

The Impact of Social Media Engagement on Body Image Among College-Going Students.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the relationship between social media engagement and body image among college-going students by taking into consideration gender and academic stream. The study sample consisted of 240 students (120 male, 120 female) from each stream (Science, Commerce, Arts). Tools used for the study are: Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) and Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-34). A 2x3 factorial design was used for the study. Statistical analysis was done by using one-way and two-way ANOVA along with Pearson correlation. The results showed no significant differences in social media engagement as far as gender and stream are concerned. However, motive-based differences across streams were found. No significant effects of gender were found for body image concern, but academic streams showed a significant difference. Correlation analysis between social media engagement and body image concern showed no significant correlation. Results suggest that while digital behaviour may be common, its psychological impacts are not uniform. This research emphasises the need for nuanced mental health approaches to understand digital influences on college-going students.

Keywords: social media, body image, college students, gender, academic stream.

1.Introduction

In the digital age we live in now, social media is a very integral part of our day-to-day lives. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are all examples of social media platforms that have completely transformed how people connect, talk to each other, and see themselves and others (van Dijck, 2013). These days, the digital world revolves around the rapid exchange of thoughts, images, and opinions blurring the line between what's public and what's personal. This transformation has definitely brought good opportunities for self expression, building community, and networking purposes, but it has also led to significant challenges like spreading fake news, cyber privacy concerns, and the rising pressure of meeting unrealistic standards of beauty and success (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Social media is used by college students not only just for fun. In fact, it's a very big part of their day-to-day lives. It allows them to collaborate for academic purposes and also to maintain their social connections, but it can also make them feel inadequate, anxious, and likely to get

into social comparison (Festinger, 1954). This is because they are constantly connected and highly exposed to idealised versions of their peers, influencers, and celebrities. College students likely start figuring out their identity, autonomy and belonging. Social Media usually plays a very complicated role here. It helps students feel validated and have a sense of community but on the other side, it can also make them vulnerable towards negative influences like peer pressure and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2015). It is important to study “The Impact of Social Media Engagement and Body Image among College-going Students” because more and more evidence has shown that the way people act online is very closely linked to their mental health (Kross et al., 2013).

1.1 Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement is not only about how often someone uses it, it's a multifaceted concept. It is a layered concept which tries to touch on how deeply or meaningfully individuals interact using these digital platforms. Social media engagement can be active or passive (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). For some, it's active like constantly sharing updates, commenting on posts or chatting with friends. For others, it might be passive like just scrolling videos or post browsing feeds or following the activities of others. Hence, not only the quantity but even the quality of social media engagement can affect people psychologically (Verduyn et al., 2017).

1.2 Body Image

Body image plays a very important role in self-concept, i.e., how people see themselves. It's the picture we carry of our own physical appearance. It is shaped by perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about one's own physical appearance (Grogan, 2016). Body image doesn't just come out of nowhere; it is shaped over time by our personal experiences, standards of society, the media we consume, and even the feedback we receive from people around us. Body image is not static. It keeps on changing over time. It may change suddenly or drastically in different stages of life and stages of development. Body image really impacts how college students deal with people, hence it is a pervasive concern among them. Studies show that a significant percentage of college students, and young adults in general, feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006).

2. Review of Literature

The impact of social media use and issues with body image on college students is complicated, according to the research included in this chapter. Social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook encourage users to constantly compare themselves to others and feel bad about their bodies due to their addictive and appearance-focused design (Perloff, 2014). Dissatisfaction has a multiplicative effect on a person's emotional well-being and self-esteem. Researchers have pointed out that constant exposure to idealized online content shapes how individuals think about themselves. Repeated encounters with edited and curated images create unattainable standards, which may lead to frustration, self-doubt and social avoidance (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Clemons et al. (2020) surveyed 120 female college students at Old Dominion University to investigate the correlation between Instagram use and body image satisfaction. Contrary to many prior studies, they found no significant negative relationship between time spent on Instagram and body image. However, qualitative responses indicated that individual factors

such as resilience, self-esteem, and media literacy might moderate the impact of social media. The authors suggested that interventions should consider these protective factors.

In her review of the literature on the mental effects of social media, Robbins (2025) zeroed in on how these platforms affect college students' perceptions of their bodies. She contended that viewing well staged, idealized photos on a daily basis encourages people to compare themselves to others, which in turn lowers their self-esteem, causes them to be less satisfied with their bodies, and even increases their risk of developing mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Robbins emphasized the importance of media literacy and critical thinking as protective strategies and called for community-level interventions.

Kolhar et al. (2021) surveyed Indian university students to find out how their use of social media affected their body image perceptions. According to their findings, students who spent more time on Instagram and Snapchat also had higher levels of body dissatisfaction and were more likely to compare themselves to peers and celebrities. The study highlighted the importance of media literacy programs in India to build resilience against appearance pressures. Ballard Brief (2024) synthesized findings from several studies, noting that frequent social media use among sedentary U.S. college students was linked to lower engagement in physical activity and higher body dissatisfaction. One cited study found that exposure to edited, idealized images led to lower body satisfaction and a greater desire for thinness.

3. Research Methodology

This section details the methodology used in the study.

3.1 Statement of Research Problem

To study “The Impact of social media engagement on body image among college going students.”

3.2 Objectives

1. To study the social media engagement of college going students with respect to their gender and stream.
2. To study the body image concern of college going students with respect to their gender and stream.
3. To study the relationship between social media engagement and body image concern of college going students.

3.3 Hypotheses

Ho1: There will be no significant difference between male and female college going students with regards to their social media engagement (Relaxation/Free Periods)

Ho2: There will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their social media engagement (Relaxation/Free Periods)

Ho3: There will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their motives as a dimension of social media engagement.

Ho4: There will be no significant difference between male and female college going students with regards to their body image concern.

Ho5: There will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their body image concern.

Ho6: There will be no significant correlation between social media engagement and body image concern among college going students.

3.4 Variables

- Independent Variables: Gender (Male, Female), Academic Stream (Science, Commerce, Arts)
- Dependent Variables: Social Media Engagement, Body Image Concern

3.5 Sample and Its Distribution

A total of 240 college-going students were selected from various colleges in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Respondents must be undergraduate students.
- Age of the respondents must be between 18 to 22 years.
- Respondents must be from either the Science, Commerce, or Arts stream.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Respondents who are post-graduate students.
- Respondents below 18 years or above 22 years of age.

The sample distribution is as follows:

	Science	Commerce	Arts	Total
Male	40	40	40	120
Female	40	40	40	120
Total	80	80	80	240

3.6 Research Tools

1. Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) by Olufadi, Y. (2016) was used to measure social media engagement.
2. Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-34) by Cooper, P. J., Taylor, M. J., Cooper, Z., & Fairburn, C. G. (1987) was used to measure body image concern.

3.7 Procedure

The data was collected from 240 undergraduate students from colleges in Ahmedabad district. The sample consisted of 120 males and 120 females, with 40 students from each of the three streams (Science, Commerce, and Arts). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. Data collection was conducted after obtaining permission from the college authorities. The process took place in quiet, well-lit classrooms to minimize distractions. Each participant received a booklet containing a consent form, a demographic information sheet, and the research questionnaires. The average time taken to complete the booklet was 25 to 30 minutes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Hypothesis 1

Ho1: There will be no significant difference between male and female college going students with regards to their social media engagement (Relaxation/Free Periods).

Table 1: Gender-wise Comparison of Social Media Engagement during Relaxation/Free Periods

Gender	N	Mean	F	p-value	Significance
Male	120	53.63	0.07	>0.05	Non-Significant
Female	120	53.95			

This table demonstrates that male and female college students reported nearly identical mean scores for social media engagement during relaxation/free periods, with a very low F value and a nonsignificant p-value ($p > 0.05$), confirming that gender does not impact this dimension of engagement within the sample.

Hypothesis 2

Ho2: There will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their social media engagement (Relaxation/Free Periods).

Table 2: Academic Stream-wise Comparison of Social Media Engagement during Relaxation/Free Periods

Stream	N	Mean	F	p-value	Significance
Science	80	54.88	1.29	>0.05	Non-Significant
Commerce	80	54.04			
Arts	80	52.45			

This table shows mean scores for social media engagement during relaxation/free periods by academic stream, revealing no significant differences between Science, Commerce, and Arts students. The F value (1.29) and p-value (>0.05) support the hypothesis, indicating stream is not related to engagement level in this context.

Hypothesis 3

Ho3: There will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their motives as a dimension of social media engagement.

Table 3: Differences in Motives for Social Media Engagement Across Academic Streams

Stream	N	Mean	F	p-value	Significance
Science	80	23.81	3.05	<0.05	Significant
Commerce	80	25.93			
Arts	80	23.91			

Contrary to the null hypothesis, this table shows a statistically significant difference in motives for social media engagement across academic streams ($F = 3.05$, $p < 0.05$). Commerce students scored noticeably higher than Science and Arts students, indicating stream membership influences motivation for social media use.

Hypothesis 4

Ho4: There will be no significant difference between male and female college going students with regards to their body image concern.

Table 4: Gender-wise Comparison of Body Image Concern Scores

Gender	N	Mean	F	p-value	Significance
Male	120	119.37	0.0018	>0.05	Non-Significant
Female	120	120.64			

Body image concern scores were nearly the same for male and female students. The results show a very low F statistic and a p-value greater than 0.05, indicating no significant gender difference in body image concern among college students in this sample.

Hypothesis 5

Ho5: There will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their body image concern.

Table 5: Academic Stream-wise Comparison of Body Image Concern Scores

Stream	N	Mean	F	p-value	Significance
Science	80	119.92	3.31	~0.05	Marginally Significant
Commerce	80	119.94			
Arts	80	120.16			

This table indicates a marginal difference in body image concern across academic streams ($F = 3.31$, $p \approx 0.05$), but the effect is slight. The means are close, suggesting only a borderline or marginal statistical significance, which can be interpreted as a weak effect in your discussion.^[1]

Hypothesis 6

Ho6: There will be no significant correlation between social media engagement and body image concern among college going students.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation between Social Media Engagement and Body Image Concern

Variable 1	Variable 2	N	Mean (SME)	Mean (BIC)	r value	Table Value (0.05)	Sig.
Social Media Engagement	Body Image Concern	240	174.74	120.00	-0.0566	0.1309	NS

Pearson correlation analysis produced an r value (-0.0566) well below the critical value (0.1309) for significance, confirming there is no significant relationship between social media engagement and body image concern among college going students in your sample.

4.2 Discussion

The first hypothesis stating there will be no significant difference between male and female college going students with regards to their overall social media engagement was accepted. The second hypothesis stating there will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their overall social media engagement was also accepted.

The third hypothesis which stated that there will be no significant difference between male and female college going students with regards to their body image concern was accepted. The fourth hypothesis stating that there will be no significant difference between science, commerce, and arts stream college going students with regards to their body image concern was rejected, as a significant difference was found.

The fifth hypothesis stating that there will be no significant correlation between social media engagement and body image concern of college going students was accepted. The results suggest that while social media use is widespread among students, its psychological impact is not uniform and may be influenced by other factors.

5. Conclusion, Advantages, and Limitations

5.1 Conclusion

This study shows that social media use is common among college students, regardless of gender or academic stream. However, the reasons for engagement and the impact on body image are more complex. Motives for using social media differ by stream, and a weak effect of stream on body image concern may exist. There is no evidence that overall social media engagement causes body image concern. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions and further research to understand the subtleties behind digital behavior and its psychological effects.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

- The sample was restricted to students in Ahmedabad, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to students in other geographical locations.
- The use of self-report measures may be subject to social desirability bias.
- The cross-sectional design of the study captures data at a single point in time and does not allow for the examination of causal relationships or changes over time.

5.3 Scope for Future Studies

- Future research could include a more diverse sample, including students from rural and semi-urban areas.
- A longitudinal research design could provide insights into how social media use and body image concerns evolve over time.
- Future studies could also investigate the role of other variables, such as personality traits, family dynamics, and pre-existing mental health conditions.

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