The Shaping of Youths` Body Image by Social Media: The Interplay between Virtual and Real Self-Identity

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Abstract
In nowadays' digitalized society, social media has become an important part of young people's lives, profoundly affecting their self-perception, identity, etc., among which, body image have become one of the highly concerned fields. Through social platforms, youths are not only exposed to a wide range of social expectations, but also continue to shape their own body image through comparison, interaction, and feedback. However, there may be a significant discrepancy between the virtual self in social media and the real self, and the impact of this disparity on youths' body image has yet to be fully explored. Therefore, exploring how social media shapes adolescents' body image, particularly the interplay between the virtual self and the real self, is crucial for understanding how youths navigate body image pressures in the information society. This exploration can also provide insights for psychological health interventions and educational strategies. In this study, the results suggest that social media puts greater pressure on individuals to conform to idealized body standards, and that discrepancies between the virtual and real selves often lead to cognitive biases and affect mood and self-perceptions. In addition, the evaluations of others on social media play an important role in shaping self-identity. Although three participants did not report receiving negative social media influence, the results of the study highlight the role of the media in promoting a single aesthetic standard and the negative impact of social media evaluations on mood, as well as the limited ways in which individuals' adopt coping styles. Future research should aim to help young people develop healthier social media relationships, explore potentially positive aspects of social media use, and develop and evaluate interventions aimed at promoting positive body image.
Keywords: Body Image, Social Media, Self-Identity, Youths

Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of youths' daily lives, profoundly influencing their self-perception, identity formation, and social interactions (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Among these influences, body image--a multidimensional construct

encompassing how individuals perceive, think, and feel about their bodies—has emerged as a critical area of concern (Cash, 2012). Adolescents, in particular, are highly susceptible to the pressures and ideals propagated through social media platforms, where curated images and narratives often dominate (Perloff, 2014). These platforms not only serve as spaces for self-expression but also as arenas for social comparison, feedback, and validation (Valkenburg et al., 2006).

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has created an environment where young people are constantly exposed to curated and idealized representations of beauty and body image. This exposure has significant implications for their mental health, particularly in terms of body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and identity formation. Recent studies have shown that adolescents who spend more time on social media are more likely to engage in upward social comparisons, leading to increased body dissatisfaction and anxiety (Fardouly et al., 2015; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Moreover, the normalization of photo-editing tools and filters has exacerbated these issues, creating a landscape where unrealistic beauty standards prevail (Merino et al., 2024). Given the pervasive influence of social media on young people's lives, it is crucial to understand how these platforms shape their body image and self-identity, particularly in the context of the interplay between their virtual and real selves. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the nuanced ways in which social media influences body image perceptions and the psychological consequences of the discrepancy between the virtual and real self.

The interplay between social media and body image among youths has evolved significantly over the past few decades, marked by advancements in technology and shifts in cultural norms. Historically, the portrayal of ideal body types has been shaped by various media, including television, magazines, and film, with a focus on unattainable beauty standards. This phenomenon laid the groundwork for the contemporary challenges faced by adolescents in the digital age (Krzymowski, 2024). With the rise of the internet in the late 20th century, social media platforms began to proliferate, fundamentally changing how individuals, particularly adolescents, interact with media and each other (Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Teen Futures, n.d.).

The proliferation of social media has transformed how youths engage with the world and themselves. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat provide spaces where users can curate and share idealized versions of their lives, often emphasizing physical appearance (Chua & Chang, 2016). For youths, who are in a critical stage of identity development, these platforms offer both opportunities and challenges (Erikson, 1968). On one hand, social media allows for creative self-expression and social connection; on the other hand, it exposes users to unrealistic beauty standards, peer pressure, and constant comparison (Fardouly et al., 2015). Research has consistently shown that exposure to idealized body images on social media is associated with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and disordered eating behaviors (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). However, less attention has been paid to the nuanced ways in which youths navigate the tension between their virtual and real selves, and how this tension influences their body image (McLean et al., 2015). The concept of the virtual self refers to the identity individuals construct and present on social media, often characterized by selective self-presentation and adherence to perceived social norms (Zhao et al., 2008). In contrast, the real self reflects an individual's offline identity, shaped by

personal experiences, relationships, and self-reflection (Higgins, 1987). The discrepancy between these two selves can lead to psychological distress, particularly when the virtual self becomes overly idealized or disconnected from reality (Vogel et al., 2014). For youths, who are still developing a stable sense of self, this discrepancy may exacerbate body image concerns and contribute to identity confusion (Erikson, 1968).

The impact of social media on adolescent body image can be understood through various theoretical frameworks that elucidate the mechanisms of social comparison and self-perception. One prevalent framework is Social Comparison Theory, which posits that individuals assess their own worth and attractiveness by comparing themselves to others, often leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and body image disturbances, especially among youths (Krzymowski, 2024). This theory emphasizes that upward comparisons, where individuals compare themselves to those perceived as superior in attractiveness or social status, are particularly detrimental. Such comparisons can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction, as youths grapple with the discrepancies between their perceived bodies and societal ideals (Mahon & Hevey, 2021; Krzymowski, 2024). Additionally, a constructivist epistemology underlies the qualitative research conducted on this topic, emphasizing the subjective experiences of youths as they navigate social media environments (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). This approach allows researchers to capture the nuanced ways in which girls interpret their social media interactions and the resulting influence on their body image perceptions. Through in-depth interviews, participants have articulated that viewing idealized images on platforms like Instagram often results in negative appearance comparisons, regardless of whether the images are sexualized or not (Mahon & Hevey, 2021; Papageorgiou et al., 2022). The research also identifies four overarching themes that characterize these experiences: expectation, comparison, striving, and validation. These themes reflect the multifaceted nature of social media's impact on body image, revealing how youths not only compare themselves to peers and celebrities but also strive for validation through likes and comments, which can further distort their self-image (Papageorgiou et al., 2022).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of social media on young people's body image and mental health. By understanding the mechanisms through which social media influences body image, particularly the role of social comparison and the discrepancy between the virtual and real self, we can develop targeted strategies to promote healthier social media use. Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the psychological impact of social media by providing a nuanced understanding of how young people navigate the pressures of maintaining an idealized online persona. This is particularly relevant in the context of increasing rates of body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and eating disorders among adolescents, which have been linked to social media use (Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Krzymowski, 2024).

The shaping of adolescent body image by social media represents a critical intersection between virtual and real self-identity, profoundly influencing how young individuals perceive themselves and their bodies. As social media platforms have become central to youths' social lives, they have concurrently introduced pervasive ideals of beauty that are often unattainable and heavily curated. This phenomenon is notable for its implications on mental health, self-esteem, and body satisfaction, with research indicating a correlation between

engagement with idealized content and increased rates of body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and even eating disorders among youth (Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Krzymowski, 2024; Teen Futures, n.d.).

The role of social media in shaping body image is complex and multifaceted, marked by an interplay of social comparison, societal pressures, and the internalization of media messages. Frameworks such as Social Comparison Theory illustrate how youths evaluate their own worth against the filtered and edited representations of peers and influencers, often leading to negative self-perception and mental health challenges (Mahon & Hevey, 2021; learn-About Face, n.d.). Moreover, the normalization of photo-editing tools and filters has exacerbated these issues, creating a landscape where unrealistic beauty standards prevail and can lead to detrimental self-judgment and self-esteem issues among young users (Merino et al., 2024; Miral, 2024).

Prominent controversies surrounding this topic include the impact of social media influencers, who often perpetuate idealized lifestyles that can distort reality for their followers, fostering a culture of comparison and inadequacy (Gary, 2023; Kaitlin et al., 2024; Merino et al., 2024;). Additionally, the psychological consequences of social media engagement highlight significant risks, including depression, anxiety, and the development of eating disorders, particularly among vulnerable populations (Anadia, 2023; Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2024).

As awareness of these challenges grows, understanding how youths negotiate these dual identities is crucial for developing effective interventions to promote positive body image and mental health (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to provide insights into how youths present themselves on social media, how they are affected by the display of body image on the platforms, and the relationship between the virtual and real selves in order to inform mental health interventions and education.

Methods
Participants
This study was conducted in southern China with a youth population that is very active on social media and is at a critical stage of identity formation. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, university bulletin boards, and community centers to ensure a diverse sample. The inclusion criteria required that participants were regular users of at least one social media platform (e.g., TikTok, WeChat, REDnote) and had been using these platforms for a minimum of two years. This criterion was set to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and exposure to social media influences on body image.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and removing any identifying information from the transcripts. Data were stored securely, and access was restricted to the researcher. Based on the voluntary principle, 12 participants (5 males and 7 females, 2 of the participants were involved in the pilot study) were eventually recruited (refer to Table 1), which is in line with recommendation form Guest et al. (2006) that sample sizes for interview should be 6-12.

Table 1
Subject Information

	Item	N	Percent
Gender	male	5	41.67%
	female	7	58.33%
Average age	22.60		

Procedure

Before conducting the interviews, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify key themes and constructs related to body image, social media use, and self-identity. This review informed the development of a semi-structured interview guide, which was designed to explore four main dimensions: (1) social media expectations and pressures related to body image, (2) the impact of external evaluations on body image perception, (3) conflicts between social media portrayals and personal body image, and (4) attitudes towards body privacy and display on social media. The interview guide included open-ended questions to allow participants to express their thoughts freely and to encourage in-depth discussions.

A pilot study was conducted with two participants (one male and one female) to refine the interview guide and ensure that the questions were clear and elicited the intended information. Feedback from the pilot study was used to adjust the wording of some questions and to add prompts that could help participants elaborate on their responses.

Participants were interviewed individually in a quiet, private setting, and the interviews were conducted via videoconference, with each interview lasting 60 minutes and recorded with the participant's consent. At the beginning of each interview, participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. They were also allowed to ask questions before the start of the interview. Interviews were conducted conversationally to make participants feel comfortable and encourage open expression.

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. During the familiarization phase, the transcribed text was read over and over again to gain a deeper understanding of the data. Initial codes were then generated by identifying meaningful segments of text that related to the research questions. These codes were organized into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined through an iterative process. The final themes were defined and named, and illustrative quotes were selected to support the findings.

Results

10 participants were subjected to formal semi-structured interviews, which were organized into four themes according to the interview outline, and the results of the analysis of each theme are presented below.

Theme 1: Social Media Expectations and Pressures on Body Image

Theme 1 focuses on whether the image of perfection displayed on social media creates implicit standards of body image for youth, and if so, how these standards influence individuals' perceptions and expectations of their own bodies. The results of the semi-structured interviews are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of the Analysis of theme 1

Item	Category	Result
1	Do you feel the need to present a particular body image on social media (e.g., thin, muscular, stylish, etc.)?	Needing (or sometimes needing) to, especially when others on social media show images of good shape, thinness, style, muscle and fitness(male), etc.
2	Have you ever felt low self-esteem or anxiety because of the body image you see displayed by others on social media?	Yes, when contrasted with others displaying a great image (thin, white, etc.) and when others get a lot of likes. Also feel lost because they can't manage their body strictly enough to achieve perfection. Two of the males said that although they do feel low self-esteem or anxiety, it does not last long.
3	How do you feel you are affected by the image of the "perfect body" on social media? Have you ever wanted to mimic or change your body to conform to this standard?	Feeling body anxiety and a tendency to compare and under-confidence, and will diet, work out and wear make-up in order to achieve perfection. Wanting to replicate their image and feeling like they have the perfect body to be recognized leads to being too tired and self-questioning, and ultimately of having to adjust their mindset on their own. Two of the male participants indicated that they had thought about it, but only in passing.

Theme 2: Social Media Expectations and Pressures on Body Image

Theme 2 focuses on how evaluations from others on social media shape an individual's self-identity, body image perceptions, and influence emotions. The results of the semi-structured interviews are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Results of the analysis of theme 2

Item	Category	Result
4	Do you pay attention to what others say about your appearance when you post body-related content on social media? How much do these comments affect you?	Will pay attention to what others are evaluating. Positive evaluations can make oneself feel happy and confident, while negative evaluations affect mood, create negative experiences and begin to reflect on what is not being done well. In addition, only two participants indicated that they pay attention but do not care much.
5	Do you feel that social media presence gives you more confidence or makes you more uneasy? Can you be more specific about why?	Body image displays on social media can make individuals more anxious and distressed because of the fear of receiving negative comments, as well as increasing the frequency of comparisons, accentuating gaps with others, and the fear of aversion from others who see their real selves. In addition, the harvesting of likes, while conducive to improving self-confidence, exacerbated the uneasiness associated with the gap between the virtual and real selves. Only one male participant reported that image presentation leads to self-confidence.

Theme 3: Social Media Expectations and Pressures on Body Image

Theme 3 focuses on whether the contrast between the virtual self-constructed on social media and the real body image leads to cognitive bias and how this bias affects mood. The results of the semi-structured interviews are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of the analysis of theme 3

Item	Category	Result
6	How do you view your body image in real life versus the image you display on social media? Do you think there is a difference between the two?	There are differences between the two, with social media presenting a more aesthetically pleasing perspective that is used to create the perfect persona.
7	When you present yourself on social media differently from your real self (e.g., use of filters, modification of photos, choice of angles, etc.), do you feel that this difference affects your perception of your body?	6 participants (1 male and 5 females) reported that their perception of their bodies would be affected, and that they would have a psychological gap and lack of confidence, and that they would begin to doubt whether they would not look good if they did not groom, and that they could not accept the reality of their own selves, and that they would not be able to differentiate between themselves and their real selves. Three participants (2 males and 1 female) indicated that they were affected at first, but later felt that the comparison with others was meaningless, and one participant (male) indicated that was not affected, and displayed on social media just to get likes.
8	Have you ever felt conflicted or anxious about the inconsistency between your social media presentation of your virtual self and your real self? If so, how did you cope?	Yes, having this experience leads to thoughts of "if only reality were so perfect". This can even be carried over into reality, with the fear that real friends will think one is imperfect. Ways to cope with this include: shifting attention (e.g., focusing on the inner self, studying, traveling, getting in touch with new things, etc.), gradually reducing the amount of grooming done to oneself, and posting fewer personal photos.

Theme 4: Social Media Expectations and Pressures on Body Image

Theme 4 focuses on the individual's boundaries of body protection and display, and their motivations. The results of the semi-structured interviews are shown in Table 4.

Table 5

Results of the analysis of theme 4

Item	Category	Result
9	Have you ever experienced wanting to hide or avoid showing a part of your body on social media? Why?	Yes, trying to cover up the shortcomings of the body (what you feel is not good enough for you, such as thick arms, not thin enough waist) and showing only what feels good because minding the negative comments of others.

Discussions

The semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 participants revealed significant insights into the impact of social media on body image perceptions, self-confidence, and self-identity. The analysis was organized into four themes: (1) Social Media Expectations and

Pressures on Body Image, (2) Evaluations from Others on Social Media, (3) The Contrast Between Virtual and Real Self, and (4) Boundaries of Body Protection and Display. The findings indicate that social media exerts considerable pressure on individuals to conform to idealized body standards, leading to body anxiety, low self-esteem, and a tendency to compare oneself with others. Participants reported feeling the need to present a particular body image on social media, often resorting to photo editing, filters, and selective angles to create a more aesthetically pleasing persona. This discrepancy between the virtual and real self often led to cognitive biases, affecting mood and self-perception. Additionally, evaluations from others on social media played a crucial role in shaping self-identity, with positive comments boosting confidence and negative comments causing distress. Only three participants did not report the negative impact of social media on them. And the way they cope is basically through their own willful efforts, such as self-regulation, reading, and exercise.

The findings of this study underscore the pervasive influence of social media on body image and self-perception, particularly among young people. The pressure to conform to idealized body standards, often perpetuated by influencers and celebrities on social media, can lead to significant psychological distress. This is consistent with previous research that highlights the role of social media in promoting unrealistic beauty standards (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015). The participants' experiences of body anxiety and low self-esteem align with the concept of "social comparison theory," which posits that individuals evaluate their own worth based on comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). In the context of social media, these comparisons are often upward, leading to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's own body (Vogel et al., 2014). Moreover, the findings highlight the emotional impact of social media evaluations. Positive feedback can enhance self-confidence, while negative comments can lead to self-doubt and anxiety. This is consistent with the "feedback loop" theory, which suggests that social media users are constantly seeking validation through likes and comments, and that this validation can significantly impact their self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). The participants' experiences of feeling uneasy and anxious about their social media presence further emphasize the emotional toll of maintaining a curated online persona.

There are similarities and differences between the results of this study and the existing literature. For instance, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) found that exposure to social media images of thin and attractive individuals was associated with increased body dissatisfaction among young women. Similarly, Fardouly et al. (2015) reported that young women who spent more time on Facebook were more likely to compare their appearance to others and experience body dissatisfaction. The present study extends these findings by highlighting the role of social media evaluations in shaping self-identity and the emotional impact of maintaining a curated online persona. However, the findings also reveal some nuances that are not fully captured in the existing literature. For example, while previous studies have primarily focused on the negative impact of social media on body image, this study also highlights the potential for positive feedback to boost self-confidence. This suggests that the relationship between social media use and body image is complex and multifaceted, and that future research should explore the conditions under which social media can have a positive impact on self-esteem.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In conclusion, this study provides some references to the interaction between virtual and real self-identity in youths under the influence of social media. The findings highlight the pervasive influence of social media in promoting unrealistic beauty standards, leading to body anxiety, low self-confidence, and a tendency to compare oneself with others. The study also underscores the emotional impact of social media evaluations, with positive feedback boosting self-confidence and negative comments causing distress. The findings have important theoretical and practical implications, highlighting the need for interventions that help young people develop a healthier relationship with social media, as well as the responsibility of social media platforms to mitigate the negative impact of their platforms on users' mental health. Future research should aim to address the limitations of this study and explore the potential positive aspects of social media use, as well as the development and evaluation of interventions aimed at promoting positive body image and self-esteem.

The findings of this study have theoretical implications for our understanding of the relationship between social media use and body image. The concept of "social comparison theory" (Festinger, 1954) is particularly relevant, as it helps to explain why individuals are prone to comparing themselves with others on social media and how these comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy. The study also supports the "feedback loop" theory (Valkenburg et al., 2006), which suggests that social media users are constantly seeking validation through likes and comments, and that this validation can significantly impact their self-esteem. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of considering the role of self-identity in the context of social media use. The participants' experiences of feeling conflicted about the inconsistency between their virtual and real selves suggest that social media can create a fragmented sense of self, where individuals feel pressure to maintain a curated online persona that may not align with their real-life identity. This is consistent with the concept of "self-discrepancy theory" (Higgins, 1987), which posits that individuals experience emotional distress when there is a discrepancy between their actual self and their ideal self.

To address the challenges identified in this study, it is essential to develop multi-faceted interventions that target both individual and systemic levels. At the individual level, educational programs should be implemented to enhance critical media literacy skills among young people, enabling them to recognize and challenge unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by social media (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Additionally, mental health professionals should incorporate discussions about social media use into their therapeutic practices, helping young people develop healthier coping mechanisms and a more positive body image. At the systemic level, social media platforms have a responsibility to mitigate the negative impact of their platforms on users' mental health. This could include implementing features that promote positive body image, such as banning or restricting the use of filters that promote unrealistic beauty standards (Merino et al., 2024). Furthermore, social media companies should provide resources and support for users who are struggling with body image issues, such as links to mental health services or forums where users can share their experiences and support one another.

Meanwhile, this study also provides some references on practical exercises. First, the study highlights the need for interventions that help young people develop a healthier relationship with social media. This could include educational programs that teach critical

media literacy skills, enabling individuals to recognize and challenge unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by social media. Additionally, mental health professionals should be aware of the potential impact of social media on body image and self-confidence, and should incorporate discussions about social media use into their therapeutic practices. Second, the findings suggest that social media platforms have a responsibility to mitigate the negative impact of their platforms on users' mental health. This could include implementing features that promote positive body image, such as banning or restricting the use of filters that promote unrealistic beauty standards. Social media companies could also provide resources and support for users who are struggling with body image issues, such as links to mental health services or forums where users can share their experiences and support one another.

While this study informs the impact of social media on body image, there are some limitations. First, While the number of participants was in line with the semi-structured interview sample size, it limited the breadth of participant types. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to ensure that the findings are representative of a broader population. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Participants may have been reluctant to disclose their true feelings or experiences, particularly if they felt that their responses would be judged. Another limitation is that the study focused exclusively on the negative impact of social media on body image, without exploring the potential positive aspects of social media use. Future research should aim to provide a more balanced perspective by examining both the positive and negative effects of social media on body image and self-esteem.

Future research should aim to address the limitations of this study by including a larger and more diverse sample, as well as exploring the potential positive aspects of social media use. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of different social media platforms in shaping body image perceptions. For example, TikTok is known for its focus on visual content, which may have a different impact on body image compared to platforms like WeChat or Facebook, which are more text-based. Another important area for future research is the development and evaluation of interventions aimed at mitigating the negative impact of social media on body image. This could include educational programs that teach critical media literacy skills, as well as interventions that promote positive body image and self-esteem. Additionally, future research could explore the role of social media influencers in shaping body image perceptions, and whether interventions aimed at influencers could help to promote more realistic and diverse representations of beauty on social media.

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