

The Duplicated Body: How the Use of Social Networks is Impacting Preadolescents' Wellbeing

[back to search](#)

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## Session Information

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## Contribution

Although there is a voluminous literature on social media effects on body image concerns of young adults, there has been relatively little research on processes and effects of social media on preadolescents' body image. Furthermore, there has been little theoretically driven research on the effects of the constant manipulation and dissemination of altered copies of the own body. Drawing on a phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 2013), the present paper articulates and comments the results of a study aimed at examining the influence of peer and media variables on body disaffection in 10- to 13-year-old preadolescents. The proposition that the use of altered virtual body images is linked with forms of body disaffection will be explored. In particular, the question turns to the extent to which body image dissatisfaction and disorder may be more salient among preadolescents who use social media to disseminate altered images of their body with the view to obtain gratification and social recognition. In addition, a reflection on the new form of dualism between the virtual and the real body will be explored.

Broadly, adolescence has been targeted as the most likely time for the emergence of body dissatisfaction. However, a growing body of research suggests that such dissatisfaction may develop earlier, during the preadolescence and lead to dieting, social anxiety, inactive lifestyles, and related behaviours that are risk factors for chronic body image problems. This trend may be associated with a large use of the social networks that is widespread among preadolescents, regardless of the age restrictions that many providers and platforms have set. On these platforms, the massive representation of their bodies – often disseminated as filtered images and/or altered videos – is negatively impacting their body image.

Although body image is a complex and multifaceted construct in contemporary western society, the major consideration of body image is in relation to appearance. Many preadolescents experience feelings of insecurity and rejection during a time when their bodies are changing rapidly. They are subjected to societal pressures, and to a cultural model based on standards of beauty which emphasises the desirability of an unrealistic body image (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006) and with celebrities that are pervasive source of influence. Furthermore, peers become increasingly relevant following the commencement of schooling: peer-relationship through the social media tend to reinforce the importance of appearance and the need to respond to specific appearance ideals.

The use of social media – with their interactive format and content features of social media, such as the strong peer presence and exchange of a multitude of visual images - combined with messaging apps, expands the number of occasions to expose the body and its altered representations: by sharing pictures and videos, by making videocalls, by watching videos posted by celebrities and friends, etc. preadolescents have the body at the heart of their social interactions. This phenomenon is causing a new form of dualism between the perceived body and the representative body, and between the body as a given of nature and its virtual and artificial representation (Digennaro, 2021). In particular, this is manifest for preadolescent girls that experience a feeling of discrepancy between the ideal and the actual self.

On this light, in the scientific literature there is the need to reach a better understanding on the complex interaction among the use of social media – typology of media, users experiences, etc. – and the development of body image in preadolescents.

## Method

The Authors carried out a research study to investigate the impact of this new form of dualism on preadolescents' life and their personal wellbeing. To the purpose, a sample of 368 preadolescents (56.71% males) was analysed through two anonymous and self-administered questionnaires aimed at investigating: what types of social media are used; how they use the social media and how they represent their bodies; the relation between the natural and the virtual bodies; the body image; the level of physical activity. An adapted version of Instagram Appearance Comparison Scale - IACS (Di Gesto et al., 2020) was adopted to investigate the combined influence of social media and peer factors. The level of physical activity was analysed with the Physical Activity Questionnaire for Older Children (Kowalski et al., 2004). Body satisfaction was indicated by three scales, including body shape satisfaction, appearance esteem and over-valuation of weight and shape (Cash et al., 2002). The whole spectrum of the secondary school was represented (n=7 classes of the first year; n=7 of the second year; n=6 of the third year). The 89.5 % of the respondents (n= 323) declared to frequently use social networks such as Instagram, TikTok, etc. The use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, etc. reached the percentage of the 99%. Broadly, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp are the most used social media/apps. The 64.5% of the TikTok's users spent more than 2 hours per day on this social media. The IACS indicated that many preadolescents (55.4%) use apps to modify their body image. Girls reported a higher percentage (73.9%) than boys. The 44.3% of the respondents declared to have thought to be in the real life as they appear with the filters used on the social media; the use of Snapchat is positively correlated with this item ( $p < 0.05$ ). Direct effects were found between social media use and body satisfaction and wellbeing variables.

## Expected Outcomes

The results have shown that a massive use of the social media as platforms where to disseminate altered copies of the body and where to have a constant exposure to the bodies of both peers and celebrities is leading to a misperception of the perceived body. Higher frequency of use of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp corresponded to greater body image concern, especially among the girls ( $p < 0.005$ ). In particular, the preadolescents that are frequent users, and have low level of daily physical activity tend to have a distorted body image, with negative influences on their physical and psychological health. They often describe themselves in extreme negative terms with a related body dissatisfaction. The virtual body they can create is seen as a model to be pursued, and the dualism between the perceived body and the virtual body determines frustration and body disaffection. The study showed the association between social media use, body exposure and wellbeing concerns during the preadolescence. It provided evidence on the massive use of the social media/messaging apps among the preadolescents although these platforms are not intended for them. Finally, it showed the presence of an inner conflict concerning the body that must be further analysed and investigated.

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