

SOCIAL COMPARISON, BODY APPRECIATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Introduction and background: According to Festinger's Theory of Social Comparison, individuals, to obtain an accurate assessment of themselves, often compare with those they consider similar. Social media provides a unique context for this phenomenon. However, users often share images that are altered to answer the phenomenon of social desirability. Individuals tend to compare themselves on social media with people more competent and popular, resulting in reduced well-being, self-esteem, self-perception, mental health, emotional adjustment, and body appreciation.

Objective: The current study aimed to verify the relationship between social comparison, body appreciation, and social media use in a sample of higher education teachers and students. Considering the role played by teachers in the educational context, it is essential to investigate, alongside those of the students, the teachers' perceptions in this regard. This, in fact, would make it possible to intervene on multiple levels to enhance self-acceptance and body appreciation in students.

Method: 699 higher education teachers (Mean age 39y., Female=82.6%) and 200 students (Mean age 22y., Female 60%) of the University of Foggia, Italy, took part in this study, completing the following questionnaires: The Social Media Social Comparison Scale and The Body Appreciation Scale-2. Pearson bivariate correlations were performed to test associations between studied variables. T-test and ANOVA were used to analyze social comparison and body appreciation in relation to the number and type of social media used (Facebook/Instagram) and between groups (Teachers vs. students).

Results: Overall, results showed a negative relationship between higher levels of social media social comparison and body appreciation ($r=-.14$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, the use of 3 or more social media [$F=9.050$, $p < .001$] and the use Instagram, compared to Facebook, appears to be associated with greater use of social media to compare one's abilities and opinions with those of others [$t=-2.759$, $p=.006$].

Conclusions: Results open interesting perspectives on the cognitive schemas that teachers and students construct with respect to body appreciation and social media use and how these may intervene in influencing teaching and learning processes.

Keywords: *Social media, social comparison, body appreciation, body esteem, higher education.*

1. Introduction and background

The theory of Social Comparison draws on the studies of Festinger (1954) who theorized that individuals need to compare themselves with others and this comparison subsequently influences our behavior.

The process of comparison is therefore carried out in the different life contexts that each individual lives and frequents. The environments we pass through every day are the most diverse and, daily, evolve. As early as 1988, before the widespread diffusion of the Internet, Taylor and Brown argued that people have an unrealistic reading of themselves: convincing themselves of their own possibilities in controlling the environment; this conviction leads, therefore, the individual to have a vision of the other as threatening or inferior compared to the idea one has of oneself instead. This theory is topical and it is intuitive to reason on how environments, in the 21st century, are no longer only tangible and concrete but also and often above all virtual. In this context, therefore, it emerges how this perception has also been transferred to social media platforms (Hassim, Hasmadi, Sharipudin, 2020). Indeed, users of the Internet and social platforms are constantly increasing. Self-disclosure, through social media, is a way to connect to others and has allowed the reduction of social distance in pandemics (Gao et al., 2020), leading to an increasing number of users.

According to the Digital 2022 Global Overview Report, there are almost 51 million individuals connected to the Internet and those active on social platforms number about 43 million, an increase of about 5.4% compared to 2021. In the latter case, the figure of onboarding new users (5.4%) is interesting, but this is accompanied by a slight decrease in the time spent online (a decrease of about 5 minutes compared to 2021). Furthermore, the report lists WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram among the most used social platforms. In Italy, the data concerning the most used platforms, with reference to a sample of Internet users aged between 16 and 64, is confirmed and sees Facebook (78.6%) and Instagram (71.4%) at the top of the list, a trend that is clearly superior to TikTok (28.9%), marking, moreover, an average time of use of the two platforms of 1 hour and 47 minutes of social use per day. It appears, therefore, that large parts of human daily life are conveyed by social spaces. It emerges, however, that while self-narration to others and direct and active relationship with others leads to mental states of a positive nature and well-being, self-narration through excessive use of social networks may lead to lower well-being and the onset of clinical disorders such as anxiety and depression (Liu et al. 2019; Reer et al. 2019). Instagram users share images, photos and videos that, in most cases, possess a positive nature in the narrative, leading, therefore, to a presentation of one's life as satisfying and fulfilling (Hassim, Hasmadi, Sharipudin, 2020). going to affect the individual's psychological well-being (Schmuck, 2019). The use of Facebook, moreover, leads to an 'upward social comparison' (Schmuck, 2019), which can negatively affect well-being and self-esteem. The perception that will result from exposure to these presentations will make the user believe that they live a less rewarding life (Denti et al., 2012). All of this assumes a role in the school and learning context since, as Beasley (2018) points out, the greatest comparison is made with people with whom one identifies most for one or several factors such as age, occupation, appearance. It follows that the peer group and teachers assume a key role in interpreting these dynamics in the learning context. Indeed, Morrison et al. (2004) pointed out that young adolescents tend to have a pronounced social comparison to manifest the need to show their ideal body image.

In light of this, it is interesting to investigate whether and how social media influence the perception of body image in correlation with the use of social networks.

2. Method and objective

The current study aimed to verify the relationship between social comparison, body appreciation, and social media use in a sample of higher education teachers and students.

Considering the role played by teachers in the educational context, it is essential to investigate, alongside those of the students, the teachers' perceptions in this regard. This, in fact, would make it possible to intervene on multiple levels to enhance self-acceptance and body appreciation in students.

Our sample comprised 699 in-training higher education teachers (82.6% female) and 139 students (85.4% female) attending bachelor's degree courses at the University of Foggia, Italy.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the two samples are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

| | Teachers | Students |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Age | | |
| Mean (SD) | 38.89(8.13) | 24.05(7.58) |
| Age range | 21-60y. | 19-53y. |
| Gender | | |
| Female n(%) | 562(82.6%) | 117 (85.4%) |
| Male n(%) | 118(17.4%) | 20 (14.6%) |
| Educational level | | |
| High Schools | 114(16.8%) | 106 (76.8%) |
| Degree or higher | 566(83.2%) | 31(22.5%) |
| Number of social media used | | |
| Mean (SD) | 1.74(.66) | 2.02 (.77) |
| 3 or more n(%) | 83(12.2%) | 34(24.6%) |
| Main social media used | | |
| Facebook n(%) | 309(45.5%) | 11(8%) |
| Instagram n(%) | 370(54.5%) | 87(63%) |
| Tik Tok n(%) | - | 40(29%) |

Participants complete two self-report questionnaires administered online. They received online information on Italian privacy regulations, gave informed consent, and subsequently took part in the study. The research was conducted following the APA’s ethical principles and code of conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002).

2.1. Measures

The *Social Media Social Comparison of Ability and Opinion* scale (Yang et al., 2018) was used to measure social comparison activities on social media. The scale was composed of 9 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 5 = Very well). The first five items of form the social media social comparison of ability (SMSC-Ability) subscale (e.g., “On social media, I compare what I have done with others as a way to find out how well I have done something”). The other 4 items formed the social media social comparison of opinion subscale (SMSC-Opinion) (e.g., *On social media, I try to know what others in a similar situation would do*). Cronbach’s alpha in our sample was .72 for SMSC-Ability and .79 for SMSC-Opinion.

The *Body Appreciation Scale-2* (BAS-2; Casale et al., 2021; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015) was used to measure body appreciation. The scale is composed of 10 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Never; 5 = Always). Cronbach’s alpha in our sample was .94.

2.2. Data analyses

Pearson bivariate correlations were performed to test associations between studied variables in the two samples. *Student’s t-test* and ANOVA were used to analyze social comparison and body appreciation in relation to the number and the type of social media used (Facebook/Instagram/TikTok) within and between groups (Teachers vs. students).

3. Results

Results from bivariate correlations are reported in Table 2. A negative relationship between social media social comparison and body appreciation emerged: greater use of social media to compare one’s abilities ($r=-.12, p <.01$) and opinions ($r=-.10, p <.05$) with those of others was associated with lower levels of body appreciation. Greater use of social media to compare one’s opinions with those of others resulted also associated with a higher number of social media used ($r=.17, p <.01$).

Table 2. Bivariate correlations among studied variables.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---------|--------|--------|----|
| 1.Body appreciation | - | | | |
| 2.Use of social media to compare one's abilities with those of others | -.124** | - | | |
| 3.use of social media to compare one's opinions with those of others | -.079* | .490** | - | |
| 4.Number of social media used | -.022 | .048 | .168** | _- |

Note. ** $p <.01$; * $p <.05$

Analyzing differences within groups emerged that teachers who are using Instagram reported greater use of social media to compare their abilities [(M=2.24, SD=.82); $t(677)=-2.272, p=.023$] and opinions [(M=2.47, SD=.93); $t(677)=-2.259, p=.006$] with those of others than teachers using Facebook [abilities: M=2.10, SD=.75; opinions: M=2.28, SD=.88]. With regard students, instead, they reported greater use of social media to compare their opinions with those of others when using TikTok [(M=3.10, SD=1.02); $F(135)=6.523, p=.002$] and Instagram (M=2.84, SD=.90) in comparison to Facebook (M=1.95, SD=.81).

In addition to this, teachers using 3 or more social media [(M=2.65, SD=.92); $t(678)=-2.825, p=.005$] reported greater use of social media to compare one’s opinions with those of others than teachers using less than three social media (M=2.35, SD=.90). No significant differences were found within the group of students with regard to the use of more than three social media and the studied variables.

When differences between groups were analyzed (teachers vs. students), results showed that students reported greater use of social media to compare one’s opinions and abilities with those of others than teachers, while teachers reported higher levels of body appreciation than students. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences between students and teachers.

| | Teachers M(SD) | Students M(SD) | t(df) | p |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|------|
| Use of social media to compare one's opinions with those of others | 2.38(.91) | 2.84 (.97) | -5.348(816) | .000 |
| Use of social media to compare one's abilities with those of others | 2.18(.79) | 2.48 (.86) | -4.073(816) | .000 |
| Body appreciation | 3.79(.80) | 3.50(.85) | 3.813(816) | .000 |

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to verify the relationship between social comparison, body appreciation and the use of social media. In particular, the social media considered refer to those most used in the Italian panorama. The Digital 2022 Global Overview report showed, in fact, that the social media most used by connected users are: Facebook and Instagram, the explorative survey was also extended to the social TikTok to verify the exposure and possible relationship of this social with the reference sample as well. The concept of well-being is closely connected to the dynamics relating to the individual dimension of one's self-representation with respect to body image components. This is explicable through social comparison with the individuals with whom one interfaces most (Beasley, 2018). In order to investigate this phenomenon with respect to the academic learning context, it proved useful to investigate the relative representations of teachers and students in higher education.

The explorative survey carried out through the administration of questionnaires (Yang et al., 2018; Casale et al., 2021; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015) showed that in both teachers and students there is a negative relationship between social comparison through social media and body appreciation: there is, therefore, a greater use of social in the presence of lower levels of body appreciation. Furthermore, those who use social media more to compare their opinions with those of others use more social networks. Analysing the results regarding the comparison within the groups, it emerged that in the teachers' group, the highest level of social comparison is carried out with the greater use of Instagram rather than Facebook, in the students' group it is highlighted that the highest level of social comparison is associated with the use of TikTok and Instagram.

In the comparison between the two groups, the negative relationship between social comparison and social use emerged: the 'student' group showed higher social use and lower body appreciation, the teachers showed lower social use and higher levels of body appreciation.

These results from an explorative survey represent a first step for future studies that aim to verify the relationship between social comparison, body appreciation and social media use with the learning construct. Indeed, components closely related to individual physical well-being, such as self-esteem (Schmuck, 2019), are crucial in the learning process (Cataudella et al., 2021; Jaaffar et al., 2019). Consequently, investigating these dimensions can be useful in providing awareness and tools with respect to individual well-being, which is fundamental for promoting effective learning.

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