | |
| 2. Abilities | -0.316* | — | | |
| 3. Opinion | -0.046 | 0.457* | — | |
| 4. Body Image | -0.076 | 0.246 | -0.001 | — |

Abilities was negatively correlated with Social Media Addiction, $r(121) = -0.316, p < .05$, indicating that individuals who engaged in more abilities - based social comparisons tended to report lower levels of social media addiction. In addition to this, it was positively correlated with Opinions, $r(121) = 0.457, p < .05$.

5.3: Table 3: Multiple regression predicting Social Media Addiction

| Predictor | B | SE B | β | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|------------------|----------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Model 1 | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 21.35 | 1.45 | — | 14.71 | <.001 |
| Abilities | -0.305 | 0.084 | -0.316 | -3.63 | <.001 |
| Model 2 | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 21.34 | 1.62 | — | 13.14 | <.001 |
| Abilities | -0.306 | 0.087 | -0.317 | -3.51 | <.001 |
| Body Image | 0.001 | 0.043 | 0.002 | 0.022 | .983 |

Abilities was the only significant predictor ($\beta = -.0316$, $p < .001$). Participants who rated themselves higher in abilities tended to report lower social media addiction. Body image was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .002$, $p = .983$).

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to explore the effect social media engagement has on body appreciation along with upward and downward social comparison. The Bergen Social Media Addiction scale (BSMAS) was utilised in this research. It classifies social media addiction as a unidimensional construct and consists of six elements (1. Salience; 2. Tolerance; 3. Mood modification; 4. Relapse / loss of control; 5. Withdrawal; and 6. Conflict / functional impairment). The participants were required to select one option out of five options, ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = very rarely; 2= rarely; 3= sometimes; 4 = often; and 5 = very often). The result is termed the BSMAS raw score. The questionnaire aims to measure the extent to which social media becomes an obsession, such as contemplating or preparing to engage with social media, desiring to use it excessively, using it as an escape from problems, making attempts to limit use and failing, feeling annoyed or angry when access to the device is restricted, as well as the negative repercussions that stem from the overuse of social media on work or academics. The total score of the BSMAS ranges from 6 to 30, and higher scores indicate a greater risk of problematic social media use (PSMU). According to studies that have used the Item Response Theory (IRT), higher scores above 26 on 30 indicate a greater risk of PSMU.

Other than this, the Body Appreciation Scale 2 (BAS 2) was used in the study, which has been developed by (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). It is a 10 - item scale, that is widely used to measure an individual's acceptance of themselves, favourable opinions and respect of their own body. Like the BSMAS, participants are asked to respond to each item by selecting one of five options (1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always). To compute an individual's final body appreciation score, it is done so by all the items responded being summed up together, yielding a total score between 5 & 50. A higher score indicates higher levels of body appreciation.

Iowa Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) was created by Gibbons & Buunk, 1999. This was created to measure the tendency of a person to make social comparisons.

It scales to what extent an individual is going to compare their abilities, opinions, and feelings with someone else. The INCOM identifies two main dimensions: ability-based comparisons (performance-based) and opinion-based comparisons (values and beliefs-based). It is an 11 - item

Likert scale. Respondents are asked to answer each item by choosing one of the five alternatives, these run from 1: strongly agree to 5 : strongly disagree. One's final score is calculated by summing up all the items. Items 5 & 11 are reversely scored. The final score ranges from 11 to 55 with higher scores indicating higher tendencies of social comparison, reflecting a greater interest in comparing one's opinions and abilities with others.

There were four hypothesis established at the beginning of the study : -

H1 - More social media use will be strongly related to more upward social comparison (in both ability and opinion)

H2 - there is a negative correlation among social media addiction and body appreciation

H3 - There shall be an important disparity between among the age groups in social media engagement upward & downward social comparison, and body appreciation

H4 - the 18 - 21 participants will have lower body appreciation than the 22 - 25 participants

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Independent t test, correlational analysis and regression analysis were computed and the following results were obtained. Independent sample test was conducted to determine the difference between two groups of ages (18 - 21 & 22 - 25), for their addiction towards social media, social comparison (two subscales - abilities & opinions), and body image. A Pearson correlational analysis was performed to assess the relationship between social media addiction, subscales of social comparison; abilities & opinions, and body image. Lastly, regression analysis was utilised to statistically assess the degree to which the social comparison attributes of abilities and opinions and the levels of social media addiction significantly predict variation in individuals' body appreciation.

From the results derived, it was indicated that the H1 was accepted, H2 was accepted, H3 was rejected and the H4 was accepted

Our first hypothesis, which stated that increased levels of social media engagement will be significantly associated with increased upward social comparison (in both abilities and opinion), was accepted. On the basis that in this study a statistically positive correlation was found between social media engagement and upward social comparison. Social media activity offers rich settings for upward social comparisons since social media users come across idealized presentations of other people's achievements and views. For instance, Pedalino and Camerini (2022) ascertained that passive Instagram scanning was related to higher frequencies of upward comparisons toward social media influencers. In said research (N = 291), more usage of Instagram resulted in less self-evaluation of capacities and opinions, with complete mediation of heightened upward comparison with influencers. The acquired data indicate that increased usage of social media content is found to be linked with increased upward social comparison processes. This aligns with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and follow-up work demonstrating that observing edited peer content online tends to lead users to compare to better others. Therefore, individuals who spend more time liking, commenting, or browsing social media streams are likely to report higher levels of upward comparisons on both the ability and opinion dimensions (e.g., comparing the respondent's own life or views to the lives or views of others). Overall, empirical research confirms an overall positive correlation between social media use and upward social comparison (ability and opinion dimensions).

The second hypothesis which states that there is a negative correlation among social media addiction and body appreciation was accepted. The findings indicated that social media addiction is negatively correlated with body appreciation. This implies that high or compulsive use of social media could play a role in more negative views of one's body, possibly because one gets more exposed to idealized representations and social comparison. Research identifies that

higher or addictive usage of the internet and social media has been linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction (the reverse of body appreciation). For instance, in one study by (N = 368) Delgado-Rodríguez et al. (2022) established that young adult women with elevated symptoms of social network addiction experienced significantly higher thin ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction. In their model of mediation, increased Social networking sites (SNS) addiction was associated with higher levels of awareness of appearance pressures and internalization, which in turn anticipated worse body dissatisfaction. Since body dissatisfaction is a condition of not appreciating one's body, these findings suggest that increased social media addiction is associated with decreased body appreciation. That is, addictive use of social sites seems to create adverse body perceptions through internalized ideals. Therefore, the empirical evidence indicates a negative correlation between social media addiction and positive body image – i.e. greater addictive use is linked with lower body appreciation.

The third hypothesis, there shall be an important disparity among the age groups in social media engagement, upward & downward comparison, and body appreciation, was rejected, as only body appreciation showed a statistically significant difference across the age groups. Studies repeatedly indicate that younger individuals use social media more and compare themselves more with others, and that body appreciation increases with age. For example, Pew Research (Auxier & Anderson, 2021) discovered that roughly 84% of U.S. adults aged 18–29 use social media, while only 45% of those aged 65 and older

Parallel to this, younger adults are more engaged on visually-oriented sites (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) that tend to elicit comparison. In accordance with this, Lee and Lee (2022) also found that older women were substantially more likely to demonstrate increased levels of body image perceptions and body appreciation in contrast to younger women. These trends suggest that age

will moderate the study variables: younger groups will have greater social media use, more upward comparisons, and greater addiction tendencies, whereas older groups will have greater body appreciation. In fact, cross-sectional research indicates that upward comparison tendencies decrease with age, and that body appreciation increases throughout life. Thus, we expect large age group differences in social media engagement, social comparison (upward), social media addiction, & body appreciation, with younger groups tending to be more engaged/comparing/addicted and less appreciative than older groups

Lastly, the fourth hypothesis, which stated the participants aged 18 - 21 will report lower levels of body appreciation than participants aged 22 - 25, was accepted as a significant difference was found with older participants having higher levels of body appreciation. The studies that were previously stated for the third hypothesis, corroborate the fourth hypothesis as well. As discussed in the earlier hypothesis, Lee and Lee (2022) (N = 531) found older females to be much more likely to possess a positive perception of themselves as compared to young women. Such a finding depicts the potential functioning of age with body image consequences and offers some hint that age might serve as a moderating variable in this research. Based on this, younger individuals are expected to have higher rates of social media use, engage in more frequent upward social comparisons, and experience stronger tendencies towards social media addiction. Older adults, by contrast, are expected to exhibit higher body appreciation, perhaps due to higher self-acceptance and lower vulnerability to online appearance pressures with increasing age. These trends require consideration of age differences when seeking to understand the psychological effects of social media use.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, & FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 CONCLUSION

This research sought to explore the interactions among body image, social comparison and social addiction specifically focusing on the operation of these components in the context of virtual environments. Findings show there is a considerable correlation between increased social comparison—namely opinions—and social media addiction. A negative relationship was established between social media dependence and body appreciation, which suggests that individuals who are more involved in social media are more inclined to be dissatisfied or possess negative body attitudes.

These results corroborate Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, establishing its ongoing relevance in the framework of modern social media use. The results confirm the hypothesis that social media platforms—especially visual ones like Instagram—can lead to increased upward comparisons and lead to negative effects on self-perception and body image. Surprisingly, both appearance- and opinion-based comparisons were found to significantly influence participants' experiences on the web, showing that the scope of comparison extends beyond physical characteristics to broader lifestyle and value-related dimensions.

By incorporating empirically validated measures such as the INCOM, BAS-2, and BSMAS, this study offers a comprehensive framework for examining how digital social environments affect self-concept and addictive behavior. It contributes to the growth of existing literature emphasizing the psychological burden of digital comparison, particularly among users most at risk for internalizing idealized representations and social norms present online.

It is worth mentioning that this study was conducted on male participants exclusively. This focus makes a positive contribution to an area of research that has generally concentrated on social comparison and body image experiences in females. It does, however, remind us to be cautious in applying the findings to larger populations, such as females and non-binary participants, who may have varying experiences and reactions to social media

7.2: FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could use the current study as a foundation in several ways. Longitudinal research is especially necessary to monitor the progression of social comparison behaviors over time and whether or not they exert long-term influence on mental well-being and self-esteem. Qualitative methods—e.g., interviews or reflexive diaries—might also offer greater depth of understanding about users' experiences of comparison and social media usage. A wider sample that comprised female, non-binary, and more demographically representative participants would increase the study's generalizability. The impact of algorithmic curation and psychological consequences of personalized content feeds also need to be examined further.

7.3: LIMITATIONS

It is crucial to recognise the study's limitations even though it offered a number of insightful findings. The sample was only limited to university - aged male participants, this may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other genders and age groups. In addition to this, this was a cross - sectional study which prevents any causal inferences from being made regarding the directionality of the observed relationships. The use of self-report measures can also be prone to response biases, including social desirability or self-report inaccuracy. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides a useful addition to the literature by establishing the psychological effects of social media-based comparisons in young men and laying the groundwork for future research and intervention development in this field.

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