

Social Media's Impact On Students' Self-Concept

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between social media behavior and self-concept among 283 first-year college students at Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology. Utilizing a descriptive-correlational design, data were collected via a validated survey and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's r correlation. Results demonstrated that students possess high self-esteem ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .543$) and a moderate perceived body image ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .498$). Correlational analysis revealed a significant, albeit weak, positive relationship between social media behavior and body image ($r = .290$, $p = .001$), while no significant correlation was found with self-esteem. The findings suggest that high self-esteem may act as a protective buffer against negative online pressures, advancing our understanding of the nuanced role social media plays in shaping specific dimensions of young adults' self-concepts..

Keywords: self-concept, body image, self-esteem, social media..

Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media is a ubiquitous presence. This widespread engagement is frequently linked to mental health and self-concept challenges among the youth. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2024) indicated that nearly half of teenagers report being online "almost constantly," highlighting the intensity of modern digital immersion. This global trend of high engagement is heavily mirrored in the Philippines. According to Kemp (2025), there were 90.8 million active social media user identities in the Philippines at the start of 2025, equating to 78% of the total population. Furthermore, Filipinos are recognized as some of the most active social media users globally, spending an average of over three and a half hours daily on these platforms (Kemp, 2024). Locally, in Cotabato Province, the impact appears even more pronounced among student populations navigating the pressures of digital connectivity.

While the dominant research narrative emphasizes detrimental outcomes, the precise relationship between social media engagement and self-concept specifically perceived body image and self-esteem is highly complex and not uniformly negative. Focusing solely on generalized harm risks obscuring the nuanced ways social media shapes specific dimensions of self-perception. Given the phenomenally high level of social media engagement in the Philippines (Kemp, 2025; Reyes et al., 2023), there is a clear need for a targeted, region-specific investigation. Therefore, this study was conducted to quantify the relationship between social media behavior and self-concept among first-year college students at Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology (CFCST).

Objectives of the Study

This study specifically aimed to:

Determine the level of social media behavior among first-year college students at CFCST.

Assess the level of self-concept among students as measured by two factors: perceived body image and self-esteem.

Analyze the correlation between social media behavior and the components of self-concept.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global impact of social media on students' mental health has been a prominent focus of recent empirical study. Research demonstrates that excessive social media usage is strongly associated with emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and depression. For example, an experimental study by Thai et al. (2023) revealed that when young adults reduced their social media use by 50% over a short period, they experienced significant

improvements in their appearance and weight esteem. This reflects a growing global consensus about the psychological effects of highly digitized lifestyles, particularly concerning how continuous exposure to idealized imagery can distort a student's self-evaluation.

In the Philippines, pervasive social media use is deeply embedded in the daily lives of students. With 93.1% of the country's internet users active on social platforms (Kemp, 2025), the potential for these digital environments to influence self-perception is massive. Recent national studies reflect this reality. Reyes et al. (2023) investigated Filipino young adults and found that social media use significantly correlates with lower self-esteem, a relationship heavily mediated by the user's tendency to engage in social comparison.

Conversely, Barcelon et al. (2023) explored the correlation between social media exposure and self-esteem among Filipino college students and found that while it may not significantly alter overall self-control or identity, it has a pronounced positive impact on students' sense of belongingness. Similarly, investigating broader youth perspectives in national contexts requires examining structured social attitudes; for instance, Barrios (2023) explored Filipino young adults, students, and parents, highlighting strong collective alignment and support for large-scale institutional initiatives. This underscores the necessity of localized research to understand both the positive and negative facets of social media on Filipino students.

Recent literature highlights the intricate relationship between social media usage, body image, and self-esteem. Individuals frequently evaluate their self-worth against the curated, idealized representations prevalent on digital platforms. According to Valkenburg et al. (2022), the frequency and nature of social media use directly influence fluctuations in self-esteem, often driven by upward social comparisons. However, the psychological impact is heavily dependent on the type of material consumed and the user's baseline psychological traits. Burnasheva and Suh (2021) suggest that actively engaging in collaborative or affirming social media platforms can actually serve to boost self-esteem, regardless of the user type. Thus, while exposure to idealized images can distort self-perception (Reyes et al., 2023), engaging with positive content or using platforms to build social connections may yield protective benefits for a student's overall self-concept.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design. Specifically, this approach was utilized first to describe the existing levels of social media behavior and self-concept among students, and subsequently to explore the statistical association between these variables.

The respondents in this research were 283 first-year college students from Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology (CFCST) during the 2024-2025 academic year. Furthermore, these respondents were selected from Arakan, North Cotabato, utilizing a stratified sampling technique to ensure a representative sample. Consequently, to guarantee the statistical validity of this correlational analysis, the sample size of 283 was established using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, thereby achieving a statistical power of .80.

To ensure clarity and replicability in the measurement framework, the primary variables of the study were operationally defined. First, Social Media Behavior (SMB) is defined as the self-reported frequency with which students engage in both passive consumption such as accessing social networking sites and active participation, such as posting pictures, editing or using filters, and comparing oneself to online body images on social platforms. Second, Perceived Body Image (PMI), which serves as a specific component of the students' self-concept, is defined as the students' subjective evaluation and internal feelings regarding their physical appearance. In particular, this focuses on the extent to which they feel influenced or pressured by the idealized images they encounter online. Lastly, Self-Esteem (SE) represents the second component of self-concept and is defined as the students' overall subjective sense of intrinsic personal worth, encompassing their feelings of pride, self-acceptance, and the degree to which they perceive themselves as being loved and valued.

For the purpose of data gathering, information was collected using a survey questionnaire designed to measure "Social Media Behavior" as a single construct and "Self-Concept" through two distinct factors: perceived body image and self-esteem. Before the actual data collection, the reliability and validity of the research instrument were established. Specifically, the questionnaire was reviewed for content validity by a panel of three subject-matter experts prior to distribution. Following this, a pilot testing was conducted where the instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency, yielding Cronbach's alpha values of 0.802 and 0.805.

Finally, to analyze the gathered data, descriptive statistics specifically Mean and Standard Deviation—were used to summarize the variables. Afterward, the test of the relationship between the variables was treated using Pearson's *r* correlation. However, prior to applying the Pearson's *r* correlation, the necessary statistical assumptions such as normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were strictly examined to ensure the validity and accuracy of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Behavior

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for social media behaviors among the 283 participants. The overall mean for social media behavior fell within the moderate range ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .566$), indicating that participants, on average, engage in the specified behaviors "sometimes".

A granular analysis of individual items reveals a distinct variance in frequency. The most common behavior, "Accessing social networking sites," yielded a high mean ($M = 4.11$, $SD = .907$), suggesting frequent passive engagement. In contrast, behaviors requiring active participation or social comparison fell into the moderate range: "Posting picture(s) online" ($M = 2.89$, $SD = .733$), "Editing/using filters on photos before posting" ($M = 2.85$, $SD = .912$), and "Comparing oneself to body images seen online" ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .997$). Notably, the item regarding social comparison exhibited the largest standard deviation ($SD = .997$), indicating the highest degree of response variability among the sample for this specific action.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Social Media Behavior, $N=283$

Social Media Behavior	Mean	Std. Deviation
Accessing social networking sites	4.11	.907
Posting picture(s) online	2.89	.733
Editing/using filters on photos before posting	2.85	.912
Comparing oneself to body images seen online	2.84	.997
Mean	3.17	.566

Legend

Mean	Qualitative Interpretation	Description
4.21 – 5.00	Very High	The behavior is practiced "Always"
3.41 – 4.20	High	The behavior is practiced "Often"
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate	The behavior is practiced "Sometimes"
1.81 – 2.60	Low	The behavior is practiced "Rarely"
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low	The behavior is "Never" practiced

Level of Self-Concept

The assessment of the students' self-concept, detailed in Table 2, demonstrated divergent results between its two measured components. The construct of perceived body image yielded a moderate mean score ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .498$). Conversely, the findings revealed that respondents exhibit a high level of self-esteem, characterized by a mean score of 4.16 ($SD = 0.543$). The comparatively low standard deviations for both constructs suggest a highly consistent response pattern across the majority of the surveyed students.

Table 2

Level of First-Year Students' Self-Concept

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Body Image	3.27	.498
Self-Esteem	4.16	.543

Legend

Mean	Qualitative Interpretation	Description
4.21 – 5.00	Very High	The behavior/feeling is felt/observed "Always"
3.41 – 4.20	High	The behavior /feeling is felt/observed "Often"
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate	The behavior//feeling is felt/observed "Sometimes"
1.81 – 2.60	Low	The behavior/feeling is felt/observed "Rarely"
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low	The behavior/feeling is "Never" felt/observed

Relationship Between Social Media Behavior and Self-Concept

Inferential analysis, detailed in Table 3, examined the correlation between the primary constructs. A significant positive correlation was found between social media behavior and perceived body image ($r(283) = .290$, $p = .001$). Following Cohen's guidelines for effect size interpretation, an r value of .290 represents a small or weak effect. Conversely, no significant correlation was observed between social media behavior and the students' self-esteem ($r(283) = -.004$, $p > .05$).

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Among Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Social Media Behavior

Variables	Body Image	Self-Esteem	Social Media Behavior
Body Image	—	-.01	.290**
Self-Esteem	.013	—	-.004
Social Media Behavior	.290**	-.004	—

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

DISCUSSION

The descriptive findings suggest a crucial distinction between passive social media consumption and active or comparative engagement. The high frequency of simply accessing sites aligns with global trends regarding the ubiquity of social media. However, this high frequency of passive use does not translate into an equally high frequency of active participation. The moderate scores for posting, editing, and comparing indicate a level of selective engagement, where participants are perhaps more comfortable with passive consumption than with the psychological vulnerability of posting or comparing.

Furthermore, the high variability in social comparison behavior ($SD = .997$) has significant implications. While the mean score is moderate, the high standard deviation suggests the sample is not homogeneous; it is highly probable that polarized subgroups exist within the population, with a specific subset engaging in this high-risk comparative behavior far more frequently than their peers.

The findings regarding self-concept reveal that while students experience moderate pressures regarding their body image, they concurrently possess a consistently high level of self-esteem. This aligns with studies in similar educational settings that report high self-esteem in early adulthood, which is often linked to successful academic transitions and the establishment of supportive social networks. The lack of a significant correlation between social media behavior and self-esteem suggests that for this specific demographic, foundational self-worth is not heavily dictated by their digital habits.

The most notable finding is the significant, albeit weak, positive correlation between social media behavior and perceived body image. This counterintuitive finding suggests that increased social media engagement is associated with a slightly more positive perception of body image within this sample. While this contrasts with much of the deficit-focused research that strictly links exposure to idealized images with body dissatisfaction (Ryding & Kuss, 2020), it is consistent with emerging literature highlighting the complex nature of digital interactions. For instance, engaging with body-positive content or utilizing platforms that advocate for diverse representations has been shown to enhance body satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2021; Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). Ultimately, the data suggests that the students' high baseline self-esteem may act as a protective buffer, mitigating negative external pressures and allowing them to derive more positive or neutral experiences from their moderate digital engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the complex relationship between social media behavior and the self-concept of first-year college students. Moving beyond the common idea that social media is always harmful, the findings suggest that personal strengths specifically high self-esteem act as an important shield. Instead of simply absorbing negative online pressures, students with strong self-worth can use social platforms with greater ease and resilience. The unexpected positive link between social media use and perceived body image also suggests that when students feel good about themselves, their online experiences may lead to positive support and connection rather than harmful comparison. Ultimately, these findings point to a need for change: schools and mental health programs should focus on actively building up students' inner self-esteem rather than just trying to control or limit their social media use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following actionable steps are recommended:

Instead of just advising students to take a break from screens, counselors should create specific support programs. Through the Guidance and Counseling Services, practitioners can focus on building self-esteem using support groups and counseling sessions. These activities should remind students of their true worth and give them the mental tools to handle the stress of comparing themselves to others online.

Add media literacy lessons to the first-year classes. Teachers should lead open discussions that help students look critically at perfect online photos and beauty standards, turning mindless scrolling into thoughtful media use.

Parents should constantly remind their children that their value comes from their character, hard work, and real-life actions, rather than how they look or how many "likes" they get. This helps build a strong shield of self-esteem at home.

Use interviews or focus groups to better understand exactly how high self-esteem protects students from online pressures. Also, future studies could use data grouping techniques to find specific, highly vulnerable students who often compare themselves to others online, making it easier for schools to offer the right help..

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