Online Social Comparison and Body Dissatisfaction among Young Adults: The Role of Self-Esteem

Yee Hong Chong

Department of Business Adminstration, Faculty of Business and Finance, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Barat 31900, Kampar, Perak, Malaysia

Abstract

Body dissatisfaction has become an increasingly prevalent psychological issue among young adults within highly visual and comparison-oriented social media environments. This study examines the association between online social comparison and body dissatisfaction and investigates whether self-esteem moderates this relationship. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 428 young adults aged 18-30, all of whom were active users of visually driven social networking platforms. Participants completed validated measures of appearance-based online social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and global self-esteem. Descriptive analyses revealed substantial variability across all constructs, with relatively high levels of daily social media use and frequent exposure to curated appearance-related content. Correlational results showed that online social comparison was positively associated with body dissatisfaction, whereas self-esteem was negatively related to both variables. Multiple regression analyses confirmed that online social comparison significantly predicted higher body dissatisfaction after demographic factors were controlled. Importantly, self-esteem moderated this relationship: individuals with lower self-esteem experienced a markedly stronger association between online comparison and dissatisfaction, while the association was weaker among those with higher self-esteem. The full moderated model accounted for a meaningful proportion of variance in body dissatisfaction, underscoring the influential role of individual psychological resources in shaping responses to digital appearance pressures. These findings highlight the significance of social media as a domain for comparison-based self-evaluation and emphasize the protective function of self-esteem in mitigating negative body image outcomes. The results offer valuable implications for interventions aimed at promoting healthier social media engagement, strengthening psychological resilience, and supporting digital well-being among young adults.

Keywords

Online Social Comparison, Body Dissatisfaction, Self-Esteem, Social Media, Young Adults, Digital Well-Being

1. Introduction

Body image concerns have become a pervasive psychological issue among young adults in the digital era. With the rapid proliferation of social networking platforms, individuals are increasingly exposed to idealized body portrayals, curated images, and comparison-inducing content that may distort perceptions of physical appearance. A growing body of research has shown that online social comparison-particularly upward comparison with attractive or seemingly "perfect" peers-increases body dissatisfaction, negative affect, and vulnerability to disordered eating behaviors [1]. As young adults spend a substantial portion of their daily time on visually driven platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, understanding the mechanisms through which online social comparison influences body dissatisfaction has become an urgent research priority.

Body dissatisfaction refers to negative evaluations or feelings about one's body shape, weight, or appearance. It is strongly associated with psychological distress, low well-being, and a range of maladaptive behaviors. Prior empirical studies demonstrate that higher exposure to appearance-focused social media content is associated with lower body satisfaction and more intense physical comparison tendencies [2]. In particular, platforms emphasizing visual self-presentation amplify the salience of appearance standards, making users more likely to engage in frequent and often unfavorable comparisons. Experimental research has shown that upward comparison with peers or influencers on social media can significantly increase body-related anxiety and decrease perceived attractiveness in young adult population [3]. These findings suggest that online social environments may heighten appearance awareness and reinforce unrealistic beauty ideals.

Young adults appear especially vulnerable to these effects. This developmental stage is characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer feedback, identity exploration, and internalization of social expectations. Cross-sectional studies indicate that young adults who spend more time on Instagram or other highly visual platforms report more body image concerns, greater comparison frequency, and reduced self-esteem [4]. As social comparison is recognized as a central cognitive mechanism linking social media use and body image outcomes, it is important to examine the psychological factors that intensify or buffer this relationship.

Among these psychological factors, self-esteem plays a crucial role. Self-esteem is defined as the overall evaluation of one's worth or value. Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to interpret appearance-related cues negatively, engage in maladaptive comparisons, and experience stronger emotional reactions to social media content [5]. Previous research supports the moderating role of self-esteem: individuals with higher self-esteem tend to be less influenced by unrealistic appearance standards, whereas those with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to feelings of inadequacy when faced with idealized images [6]. These findings suggest that self-esteem may shape the emotional and cognitive responses triggered during online social comparison and influence whether users internalize unrealistic body ideals.

Recent studies have provided consistent evidence that self-esteem can serve as a protective factor against body dissatisfaction. For example, young adults with high self-esteem demonstrate greater resilience to negative effects of social media exposure and are less likely to engage in upward appearance comparison [7]. Conversely, individuals with lower self-esteem often rely more heavily on external validation and social approval, making them more reactive to others' appearance cues and more likely to feel dissatisfied with their own bodies [8]. Because self-esteem influences how individuals interpret social information and regulate emotional responses, examining its moderating effect provides insight into how online environments shape psychological well-being.

Despite these advancements, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature has focused on adolescents or female-only samples, while fewer studies investigate young adults as a broader demographic group. Second, although many studies emphasize the negative influence of social media, fewer integrate social comparison theory and self-esteem within a unified analytical model. Third, the rapidly evolving nature of online platforms, especially the rise of influencer culture and appearance-focused content, suggests the need for updated empirical evidence. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing more precise psychological models and informing interventions aimed at reducing appearance-related distress among digital-era populations.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between online social comparison and body dissatisfaction among young adults, with particular attention to the moderating role of self-esteem. Based on social comparison theory, individuals are motivated to evaluate themselves by comparing with others; however, when these comparisons occur in highly curated digital environments, they may produce distorted self-perceptions. By incorporating self-esteem as a moderating variable, this research seeks to clarify not only whether online social comparison predicts body dissatisfaction but also under what conditions and for whom such effects are most pronounced. Understanding these mechanisms contributes to the broader literature on digital mental health, body image, and youth development, offering implications for prevention and intervention strategies.

2. Literature Review

Online social comparison has become a central mechanism through which young adults evaluate their appearance and construct self-perceptions in digital environments. The widespread use of visually oriented social media platforms exposes individuals to curated and idealized images that intensify comparison tendencies. Scholars argue that online spaces are uniquely structured to facilitate upward appearance-based comparisons because content is often edited, filtered, and carefully selected to highlight physical attributes aligned with contemporary beauty standards [9]. Consequently, users are regularly confronted with images that portray unattainable levels of attractiveness, which activate cognitive processes that influence their self-evaluation. Existing evidence shows that individuals who spend more time engaging with such appearance-focused content demonstrate stronger comparison orientations and greater vulnerability to negative affect and body-related concerns [10].

Body dissatisfaction, a key psychological outcome of repeated upward comparison, has been extensively examined in prior research. It reflects the discrepancy individuals perceive between their actual physical appearance and their internalized ideals. Digital environments amplify this discrepancy by continuously presenting hyper-idealized bodies that can distort normative perceptions of beauty. Young adults, who are particularly sensitive to peer evaluation and identity development, often internalize these unrealistic standards, leading to persistent dissatisfaction with their own appearance. Empirical findings consistently reveal that exposure to attractive peer or influencer images can immediately increase body-related anxiety, reduce satisfaction with one's own body, and elevate negative mood [11]. This effect extends beyond immediate reactions; over time, repeated contact with idealized representations consolidates negative beliefs about physical appearance, reinforcing a cycle of self-doubt and evaluative scrutiny [12].

The relationship between online social comparison and body dissatisfaction is further strengthened by individuals' cognitive styles. Users prone to constant self-monitoring, self-scrutiny, or appearance evaluation are more likely to experience intense negative reactions during upward comparison episodes. These tendencies serve as mediators, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to social media content. Studies reveal that frequent comparison with peers or influencers predicts higher levels of emotional distress, internalization of unrealistic body ideals, and elevated body dissatisfaction across genders [13]. While much early research focused on young women, more recent studies show that men also exhibit increased muscular dissatisfaction when exposed to fitness-oriented comparison content, indicating that the phenomenon spans diverse demographic groups [14]. The cumulative effect of these comparison processes contributes to durable distortions in self-image and constitutes a significant risk factor for mental health problems.

Self-esteem emerges as a critical psychological construct that shapes the impact of online comparison experiences.

Defined as an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth, self-esteem influences how people interpret appearance-related cues and regulate their emotional responses. Individuals with high self-esteem are typically more resilient, less sensitive to external judgments, and more capable of maintaining stable self-evaluations in the face of idealized media imagery. Conversely, those with low self-esteem exhibit greater emotional reactivity to appearance cues and tend to rely on external validation, making them more susceptible to feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves with idealized bodies online [15]. Empirical studies confirm that self-esteem significantly predicts differences in the intensity of body dissatisfaction; individuals with lower self-esteem experience stronger negative affect, heightened shame, and a more pronounced decline in body satisfaction following exposure to idealized images [16].

Given its influence on cognitive appraisal, self-esteem has been widely conceptualized as a moderator in the relationship between online social comparison and body dissatisfaction. Individuals with higher self-esteem tend to interpret idealized imagery as irrelevant or unrealistic, reducing the likelihood of negative self-evaluation. They may engage in downward or neutral comparison, or simply disengage from harmful content, thereby preventing negative consequences. In contrast, those with low self-esteem are more likely to internalize unrealistic appearance ideals and personalize upward comparison outcomes, interpreting them as evidence of personal inadequacy [17]. This emotional and cognitive vulnerability intensifies the negative impact of comparison and increases the risk of persistent body dissatisfaction. Several studies show that the association between comparison frequency and body dissatisfaction is significantly stronger among users with lower self-esteem, indicating that self-esteem functions as a protective or risk factor depending on its level [18].

In summary, existing literature provides substantial evidence that online social comparison plays a pivotal role in shaping body image outcomes in young adults, and that self-esteem significantly influences how individuals process and respond to appearance-related information. Digital environments amplify opportunities for upward comparison, reinforcing appearance pressures and fostering body dissatisfaction. Individuals with low self-esteem appear particularly vulnerable to these effects due to their heightened reliance on external validation and greater sensitivity to negative social cues. However, despite substantial progress, gaps remain in understanding how these processes interact within contemporary media environments characterized by influencer culture, algorithm-driven content exposure, and ever-increasing visual emphasis. These gaps highlight the need for updated empirical research that integrates comparison processes and self-esteem into a cohesive explanatory framework to better understand individual differences in vulnerability to appearance-related distress in the digital era.

3. Research Method

The present study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between online social comparison and body dissatisfaction among young adults, and to assess whether self-esteem moderates this association. A survey-based approach was selected because it allows systematic measurement of psychological constructs, facilitates comparisons across individuals, and is widely used in body image and social media research. Consistent with prior studies on digital behavior and body image concerns, the study relies on validated self-report instruments that capture individuals' comparison tendencies, levels of self-esteem, and body-related evaluations [19]. The use of standardized scales ensures reliability, comparability with previous findings, and suitability for statistical analysis.

Participants were recruited from a pool of young adults between the ages of 18 and 30, an age range commonly identified as highly active on social networking platforms and particularly vulnerable to appearance-based comparison pressures. Recruitment was conducted online through university mailing lists and social media advertisements to reach a diverse population of active digital media users. Individuals who reported using social media for less than one hour per day or who were outside the specified age range were excluded to ensure that the sample reflected users who regularly engage in online appearance exposure. Data collection was voluntary and anonymous, and participants were informed that the study focused on social media experiences and psychological well-being. To maintain data quality, responses exhibiting inconsistent patterns-such as straight-lining or implausibly short completion times-were removed prior to analysis. The final sample size met recommended thresholds for moderation analysis and ensured adequate statistical power for detecting small-to-medium interaction effects [20].

Online social comparison was measured using a modified version of the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure, adapted to reflect appearance-based comparison on social media. This instrument has been widely used in studies examining how individuals evaluate themselves in relation to peers online and has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in young adult populations [21]. Items were phrased to specifically capture comparison tendencies triggered by exposure to idealized images, influencers, and peers on visually oriented platforms. Participants rated each item on a Likert scale reflecting the extent to which they engage in appearance-related comparisons when using social media. Higher scores indicate stronger comparison orientation.

Body dissatisfaction was assessed using the Body Shape Questionnaire-Short Form, a validated measure widely employed to examine dissatisfaction with weight, shape, and overall appearance. Prior research has established the instrument's reliability and sensitivity in detecting subtle variations in body image concerns among young adults [22]. The scale captures cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses associated with dissatisfaction and aligns closely

with the construct as defined in previous experimental and correlational studies. Responses were recorded on a multi-point scale, with higher scores representing greater dissatisfaction. This measure was selected for its conceptual alignment with the theoretical framework and its consistent use in digital body image research.

Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, one of the most widely used and empirically validated instruments for assessing global self-worth. Its strong reliability, cross-cultural relevance, and stability make it particularly suitable for moderation analysis in psychological research [23]. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The use of this scale enables consistency with earlier studies examining the interaction between self-esteem and exposure to idealized appearance cues in online environments.

In addition to the primary variables, demographic information such as age, gender, educational background, and average daily social media use was collected to describe the sample and control for potential confounding effects. Prior research highlights that gender and exposure duration may influence appearance-related outcomes, and including these variables strengthens the robustness of the analysis [24]. All surveys were administered online to ensure accessibility, and participants completed the questionnaire in approximately 10 to 12 minutes.

Data analysis was performed using statistical software capable of conducting multiple regression and moderation analysis. Prior to hypothesis testing, preliminary analyses were conducted to verify normality, assess reliability of the scales, and examine correlations among variables. Regression models were then used to evaluate the direct effect of online social comparison on body dissatisfaction, followed by the inclusion of self-esteem and the interaction term representing its moderating role. To interpret significant interaction effects, simple slope analyses were conducted to examine how the relationship between comparison and dissatisfaction differed across high and low levels of self-esteem. This analytical approach is consistent with contemporary moderation frameworks and provides a nuanced understanding of how individual differences shape psychological outcomes in digital environments [25].

Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring that all participants provided informed consent and were aware of their right to withdraw at any time. The anonymity of responses was maintained, and no identifying information was collected. Given the sensitive nature of body image topics, resources for psychological support were provided at the end of the survey for participants who wished to seek further assistance. The overall methodological approach was designed to balance scientific rigor with participant well-being, aligning with established standards in psychological research involving potentially distressing content.

4. Results

Descriptive analyses were first conducted to examine the overall distribution of the main variables in the study. Young adults in the sample reported a relatively high level of daily social media use, with an average of nearly four hours per day, indicating substantial exposure to appearance-related online content. Online social comparison scores showed that most participants frequently engaged in appearance-based evaluations triggered by browsing social media posts. Body dissatisfaction demonstrated moderate variability, with a considerable proportion of participants reporting concerns related to weight, shape, or overall appearance. Self-esteem scores ranged broadly across individuals, suggesting meaningful differences in psychological resilience within the sample.

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among online social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and self-esteem are summarized in Table 1. Online social comparison was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction, indicating that individuals who compared their appearance more frequently tended to report greater dissatisfaction. Self-esteem showed negative correlations with both comparison and dissatisfaction, suggesting that individuals with lower self-esteem were more likely to experience higher levels of appearance-related concerns. All correlations were statistically significant, and the magnitudes indicated meaningful associations appropriate for subsequent regression modeling.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 428)

Variable	Mean	SD	Online Social Comparison	Body Dissatisfaction	Self-Esteem
Online Social Comparison	3.42	0.71			
Body Dissatisfaction	3.08	0.82	0.46***		
Self-Esteem	2.71	0.65	-0.39***	-0.52***	

A multiple regression model was then conducted to examine the direct effect of online social comparison on body dissatisfaction. After controlling for demographic variables such as age, gender, and average daily social media use, online social comparison remained a significant predictor of higher body dissatisfaction. Individuals who engaged more frequently in online comparison tended to report stronger dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. The effect size indicated that comparison processes accounted for a meaningful proportion of variance in body-related concerns.

To assess the moderating effect of self-esteem, an interaction term between online social comparison and self-esteem was introduced into the regression model. The interaction was statistically significant, indicating that self-esteem altered the strength of the relationship between comparison and dissatisfaction. Individuals with lower self-esteem exhibited a substantially stronger association between online comparison and dissatisfaction, whereas the association was weaker-but still present-among those with higher self-esteem.

Simple slope analysis further clarified this moderation effect. For individuals with low self-esteem, online social comparison strongly predicted elevated body dissatisfaction. For those with high self-esteem, the association was less pronounced, suggesting a buffering effect. Although online comparison remained associated with dissatisfaction across all self-esteem levels, the psychological impact was significantly more severe among individuals who perceived themselves as having lower worth or value.

The full moderated regression model explained approximately 42% of the variance in body dissatisfaction, indicating a high degree of explanatory power for psychological research. Adding the interaction term significantly improved model fit, reinforcing the conclusion that self-esteem meaningfully shapes vulnerability to appearance-based comparison processes. These results highlight substantial individual differences in how young adults internalize and respond to appearance-related cues encountered on social media platforms.

5. Conclusion

The present study sought to deepen the understanding of how online social comparison influences body dissatisfaction among young adults and to examine the moderating role of self-esteem in this relationship. In an era where digital platforms dominate everyday social interaction, young people are continuously exposed to curated visual content that highlights idealized standards of beauty. Against this background, the findings of this study provide meaningful insights into the psychological processes that shape body image experiences within digital environments. The results demonstrate that individuals who more frequently compare their appearance with others online tend to report higher levels of body dissatisfaction, supporting the view that digital social interactions exert a powerful influence on self-perception and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the study shows that self-esteem significantly alters the strength of this association, highlighting the importance of individual psychological resources in shaping responses to social media.

The descriptive results indicate that online comparison behaviors are prevalent among young adults and that body dissatisfaction remains a widespread concern within this population. As social media has become a primary channel through which young adults express identity, seek validation, and interact with peers, appearance-based evaluations are embedded into everyday digital routines. The study's findings suggest that this constant exposure to comparison triggers may gradually erode satisfaction with physical appearance. Although not all individuals experience the same level of vulnerability, the overall pattern indicates that social media environments create conditions in which upward comparison becomes nearly unavoidable. This habitual comparison appears to accumulate over time, reinforcing negative self-evaluations and contributing to heightened preoccupation with physical appearance.

A central contribution of this study is the confirmation of self-esteem as an important moderating factor. The results indicate that individuals with lower self-esteem are especially sensitive to upward appearance comparisons, experiencing a much stronger link between comparison behaviors and dissatisfaction. This pattern suggests that self-esteem serves as a psychological buffer, helping individuals maintain a stable sense of identity and worth even when confronted with unrealistic beauty standards. Those with higher self-esteem seem better able to contextualize or dismiss idealized images rather than internalize them. Conversely, individuals with lower self-esteem may interpret such images as personal inadequacies, making them more susceptible to negative emotional reactions. This finding underscores the need to consider individual variability when examining the impact of digital environments, as the same content may produce vastly different psychological outcomes depending on personal characteristics.

Another significant implication of the study concerns the broader digital ecosystem in which young adults participate. Social media platforms often reward visual perfection, popularity, and curated lifestyles, creating an environment where self-worth becomes increasingly tied to external judgments. The current findings suggest that digital features such as likes, comments, and algorithm-driven content amplification may inadvertently reinforce comparison tendencies and heighten appearance anxiety. As users are continuously exposed to content that aligns with their previous engagement patterns, those already prone to comparison may find themselves in feedback loops that intensify dissatisfaction. This dynamic highlights the importance of examining not only individual psychological factors but also the technological structures that shape online behavior and emotional responses.

The findings also carry practical implications for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers concerned with youth well-being. Because online comparison appears to meaningfully influence body image, interventions aimed at reducing comparison tendencies or reframing cognitive interpretations of social media content may prove beneficial. Programs that promote critical media literacy, encourage healthy social media habits, or foster self-compassion may help mitigate negative effects. Additionally, initiatives that support the development of self-esteem in adolescence and young adulthood could reduce long-term vulnerability. Digital well-being campaigns and platform-level changes may also contribute to healthier environments by reducing exposure to overly idealized imagery or promoting diversity in body representation. The findings of this study support efforts to create healthier digital ecosystems that encourage authenticity rather than perfection.

Although the study provides robust evidence regarding the relationships among online comparison, self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction, it also highlights areas for future research. As digital environments continue to evolve, future studies should consider the impact of emerging platforms and content formats, such as highly edited short videos and augmented reality filters, which may further intensify appearance pressures. Longitudinal research would also help

clarify how comparison tendencies develop over time and whether self-esteem interventions can produce lasting protective effects. Furthermore, investigating cultural differences, gender identity variations, and broader psychological variables-such as perfectionism or social anxiety-could offer a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within young adult populations.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that online social comparison is a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction among young adults and that self-esteem plays a crucial role in shaping this relationship. These findings emphasize the need to address both individual vulnerabilities and structural aspects of digital platforms when considering strategies to promote positive body image and psychological well-being. As social media continues to permeate daily life, a deeper understanding of these processes becomes essential for fostering resilience and supporting healthier interactions with digital content. The present study contributes to this ongoing effort by illuminating the mechanisms through which digital comparison impacts young adults and by underscoring the importance of strengthening self-esteem to protect against the harmful effects of idealized online portrayals.

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