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The Paradox of Digital Validation: Multidimensional Body Image and Social Media Dependence Among Generation Z

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Abstract: *This study examined associations between social media dependence, exposure to appearance-focused content, and multidimensional body image among Generation Z. A cross-sectional correlational design was used with a community sample of $N = 351$ students aged 18–20 years. Data were collected via the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) and the Body Self-Image Questionnaire – Short Form (BSIQ-SF), alongside items assessing general social media use and time spent on appearance-focused profiles. Inferential statistics (Pearson's r , Spearman's ρ , Kruskal–Wallis H , independent samples t test) were computed at $\alpha = 0.05$. Higher social media dependence was positively associated with more problematic body image ($r = 0.302$; $p < 0.001$). Subscale analyses indicated that dependence was most strongly related to Social Dependence ($r = 0.367$; $p < 0.001$) and Negative Affect ($r = 0.299$; $p < 0.001$), and negatively to Overall Appearance Evaluation ($r = -0.161$; $p = 0.003$) and Health–Fitness Evaluation ($r = -0.118$; $p = 0.027$). No significant association emerged between general time on social media and body dissatisfaction ($r = -0.033$; $p = 0.537$). By contrast, time devoted to appearance-focused content correlated positively with body dissatisfaction ($r = 0.153$; $p = 0.004$), and group differences by exposure duration were confirmed ($\chi^2 = 11.148$; $p = 0.025$). Findings suggest that qualitative features of online engagement—particularly exposure to idealised imagery and appearance-contingent feedback—are more consequential for body image than overall usage time. Implications include targeted media-literacy interventions emphasising critical evaluation of appearance content and support for protective body-image processes in Generation Z.*

Keywords: *body image; social media dependence; Generation Z; appearance-focused content.*

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1. Introduction

Late adolescence, representing the concluding phase of developmental transformation within Generation Z (approximately 18–20 years in this sample), is characterised by reaching physiological and neurobiological maturity, though significant brain maturation continues during this period (American Psychological Association, 2023). This stage involves the integration of pronounced physical changes, including the development of secondary sexual characteristics, which can evoke complex emotional responses such as confusion or fear (Penzešová & Martinčková, 2018). Psychologically, individuals in this age group pivot toward peers as the primary source of validation and support. Social standing and popularity within these groups are frequently grounded in physical self-perception, making body image a central pillar of adolescent self-esteem and identity formation (Cataldo et al., 2021; Fabris & Longobardi, 2024). While late adolescence is often marked by an increase in appearance satisfaction as the self-concept stabilises, the heightened interest in slimness and physical attractiveness remains a dominant psychological feature (Fialová, 2006; Vall Roqué et al., 2021; Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022). In the digital era, social media has emerged as a primary milieu for socialisation, offering continuous access to a rapidly evolving media environment (Singh, 2025). The high availability of these platforms on mobile devices facilitates constant exposure to filtered images and idealised body representations (Rideout & Robb, 2018). Current research indicates a troubling correlation between the duration of social media use and problematic body image, particularly through the mechanisms of social comparison and the search for externalised validation (Boursier et al., 2020; Ghalamghash, 2025). However, it remains unclear whether the risk is driven by the total volume of connectivity or by specific, appearance-oriented activities. For Generation Z, who often navigate multiple digital layers, the prevalence of idealised fitspiration content and edited photographs may complicate the integration of bodily changes into a healthy self-perception (Sarda et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2026).

Understanding the nuances of digital influence is vital, as negative body image is a documented precursor to eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and unhealthy weight-regulation strategies (Miranda et al., 2014; Franchina & La Coco, 2018). Conversely, social media also provides a space for identity exploration and online prosocial behaviour, which can enhance self-esteem through emotional support and positive feedback (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021; Pastor et al., 2025). By disentangling the effects of general social media dependence from the specific consumption of appearance-focused content, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence for media literacy programmes. Such programmes are essential to foster resilience against appearance-related content that may threaten body image and to promote protective strategies that support psychological well-being during the transition to adulthood (Frisén et al., 2015; Gattario & Frisén, 2019).

This study adopts the multidimensional construct of body image proposed by Cash (2004), which views physical self-perception on a spectrum from positive acceptance to body dissatisfaction. This framework includes dimensions such as appearance evaluation, orientation, and body-part categorisation (Cash & Pruzinski, 2002). Furthermore, the developmental-sociocultural framework formulated by Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) is utilised to understand how social media affordances—such as quantified feedback (likes) and edited imagery—intersect with the developmental tasks of late adolescence. This model posits that the excessive emphasis on appearance-contingent self-worth serves as a primary mediator in the deterioration of body image (Fabris & Longobardi, 2024).

Extensive literature highlights that visually-oriented platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, strengthen objectification by reducing identity to physical attributes (Salomon & Brown, 2018; Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022). Studies have confirmed that individuals who frequently engage in appearance-centric activities—such as photo editing or following fitspiration accounts—report lower satisfaction with their appearance and higher levels of self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2015; McLean et al., 2015). While body-positivity trends have recently emerged as a potential buffer, they operate within a complex environment where unrealistic beauty ideals remain prevalent

(Ladwig et al., 2024). Social media activity focused on physical appearance can heighten body dissatisfaction in adolescents. However, the mechanisms behind this association remain insufficiently examined. A three-wave longitudinal study found that comparison with social media appearance ideals and the internalisation of these ideals mediated the association between appearance activity on social media and body dissatisfaction (Kvardová et al., 2025). Research on Generation Z suggests that even though self-concept begins to stabilise in emerging adulthood, the pressure to conform to digital beauty standards remains a significant stressor (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022; Singh, 2025).

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of work on digital media, inconsistencies persist regarding the impact of general usage duration. Some evidence suggests that total time spent online is a poor predictor of body dissatisfaction compared to the quality of engagement and internalisation of beauty ideals (Cohen et al., 2017; Kvardová et al., 2025). There is a specific lack of data regarding late adolescents, where digital avatars and social networking overlap. Furthermore, few studies have simultaneously examined how social media dependence (problematic use) is associated with distinct sub-dimensions of body image, such as social dependence and negative affect, in this specific demographic. This study addresses these gaps by distinguishing between general social media use and appearance-focused exposure within a multidimensional assessment framework.

2. Methodology

Participants

The research sample consisted of $N = 351$ respondents, of which $N = 201$ respondents attended a gymnasium (grammar school) and $N = 150$ respondents attended a university. The age range of participants was 18–20 years. Age categories were distributed as follows: $N = 162$ participants in the 18-year category (46.2%), $N = 127$ participants in the 19-year category (36.2%), and $N = 62$ participants in the 20-year category (17.7%). Gender was distributed by $N = 258$ women (73.5%) and $N = 93$ men (26.5%). All participants agreed to participate in the research and provided written informed consent. A convenience non-probability sampling method was used, with data collection conducted in two independent data collection sessions at a grammar school (Gymnázium M. R. Štefánika v Nových Zámkách) and at a university (Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave). Participants over the age of 20 and those from other schools were excluded because the number of such participants was insufficient for meaningful statistical analysis. Inclusion criteria were age 18–20 years and active student status. Respondents over 20 years of age were excluded to ensure developmental homogeneity of the late adolescent sample.

The research itself was approved by the ethics committee within the VEGA project (funding of research).

Materials/Instruments

Demographic questionnaire

A self-developed questionnaire designed by the authors was used to assess the type of school attended, participants' age, and time spent on social media in general as well as on appearance-focused social media.

Body Self-Image Questionnaire – Short Version (BSIQ-SF)

The questionnaire consisted of 27 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – “does not describe me at all” to 5 – “describes me completely”). The items are divided into nine subscales (Rowe, 2005). Linguistic equivalence of the BSIQ-SF was ensured through professional review using a forward-backward translation procedure conducted by an independent bilingual specialist (PaedDr. Hana Grófová). The subscales include evaluation of overall appearance, influence of health and fitness, investment in appearance ideals, care for appearance, dissatisfaction with height

and weight, negative affect (emotions) related to body image, and social dependence. The resulting point range varies from 27 to 135 points. A higher score usually means a higher level of satisfaction with one's own body. Scores > 115 points indicate a high level of satisfaction, scores between 86 – 114 points indicate partial/moderate satisfaction, and scores < 85 points indicate dissatisfaction with one's own body.

The authors verified the reliability of the instrument after translation on a sample of N = 200 participants, recruited from University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)

The original scale was developed by Andreassen et al. (2016), while the Slovak version was prepared by Holdoš et al. (2015). Cronbach's alpha reached $\alpha = 0.94$. Construct validity is supported by the statistically significant correlation between this instrument and psychiatric symptoms, as reported by Holdoš (2022). Factor analysis yielded a one-factor model. The scale includes 6 general items about social media use, with responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – “very rarely” to 5 – “very often”). The total score ranges from 6 to 30 points. Although no formal cut-off score has been established, higher scores indicate a greater degree of problematic social media use.

Procedure

Data collection was performed via the online survey platform Survio. Participants were informed of the study's anonymity and their right to withdraw.

School: category (Gymnázium M. R. Štefánika – UCM in Trnava), nominal variable;

Age: category (18 years – 19 years – 20 years), ordinal variable;

Time spent on social media: item in the questionnaire (focused on general social media use), scale (less than 1 hour, 1–2 hours, 2–3 hours, 3–4 hours, 5 or more hours), ordinal variable;

Time spent on appearance-focused social media: item in the questionnaire, scale (less than 1 hour, 1–2 hours, 2–3 hours, 3–4 hours, 5 or more hours), ordinal variable;

Body image: Body Self-Image Questionnaire - Short Version (BSIQ-SF), Likert scale (1 – “does not describe me at all,” 2 – “describes me slightly,” 3 – “describes me somewhat,” 4 – “describes me almost completely,” 5 – “describes me completely”), subscales (Overall Appearance Evaluation – OAE, Health Fitness Influence – HFI, Investment in Ideals – II, Health-Fitness Evaluation – HFE, Attention to Grooming – AG, Height Dissatisfaction – HD, Fatness Evaluation – FE, Negative Affect – NA, and Social Dependence – SD), with each subscale consisting of 3 items and a minimum of 3 points and a maximum of 15 points per subscale, cardinal variable;

Social media addiction: Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), Likert scale (1 – “very rarely,” 2 – “rarely,” 3 – “sometimes,” 4 – “often,” 5 – “very often”), with a minimum total score of 6 and a maximum of 30, cardinal variable.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the authors used SPSS, version 30.0 Standard. Inferential statistics for H1 were conducted using Pearson's correlation coefficient, for H2 using Spearman's correlation coefficient, followed by the Kruskal-Wallis test and the independent samples t-test. To assess statistical significance for all the above analyses, the standard 95% confidence level was used, with the significance level set at $p = 0.05$. The strength of the correlation relationship was interpreted using Cohen's (1994) scale for the correlation coefficient (r).

3. Main Findings

H1: Higher scores on the BSIQ will be positively and statistically significantly correlated with scores on the BSMAS.

Table 1 presents the correlation coefficient between the total BSIQ score and the BSMAS score. The indicated correlation is moderate, positive, and statistically significant ($r = 0.302$; $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis H1 was therefore accepted. Given the scoring direction of the BSIQ, these results

suggest that higher social media dependence within the studied sample is associated with greater overall body satisfaction.

Table 1. Correlation H1

Total BSIQ score	Total BSMAS score	
	r	p
	=0.302	<0.001

Note. BSIQ = Body Self Image Questionnaire ; BSMAS = Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale.

Table 2 below shows the correlation coefficients and significance levels for each subscale of the BSIQ with the BSMAS total score. To account for multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was applied to the nine correlation tests conducted between the BSIQ-SF subscales and the BSMAS. Accordingly, the adjusted significance threshold was set at $p < 0.006$ ($0.05/9 = 0.0056$). The subscale Overall Appearance Evaluation (B_OAE) correlated negatively, weakly, but significantly with the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS; $r = -0.161$; $p = 0.003$). Similarly, the Health Fitness Evaluation subscale (B_HFE) correlated negatively, weakly, but non-significantly ($r = -0.118$; $p = 0.027$). The subscales Health Fitness Influence (B_HFI; $r = 0.179$; $p < 0.001$), Investment in Ideals (B_II; $r = 0.257$; $p < 0.001$), Fatness Evaluation (B_FE; $r = 0.219$; $p < 0.001$) correlated positively, weakly, and significantly with the BSMAS. Attention to Grooming (B_AG; $r = 0.122$; $p = 0.022$) correlated positively, weakly, and non-significantly with the Bergen Social Media Addiction scale. The Social Dependence subscale (B_SD; $r = 0.367$; $p < 0.001$) correlated positively, moderately strongly, and significantly with the BSMAS. The Negative Affect subscale (B_NA) correlated positively, weakly, and significantly ($r = 0.299$; $p < 0.001$). The subscale whose relationship with the BSMAS was non-significant, although weak and positive, was Height Dissatisfaction (B_HD; $r = 0.103$; $p = 0.054$).

Table 2. Correlation of subscales H1

BSIQ subscales	Total BSMAS score	
	r	p
B_OAE	= - 0.161	0.003
B_HFI	= 0.179	<0.001
B_II	= 0.257	<0.001
B_HFE	= - 0.118	0.027
B_SD	= 0.367	<0.001
B_HD	= 0.103	0.054
B_FE	= 0.219	<0.001
B_NA	= 0.299	<0.001
B_AG	= 0.122	0.022

Note. BSIQ = Body Self Image Questionnaire; BSMAS = Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale; B_OAE = Overall Appearance Evaluation; B_HFI = Health Fitness Influence; B_II = Investment in Ideals; B_HFE = Health-Fitness Evaluation; B_SD = Social Dependence; B_HD = Height Dissatisfaction; B_FE = Fatness Evaluation; B_NA = Negative Affect; B_AG = Attention to Grooming.

H2: Time spent on appearance-focused social media will be statistically significantly correlated with BSIQ scores (Boursier et al., 2020).

In Table 3, the correlation using Spearman's rho (ρ) is presented as trivial, negative, and statistically non-significant between the total BSIQ score and the general time spent on social media. However, after correlating the BSIQ score with the specifically appearance-focused time spent on social media (Table 3), the relationship proved to be positive, weak, and statistically significant ($\rho = 0.153$; $p = 0.004$). Hypothesis H2 was therefore accepted. The results indicate that respondents who spend more time consuming appearance-focused content exhibit higher levels of body satisfaction.

Table 3. Correlation H2

Total BSIQ score	Time spent on social media		Time spent on appearance-focused social media	
	ρ	p	ρ	p
	= -0.033	0.537	= 0.153	0.004

Note. BSIQ = Body Self Image Questionnaire.

Table 4. Kruskal-Wallis H2

BSIQ	Time spent on appearance-focused social media	N	Mean rank	Kruskal Wallis test
	Less than 1 hour	200	161.4	$\chi^2 = 11.148$ df = 4 p = 0.025
	1-2 hours	104	197.0	
	2-3 hours	35	201.0	
	3-4 hours	9	173.2	
	5 or more hours	3	137.2	

Note. BSIQ = Body Self Image Questionnaire.

Following the Kruskal-Wallis test (Table 4), the difference between the groups was significant with Bonferroni' correction applied ($\chi^2 = 11.148$; $p = 0.025$). Following the significant Kruskal-Wallis test, pairwise comparisons were conducted to examine differences between groups. The significance level was adjusted using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, and the difference between the first (Less than 1 hour) and second group (1-2 hours) remained significant ($t = -35.534$; $p = 0.038$).

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation

Hypothesis H1 was accepted, demonstrating that higher levels of social media dependence are associated with a more positive overall perception of one's body within this specific sample. While this finding stands in contrast to traditional assumptions regarding the pathogenic impact of digital connectivity on body image (e.g., Boursier et al., 2020), it reflects a complex developmental-sociocultural dynamic. A potential explanation suggests that for late adolescents, social media serves as a primary milieu for obtaining social validation and positive feedback. When individuals utilise these platforms to present fitness achievements or curated appearances, the resulting "quantified" approval—such as likes and positive comments—may lead to an increase in subjective satisfaction with the physical self. This is consistent with the observations of Sarda et al. (2025), who found that social media content focusing on appearance can, under certain conditions, be associated with increased body image satisfaction through the mechanism of self-objectification and external reinforcement.

The relationship of the Overall Appearance Evaluation (B_OAE) subscale with social media dependence indicated that higher levels of dependence were associated with lower levels of positive overall appearance evaluation, suggesting that while the total satisfaction score increases, direct evaluations of attractiveness may be undermined by excessive network use. However, a nuanced analysis of the BSIQ-SF subscales reveals a significant paradox. The negative correlation identified between social media dependence and the Overall Appearance Evaluation (B_OAE) subscale suggests that as dependence grows, the direct, internal evaluation of one's own attractiveness actually declines. This indicates that the "satisfaction" reported in the total BSIQ score may be fragile and heavily contingent on external validation rather than a stable, positive physical self-concept. This interpretation aligns with the findings of Badola et al. (2025), who highlighted that while digital engagement may offer temporary boosts to self-esteem, it simultaneously increases social appearance anxiety. The ability to edit content and use filters may provide a temporary sense

of satisfaction, but as Liminou et al. (2025) suggest, the internalisation of these idealised standards often complicates the integration of real-world bodily changes, potentially leading to long-term deterioration of body image stability.

The Health Fitness Influence (B_HFI) subscale revealed that higher social media dependence was associated with a greater emphasis on physical condition and health when evaluating body image. This may be explained by the existence of fitspiration accounts that promote a healthy, active lifestyle, healthy eating, regular physical activity, and self-care (Liminou et al. 2025; Longobardi et al., 2022). Consuming such content may be one of possible explanations of the relationship between this subscale and social media dependence: moderate use may encourage a healthier lifestyle, but excessive consumption may contribute to problems such as bigorexia, orthorexia, and other disordered eating patterns. Yu et al. (2026) reported that individuals who consume social media content more frequently are more likely to develop disordered eating habits. Slater et al. (2017), however, suggested that fitspiration content does not significantly affect body image or emotional experience. Holland and Tiggemann (2016) found that women who posted fitspiration content on social media were four times more likely to experience eating disorders than members of the control group.

The Investment in Ideals (B_II) subscale showed that higher social media dependence was associated with a greater investment in beauty ideals, i.e., increased focus on achieving an idealised appearance (e.g., body weight, body shape etc.). This may be linked to the presentation of “perfect” bodies or body parts. On the positive side, this might encourage healthy lifestyle changes (balanced diet, regular exercise), but it may become problematic when individuals uncritically adopt unattainable or unhealthy beauty ideals presented by others, or when they seek to achieve them through cosmetic procedures or harmful behaviours (e.g. extreme exercise, prolonged fasting). Galeotti et al. (2024) found that the key factor in considering cosmetic procedures is not negative body image alone, but the presence of edited photos (filters) that individuals wish to match in their real-life appearance. The findings of Dahlgren et al. (2024) also support the notion of strong positive relationships between eating disorders, internalisation of beauty standards, and perceived social pressure (from family, media, etc.), with stronger associations in women than men. Delgado-Rodríguez et al. (2022) concluded that social media dependence predicted perceived external pressure to achieve beauty ideals, which, when internalised, was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction, although the direct relationship between social media dependence and negative body image, when controlling for these mediators, was not significant.

The Health Fitness Evaluation (B_HFE) subscale indicated that higher social media dependence was associated with a lower level of positive evaluation of one’s health and fitness although the relationship did not reach statistical significance. This is consistent with the mechanisms described above, such as fitspiration accounts. Users may be exposed to such content but unable to meet the portrayed standards, or may not achieve visible results as quickly as expected, which may lead to feelings of inadequacy, failure, and dissatisfaction with one’s physical condition and health. Ragatt et al. (2018) reported that people who consume fitspiration content describe benefits such as increased social support, access to information, motivation for physical activity, and a sense of belonging in an online community, but also negative effects on well-being, self-perceived goal achievement, feelings of insufficiency, failure, distress, and an increased risk of eating disorders or compulsive exercise. Curtis et al. (2023) found that Instagram fitness accounts provide meaningful content (e.g., exercise tutorials) but also include objectification, sexualisation, and unrealistic or unhealthy body ideals. Exposure to such content is associated with negative body image, negative mood, and a higher degree of internalisation of unhealthy beauty ideals. Curtis et al. (2023) suggest that the association of fitspiration content may differ depending on the trustworthiness of the source (e.g., informative, evidence-based content vs. sexually objectifying, unrealistic, or unhealthy body ideals).

The Social Dependence (B_SD) subscale revealed that higher social media dependence was positively correlated with the extent to which body image evaluation relied on the opinions and

reactions of others. This may be linked to social feedback on social media, such as comments under photos or videos that display an individual's physical appearance. In adolescence, when peers become a major source of socialisation and adolescents' focus shifts from the family to the wider social environment, peer feedback may be associated with more negative body evaluation, as supported by Schmidt and Talbot (2025) and Dane and Bhatia (2023). The anonymity of online feedback may increase the likelihood of hateful or shaming comments, since users do not need to reveal their identity, whereas face-to-face criticism may be delivered more gently. Sarda et al. (2025) reported that for individuals with lower self-compassion, commentary on physical appearance was associated with higher levels of shame related to their body. It appears that although the overall BSIQ index rises, this increase is driven more by a heightened orientation toward the opinions of others and more intense emotional investment in the body, rather than an uncritical acceptance of physical identity.

The Height Dissatisfaction (B_HD) subscale showed a weak positive relationship with social media dependence, suggesting that higher dependence may increase dissatisfaction with one's height, although the relationship did not reach statistical significance. This may be because height is less easily observable and directly comparable in online environments than other appearance features (e.g., facial features, body shape). People may be more exposed to content promoting "ideal" heights, yet they cannot visually compare one's own height to that of others as easily as other aspects of appearance. However, Hansson et al. (2026) found that shorter stature was positively correlated with dissatisfaction with one's height, whereas Schmidt and Talbot (2025) reported that the consumption of narrow beauty ideals (e.g., "ideal" height) on social media may reduce overall body satisfaction.

The Fatness Evaluation (B_FE) subscale showed that higher social media dependence was associated with a more negative evaluation of one's body in terms of weight (as "too fat" or "overweight"). This may be explained by the presentation of idealised bodies that are not realistically achievable or that can only be achieved through cosmetic procedures or unhealthy practices. Adolescents may also be exposed to content that criticises bodies that deviate from cultural beauty standards. Both mechanisms may be associated with dissatisfaction with one's weight, the perception of one's body as obese. The consumption of trends, pro-eating-disorder content, and appearance-focused platforms strengthen these associations, whereas high social media literacy can act as a protective factor.

Social media dependence was also positively correlated with the experience of negative emotions related to one's body (Negative Affect; B_NA), such as shame, sadness, or anxiety. These findings are consistent with the mechanisms outlined above. In recent years, "body positivity" profiles have begun to appear on social media, promoting diverse body types and the acceptance of deviation from conventional beauty standards. Ladwig et al. (2024) found that fitspiration accounts may reduce body satisfaction, whereas body positivity content decreased body dissatisfaction.

The Attention to Grooming (B_AG) subscale, which relates to cosmetic and appearance modifications (makeup, hairstyling, clothing), indicated that higher social media dependence was associated with greater attention paid to grooming although the relationship did not reach statistical significance. This may be explained by social media directing attention toward appearance, either directly (e.g., comments on body appearance under adolescents' posts) or indirectly (individuals who present hard-to-achieve, unrealistic beauty ideals). This may trigger doubt or dissatisfaction, which in turn may motivate individuals to invest more in appearance modifications in an attempt to approach these ideals. This view is supported by Dane and Bhatia (2023), Delgado-Rodríguez et al. (2022), Ladwig et al. (2024), Steinsbekk et al. (2020), and Wang et al. (2021).

Hypothesis H2 was also accepted, as a statistically significant positive relationship was found between the time spent on appearance-focused social media and BSIQ scores. The positive direction of this correlation indicates that longer exposure to visual beauty ideals and fitness content is associated with higher declared body satisfaction. This phenomenon can be interpreted through the

lens of selective exposure: adolescents with a positive relationship with their bodies may more actively seek out and consume appearance-oriented content, such as "fitspiration," to reinforce their own grooming and physical maintenance efforts. This finding is partially supported by Kvardová et al. (2025), whose research suggested that general social media use is not necessarily associated with dissatisfaction; rather, the impact depends on the specific nature of the appearance-related activity. Nevertheless, the identified positive association between problematic social media use and body satisfaction opens a critical discussion on adaptive versus maladaptive strategies. As noted by Dane and Bhatia (2023), the relationship between social media and body image is rarely linear. In this sample, high scores on the BSIQ among dependent users might reflect a defensive projection or a social desirability bias, where individuals report high satisfaction to align with the idealised digital personas they maintain. This is particularly relevant given that other subscales, such as Social Dependence (B_SD) and Negative Affect (B_NA), showed strong positive correlations with dependence, suggesting that this "satisfaction" is accompanied by a heightened sensitivity to peer opinions and increased emotional volatility regarding the body (Schmidt & Talbot, 2025).

4.2. Implications

Adolescents must gradually integrate bodily changes mentioned above into their self-perception and evaluation of their body, and this integration process may already be challenging. The specific features of social media described above may complicate the process or increase in the intensity of negative feelings toward one's body, thus worsening body image. This view is supported by Yu et al. (2026), whose findings confirmed social media as a significant predictor of negative body image. In contrast, Kvardová et al. (2025) arrived at different conclusions, as their research suggested that appearance-related social media activity (social comparison and internalisation of social media beauty ideals) does not necessarily directly increase adolescents' dissatisfaction with their own appearance. The authors also examined the relationship between body dissatisfaction and general social media use time and found that higher general usage was associated with lower body dissatisfaction, suggesting that social media themselves are not necessarily associated with dissatisfaction unless the content is appearance-focused. However, when individuals actively select and consume appearance-related content, negative body evaluation may emerge.

The direction of the relationship may be bidirectional: people with more negative body image may also spend more time comparing their appearance with others on social media. The immediate outcome may not necessarily be negative, as adolescents may initially seek information on how to adopt a healthier lifestyle to reach a desired appearance. However, insufficient regulation and uncritical consumption of social media content may shift these behaviours toward unhealthy patterns (disordered eating, excessive exercise without adequate recovery). Dane and Bhatia (2023) argue that the relationship between social media usage time and body image is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple measure of time. Cohen et al. (2017) did not find a significant relationship between time spent on social media and body image, but appearance-related activities were positively associated with poorer body image (McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

Limitations

Several methodological constraints limit the reach of the current findings. The cross-sectional nature of the data precludes any definitive claims regarding causality or temporal precedence; it remains plausible that pre-existing body dissatisfaction may drive individuals toward higher social media dependence in a search for validation. Furthermore, the reliance on a regional student sample restricts the generalisability of these observations to more diverse socioeconomic or cultural demographics. The limitations also include the absence of gender-based and

platform-specific analyses. Finally, the use of self-report measures inherently introduces social desirability bias, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as body weight and problematic internet use.

5. Future Research

To further clarify the relationship between body image and social media dependence, the authors also examined the relationship between the individual subscales of the questionnaire assessing body image problems and dependence on social media. Subsequent investigations should adopt longitudinal designs to track the stability of these relationships as Generation Z transitions into emerging adulthood. There is a clear need to explore specific mediating variables, such as self-objectification and thin-ideal internalisation, which could clarify the precise psychological mechanisms at play. Furthermore, research comparing the protective effects of "body neutrality" versus "body positivity" content would provide more granular guidance for digital literacy interventions. Given the focus on generation Z, future studies might also investigate whether the use of digital avatars serves as a buffer or an amplifier of physical body concerns.

6. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that social media dependence and time dedicated to appearance-focused content exhibit significant links to body perception in late adolescents. Contrary to initial expectations, higher social media dependence was positively correlated with total BSIQ scores, indicating that intensive use in this demographic is associated with higher levels of declared body satisfaction. However, the subscale analysis revealed a vital paradox: while total satisfaction and social dependence on others' opinions increase with problematic use, the direct evaluation of overall appearance (B_OAE) tends to decline. This suggests that social media dependence may foster a body image that is highly invested in social validation but internally self-critical.

The significant link between appearance-focused exposure and higher body satisfaction further underscores that the type of content—rather than general time spent online—is the primary predictor of physical self-perception. These results suggest that for some adolescents, appearance-focused platforms may serve as a space for identity reinforcement, while for others, it may shift the focus toward appearance-contingent self-worth. These findings highlight the necessity of media literacy programs that do not merely focus on reducing screen time, but rather on deconstructing the mechanisms of social validation and internal vs. external body evaluation to support a truly stable and healthy body image during the transition to adulthood.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

All procedures followed institutional ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants

Author contributions

Conceptualisation: [DD]. Methodology: [DD, LP]. Formal analysis: [DD, LP]. Investigation: [DD, LP]. Writing—original draft: [LP]. Writing—review & editing: [DD]. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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AI tools use statement

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