


“THE DUALISM BETWEEN REAL AND VIRTUAL BODY AMONG CHILDREN- A QUALITATIVE STUDY”

“DUALISMO TRA CORPO REALE E CORPO VIRTUALE NEI BAMBINI- UNO STUDIO QUALITATIVO”

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ABSTRACT

Social media use is leading to the development of the dualism between real and virtual identities. The present qualitative study aimed to investigate how children use social media and how the beauty-ideals models are affecting their body image. Children are prolific users with many of them not liking their physical aspect. It would be beneficial for children’s development to adopt specific strategies contributing to establishing the groundwork for a healthy growing process.

L'uso dei social media sta portando allo sviluppo del dualismo tra identità reali e virtuali. Il presente studio qualitativo ha lo scopo di indagare come i bambini usano i social media e come i modelli degli ideali di bellezza influenzano la loro immagine corporea. I bambini sono utenti prolifici e molti non sono soddisfatti del loro aspetto fisico. Specifiche strategie di intervento dovrebbero essere adottate per un processo di crescita sano.

KEYWORDS

focus group, children, education, body image, social networks
focus group, bambini, educazione, immagine corporea, social network

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Introduction

The present study aimed to investigate how 9-10-years-old children use social media and how the beauty-ideals models proposed on social media are affecting their body image.

Body image

Body image is generally defined as a multifaceted concept encompassing how an individual sees, thinks, feels, and behaves in relation to the appearance and function of its own body (Cash & Smolak, 2011).

Recent studies have framed this complex concept across multiple dimensions (Cash, 2012; Smolak, L., Thompson, 2009). The subjective and affective dimensions which are related to the satisfaction of each individual's body. In this perspective, body image is above all a conscious appreciation of individuals' own physical aspect (Byrne, 2012) and with the satisfaction deriving from the perception of appearance. Both these two dimensions are connected with the cognitive dimension regarding the thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes related to an individual's appearance and with the behavioural dimension describing a person's behaviours linked to body image such as avoiding mirrors or body-monitoring.

Sociocultural theories

The tripartite influence model is generally considered for understanding the elements arising coming from the context in which individual lives and how these impact the body image of an individual (J. K. Thompson et al., 1999).

According to this model, body image is directly affected by peers, relatives, and mass media; thus, encompassing sociocultural, psychological, and biological factors which influence the way the individual, through the body, lives, interacts with others, and experiences the world.

Regarding the external elements influencing an individual's body image, sociocultural theorists suggest that media content based on the appearance might be connected with the internalization of appearance (Schaefer et al., 2015). Hence, individuals might be concerned about their body image when there is a comparison with other imagined or idealised person (J. Thompson, 1990).

To apply this model to our society, Sæle et al. (Sæle et al., 2021) proposed the Body pressure, Omniopticon, Panopticon and Synopticon (BOPS) model supporting the idea that, nowadays, body image in youth generations is subjected to body pressure and many power strategies from authorities, individuals, peers, family, celebrities, or social media, following the Foucaudian idea of panoptic power mechanism (Foucault, 1995, 2005).

In particular, in our society the use of social media networks is widely spread due to their impact on the way people interact with one another. In fact, users might exchange text messages, information, and photos, revealing parts of their character and behavior for the enhancement of sentiment factors, social interactions, and to develop their social identity. In particular, the youngest generation (Generation Z) is named the "digital natives", representing the first generation raised on the internet and social media (Turner, 2015) and living the experience the so-called onlife dimension in which the lived experience is marked by a growing omnipresence of information and communication technologies (Floridi, 2014).

It determines a kind of omnipticon in which the many see the many, influencing each other (Sæle et al., 2021) and where the passive fruition of ideal body images might be linked with the manipulation and diffusion of idealized beauty models. This results in an unrelenting process of remixing and remodeling the body, with potential negative effects consequences. This phenomenon might lead to the onset of dualism: the coexistence of the real being and the virtual identity shown on social media (Digennaro, 2022a).

Although there is a growing literature on social media effects on body image concerns and wellbeing of young adults, adolescents, and preadolescents (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023a; Evans et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2018; Jarman et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017) there has been relatively little research on the use of social media among children and how they affect their body image.

Methods

Study design

The present study aimed at investigating the spreading of the use of social media platform among children and how this is impacting the development of their body image.

For the data collection, a convenience sample of 134 scholars (9-to-10 years old) were invited to take part to the study. Participants were involved in focus-group discussions dealing with social media engagement, sharing picture with their image, the use of beauty filter to alter their appearance. Due to privacy issues, focus-group discussions were not audio recorded. However, for each session's discussion a group of 6 experienced observers took notes of behaviours, children's reactions to specific topics and of children's quotes, while a researcher (A.I.) conducted the focus group as moderator. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Human Sciences, Society and Health of the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (Approval number: 3RA2.2022.06.15). Informed parent consent was also obtained along with the authorizations from all the schools involved in the survey.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically, using a deductive approach which involved the following phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Familiarisation with the process of taking notes was achieved by listening to the audio-recordings of other focus-group discussions. Each transcript was then subjected to systematic coding conducted by a member of the research team, whereby meaningful quotes or key examples from participants were codes. Relevant codes were then grouped together to develop themes and then, definitions and names were then formally assigned to each theme.

Results

Personal mobile devices

The majority of participants declared to own a personal mobile otherwise "you will be excluded for the rest of the group".

However, in few cases children declared of not owning a personal mobile but there are allowed to use their parents' mobile.

Only in one case a child did not participate to the discussion because he did not have his own mobile phone and he felt embarrassed regarding this topic.

Social media engagement

Surprisingly, among the interviewed participants only 3 declared to spend long time using personal device. In particular, a girl said: "I am always with the phone and my parents don't want it and would like to take it off, but I hide it", whereas a boy said "once I played all night until 6 am".

Other participants claimed to not having enough time for using social media because "I do 3 hours of training and then homework", or "... because my time is programmed", or because "If I have basketball and much homework, thus, I use social a little because in the evening I'm tired".

Nevertheless, children are avid social media users. In fact, they mainly use apps such as TikTok, Telegram, YouTube, Twitch for different purposes: Telegram is used to send messages, WhatsApp for texting and sharing pictures with their classmates YouTube to upload videos (a child has its own channel), Discord, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Twitch, Roblox, Snapchat are also used.

One boy said: "I have the youtube channel, but I don't make videos, I use Twitter and play".

None of participants is a Facebook user because according to them "Facebook is for elderly" or because "My relatives use Facebook, I don't want to have them as friends".

Sharing their pictures

Regarding the sharing of pictures with their body image, different opinions were found, especially among girls.

To this purpose, a girl said: "I agree for publication of my pictures from my mother, if I am satisfied of how I look like". Similarly, another girl declared "I like to be photographed and even posted if I go out well".

Effectively, three girls are considered to be the "influencers" of the group.

Those statements underline the importance for children to appear good-looking when sharing their picture, according to the beauty standards imposed by our society. For this purpose, it also emerged that, for the majority of girls, there is the habit to take several pictures for choosing the most beautiful to be shared.

Nevertheless, a large proportion of participants resulted to be avoiding the publication of photo/video material portraying themselves (either by their own decision or by imposition by parents) declaring "I don't like to publish my photos" or "I don't publish because I don't want and neither do my parents". Many of them said that they are scared of haters on social network and for this reason they prefer not sharing their pictures. In fact, a girl said: "In the past I used to make videos with my face, but there were haters who insulted myself, and it is not fair that they insult." It also emerged that they are aware of the risk of exposing their image on social networks with a girl saying "I am against the use of social media because they can incite you to hate" and P. and M. intervened saying that "once a girl committed suicide because of social humiliation."

Interestingly, a small proportion of boys sustained to be inclined to share their image "only if I earn so much money, I could post photos" with two of them saying to have their own channel and "I would not like to publish my photos or videos unless I earn money".

Use of beauty filters

Many children share the feeling of not liking their image with the most common stating being "I don't want to be posted because I don't like how I am in pictures", reporting a negative perception of their body image and some of them hate to be posted on social networks as they are not satisfied with their appearance in pictures.

Therefore, a common habit is to use beauty filters to increase their body satisfaction since they see themselves better with filters and tend to use them specially to share photos with each other, changing their appearance according to filters.

Moreover, when asking "Have you ever wanted or tried to be in the reality as you look like with filters?" many of them answered yes. For instance, M. says she saw a filter on TikTok that had bangs and that's why she decided to get bangs.

Another interesting feeling regarding the use of beauty filters is the idea among few girls of not using it "...because once removed I see myself ugly". However, few of them decide to not using beauty filters since "I do not become more beautiful if I apply a beauty filter" and "I don't use beauty filters because they change the physical appearance too much; thus, I accept myself and I only apply funny filters with my brother".

Parents' awareness

Regarding the parents' awareness toward the activities on social network of children a child says that parents do not know that he has social network. Moreover, a student does not follow his relatives and he "blocked" family members to prevent them from seeing published posts. Many children have asked parents for permission to use social media other not, some have not used their name others will change their age and using a private account.

Whereas a girl has blocked her mother because she does not want her to publish her pictures but she does it anyway.

Nevertheless, many children asked their parents' permission to use social networks and some of them respected their decision while some of them declared to change their name or to change their age in order to create a social media account.

Conclusions

Childhood represents a critical moment in the developmental process of body image, since there are important significant changes in body, self-concept, mood, and social interactions (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Low levels of self-esteem might increase the risk of developing an ever-increasing body concern by affecting assessments of one's personal attributes, including physical appearance (Rodgers et al., 2020). A growing number of studies found that a disproportional awareness to the body might enhance the onset of bodily concerns and unhealthy behaviours (i.e. dieting, social anxiety, inactive lifestyles, and related behaviors) which represent risk factors for chronic body image issues (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Effectively, social media enhance the risks for being exposed to inappropriate contents, bullying, grooming, sexual abuse, or body shaming among youth (Fardouly et al., 2018). In fact, sociocultural theories suggest that the contents shared on social media networks, which are mainly centred on images may be linked with the internalisation of appearance (Schaefer et al., 2015). For this reason, users might be more concerned about their body image when there is the comparison between idealised beauty models and the perception of their appearance (J. Thompson, 1990).

Moreover, Kircaburun et al. (2020) found that a problematic social media use might stimulate a maladaptive coping strategy toward emotional trauma and body dissatisfaction, suggesting that it is directly or indirectly related to childhood emotional maltreatment or body dissatisfaction.

Accordingly, following the social comparison theory, individuals need to compare themselves with other individuals considered similar, with the aim of a self-evaluation. Comparison is considered downward when it is made with profiles considered worse. Oppositely, it is considered upward when the comparison is made with profiles considered better (Vani et al., 2021).

In our society, physical aspect represents a relevant element for the way people individuals feel about them (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018), and the number of likes representing a parameter used for the social comparison process (Chua & Chang, 2016).

In this context, the number of likes denotes a parameter used for the social comparison process (Chua & Chang, 2016). The mechanism of “likes” might lead individuals to a lower perception of body satisfaction, if a shared picture receives a lower number of likes than expected. Contrarily, if the shared picture receives a higher number of likes than hypothesized expected, body satisfaction and self-esteem are preserved (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010).

Additionally, Meshi et al. (2013) confirmed that at brain level, when a “like” is received, the brain structure of the person who received it, is activated. This brain structure is the nucleus accumbens and is usually more active when an individual experiences something that make him happy (Meshi et al., 2013).

Therefore, this mechanism might induce in users an increasing needing of sharing beautiful pictures, according to the beauty standards imposed by the society, in order to receive more “likes” (Eshiet, 2020), with some people removing the picture if it does not achieve the expected number of likes (Jang et al., 2015). This occurs because the number of “likes” represents an index of appreciation by peers concerning physical beauties (Chua & Chang, 2016). Nevertheless, the exposure to filtered pictures might lead to a decline of an individual body satisfaction (Kleemans et al., 2018). Thereby, Leggett-James & Laursen (2022) demonstrated that children who are higher social media users report a greater decrease in body satisfaction also because of then high influence received by peers.

From the present study it emerged that children who practice physical activity have less time to spent on social media; hence, a lower exposure to social media platforms might counteract their negative effects. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that promoting active lifestyles might represent a valid strategy to preserve children (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023a; Iannaccone, 2022) and the participation in physical activities is linked to higher levels of positive body image approach (Sabiston et al., 2019).

As a result, the current study aimed explored the habits of children regarding the use of social networks and how this exposure might represent a risk factor toward a healthy construction of their personal body image.

In conclusion, digital natives are continuously exposed to ideal beauty models through social media platforms. The current study showed that children are differently responding to those stimuli. However, it is worthy underlying that the majority of them is unsatisfied with its body image. Consequently, they seek for peers’ appreciation on social networks by applying beauty filters, responding to the societal beauty models and creating a sort of a virtuous circle in which the moving mechanisms is given by the number of the “like” to pictures with users’ image. Therefore, children apply beauty filters to look beautiful in the peers’ eyes, increasing their self-esteem and better appreciate their own body. Nevertheless, this process might induce to the development of dualism between the virtual identity (with manipulated pictures) and the real being (Digennaro, 2022b; Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023b).

Thus, it would be beneficial for children’s development to adopt specific strategies contributing to establishing the groundwork for a healthy growing process and preventing them to be negatively influenced. For instance, a comprehensive program might be proposed with the collaboration of schools, educators, and parents focusing on the strengthening of specific pillars such as the self-consciousness, or the creation of the identity.

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