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## **Social media and its impact on adolescents' sense of body image in Sri Lanka**

Lokumannage A.

Department of Mass Media, Sri Palee Campus, University of Colombo

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study is based on how social media affects an adolescent's sense of body image in Sri Lanka. Social media images have a significant impact on body image or potential deviant behavior of an average adolescent. However, one major difference between adults and adolescents is that adolescents are facing the most vulnerable and sensitive period of their life. For this study, the survey method was used to evaluate the social media footprint on adolescents' body image. Participants in this research study consisted of 100 grade 12 students, 50 females and 50 males (age 18) from 10 selected schools in the Colombo district. The questionnaire consists of 15 questions. Students are asked to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point scale ranging from "definitely disagree" to "definitely agree". The objectives of the study were to study the importance of social media platforms as attractive & fashionable media outlets, to understand how adolescents compare their body image with those of celebrities that they see on social media, and to determine the pressure adolescents experience from social media to have perfect body images. The following questions were asked: How do social media platforms influence the sense of what constitutes attractive and fashionable body images? Do adolescents feel any pressure from social media to lose weight? Do adolescents compare their body images to celebrities that they see on social platforms? As results it was revealed that social media has a great influence on adolescents' body images; the researcher measured general body dissatisfaction among adolescents. Secondly, social media has a great influence on how adolescents perceive what is attractive and fashionable. Social media influence a sense of pressure on adolescents to look a certain way (thinner and more beautiful for girls, stronger and more muscular for boys). The study has revealed that the higher the time adolescents spend online the more they are unsatisfied with their bodies, which also leads to the conclusion that media has a negative influence on adolescents' body images.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Adolescent, Body image, Internet, Social media, Sri Lanka*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Every stage in human life is important and unique, nevertheless, there is always one period in life that can be defined as the most sensitive or the hardest for an average individual. That stage is called adolescence. Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. In this period children start looking like adults by their physical appearance and preparing themselves for adult roles but that transaction is more complex than it seems. In this period children start searching for identity, they try on different behaviors and appearances to discover who they are and where do they belong. In this transition to adulthood, children are constantly looking for a role model, someone to associate with.

Adolescence is “a stage of life that begins sometime around the onset of puberty and ends sometime when the individual obtains adult rights, responsibilities, and recognition by family, law, society, and such” (Thomas and Gerald, 2005). Adolescence is a period in life with the most sudden changes a body can experience. Individuals transfer from childhood to adulthood, both mentally and physically. This challenging developmental stage is initiated by pubertal onset and “can be divided into three periods: early (ages 12 to 14 years), middle (ages 15 to 16 years) and late adolescence (ages 17 to 19 years and beyond)” (Richter, 1997). Although body image is defined as a subjective perception on one’s body, the image that an individual has of his or her body is largely determined by social experience. People receive information about how

should they look every day, and that picture has been changing through history. Nowadays, media play a big role in transmitting information about body image and have a great influence on viewer’s perception of what is beautiful and what is not.

In this digital era, social media plays a significant role in adolescents’ lives. All the way from magazines and movies to the popular media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, media are constantly involved in everyday reality. Thin female models and muscular strong men are the “ideal” images of today’s world. Adolescents constantly try to keep up with these unattainable and unrealistic pictures they see in media every day. Undoubtedly, they eventually fail, and this failure can lead them to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, eating disorders or depression. Social media are Internet sites where people interact freely, sharing and discussing information about each other and their lives, using a multimedia mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio (Curtis, 2013). In Sri Lanka the most famous social media platform is Facebook.

Previous research has proved that hormone changes do affect adolescents’ behavior, and body image. Adolescence is a period of human life when changes are inevitable, leaving adolescents extremely vulnerable and easy to manipulate. It is crucial to understand the difficulties that adolescents are dealing with. A developing body and mind do not require constant media pressure to attain unrealistic “ideal” images. Such information is imperative in order to

clarify the vulnerability and sensitivity of adolescents.

Beside constant pressure on girls to look thin and toned, and on boys to look muscular and strong, there are numerous problems overweight adolescents face from childhood. Overweight adolescents have struggled with peer acceptance. They are rated as less attractive, intelligent, hardworking, successful, athletic, and popular than slim people. This pressure in adolescence can be fatal for an average teenager. Commercials and advertisements promote extreme thinness as the only desirable figure for women and muscularity as the only acceptable shape for men. Marketers will often do anything that they can to sell a product and make a profit, and almost anything can be sold if it appeals to our sense of beauty or is considered attractive. According to marketing experts, beauty and sex-appeal sell everything.

On the other side, there are celebrities and fashion models who are often seen as role models, especially by adolescents. Their body weight, appearance and beauty are often associated with their popularity and wealth. They promote thinness and muscularity as the "ideal" picture. The most influential media personalities and celebrities have to be aware of the power embedded in their actions and words. Constant representation of slenderness as the only acceptable body shape, from movies and music videos to their Facebook and Instagram accounts, makes adolescents search for a similar look.

In the modern society, social media undoubtedly play a vital role in

adolescent's social life. Young adults have embraced social media platforms which give them the opportunity to consume, create and share content. As most online platforms revolve around one's personal profile, they offer young people space to present themselves. A profile page offers an online stage where a user can, besides communicating with others, also divulge personal data in written and visual form (Smolak, 2011). Beside friends, peers and family, adolescents can broaden their social network to other people with whom they may share similar interests, concerns or problems. Teenagers are reported as the heaviest users of social networking. Due to adolescents spending more and more time on social platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, this study focused on the single topic of finding out the impact social media has on increases in negative or obsessive thoughts about appearance.

Recent research has found that the risk for depression jumps 27% when a teenager frequently uses social media. Also, it has been found that children in the United States who spend more than 3 hours per day on social media are more capable of bloodshed. We can't simply ignore this fact since Sri Lanka has one of the highest suicide rates. A study found that children who frequently uses social media are more likely to lose soft skills, self-esteem respect for others and creativity. There are six million plus active social media users in Sri Lanka right now. That is more than 30% of our population. Starting from mid-2017, users in Sri Lanka on Facebook increased from five million to six million in less than 6 months. As per

TRCSL stats, there are 1.5 million plus users who are aged between 10 to 18. Minimum age to open Twitter Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat accounts is 13. According to a study, it is found that more than 50% of children in the world already used a social network by the time they are 10 (Jayasinghe, 2018).

In a review of studies that attempted to measure the prevalence of body dissatisfaction in the U.S., it was found that 46%-66% of U.S. women experience “weight dissatisfaction,” while their reported dissatisfaction with their “overall appearance” ranged from 23%-56% (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2017). Many adolescents blame the media, especially social media where they spend most of their time, as a cause to their weight gain. Blaming the pressures they are subjected to, to look good, causes depression because they never/rarely feel good enough. It is reported that adolescents who feel pressure from the media look thinner, more muscular or toned, tend to suffer more from low self-esteem and eating disorders.

Social media pressures, such as the pressure to look good, happy, funny and interesting online are among the most common pressures adolescents feel. An average adolescent, who owns a Facebook or Instagram account, is under constant pressure to appear successful and seem to have an interesting life. In addition, the increased pressure to look thin for girls and muscular for boys, the pressure to be fashionable is something young adults face daily in social media. Celebrities set standards of what is fashionable and “cool” through their pictures on various

social platforms. At the same time adolescents are trying to keep up with the pressure to dress fashionably, have “cool” styles and slender bodies.

The researcher did not find any published article in Sri Lanka social media on adolescent’s body image. The objectives of the study were, to study the importance of social media platforms as attractive & fashionable media outlets, to understand how adolescents compare their body image with those of celebrities that they see on social media, and to determine the pressure adolescents experience from social media to have perfect body images. The following questions were asked: How social media platforms are important sources of information about attractive and fashionable body images? Do adolescents feel any pressure from social media to lose weight? Do adolescents compare their body images to the celebrities that they see on social platforms?

## **2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this study, the survey method was used to evaluate the influences of social media on adolescents’ body image. Participants in this research consisted of 100 grade 12 students, 50 females and 50 males (age 18) from 10 selected schools in the Colombo district. After analyzing the needs and requirements of each school, those schools showing, 1. the most interest as being part of this research, 2. providing an excellent working environment and 3. encouraging students to take the survey seriously and answer as honestly as possible, were taken for this study. The researcher used the probability

sampling method. The survey is a questionnaire that shows how much influence social media has on adolescents. The questionnaire consists of 15 statements. Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point scale ranging from “definitely disagree” to “definitely agree”. The questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part contains 4 statements about social media as an important source of information (Example: Social media are very important source of information about what is attractive and fashionable). The second part contains 8 statements on how students feel about certain aspects they see in media (e.g. I feel pressure from media to lose weight). The third part includes 3 additional statements in order to cover all necessary aspects of social media influence.

The Figure Rating Scale (FRS), also known as the Stunkard Scale, was used in this study as a tool to determine body dissatisfaction in adolescent males and females. The Figure Rating Scale is an effective psychometric measurement which shows how an individual perceives himself or herself, precisely how they perceive their own physical appearance. Initially, this scale presents nine male and nine female schematic silhouettes, from extreme thinness to extreme obesity. Researcher should ask participants to choose one of nine schematic silhouettes for each statement. The instructions are as follows: (1) Choose your ideal figure; (2) Choose the figure that reflects how you think you look; (3) Choose the figure that reflects how you feel most of the time; (4) Choose the figure that you think is the most preferred by men; (5) Choose the

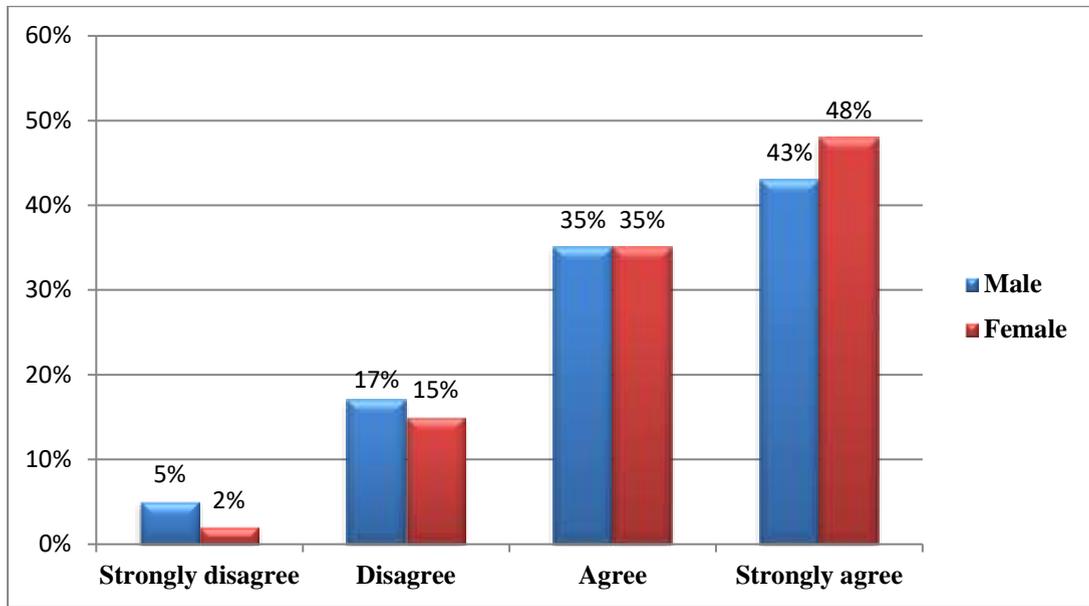
figure that you think is the most preferred by women; and (6) Pick the opposite sex figure that you find the most attractive. The discrepancy between the perception of current body-size/muscularity and ideal body-size/muscularity is used as the measure of body dissatisfaction. There are two possible outcomes, a negative and a positive. A negative outcome would show that students perceived current body size to be larger than their ideal. On the other side, a positive outcome would indicate that students perceived current body size to be their ideal.

### **3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

RQ1. How are social media platforms important sources of information in relation to attractive and fashionable body images?

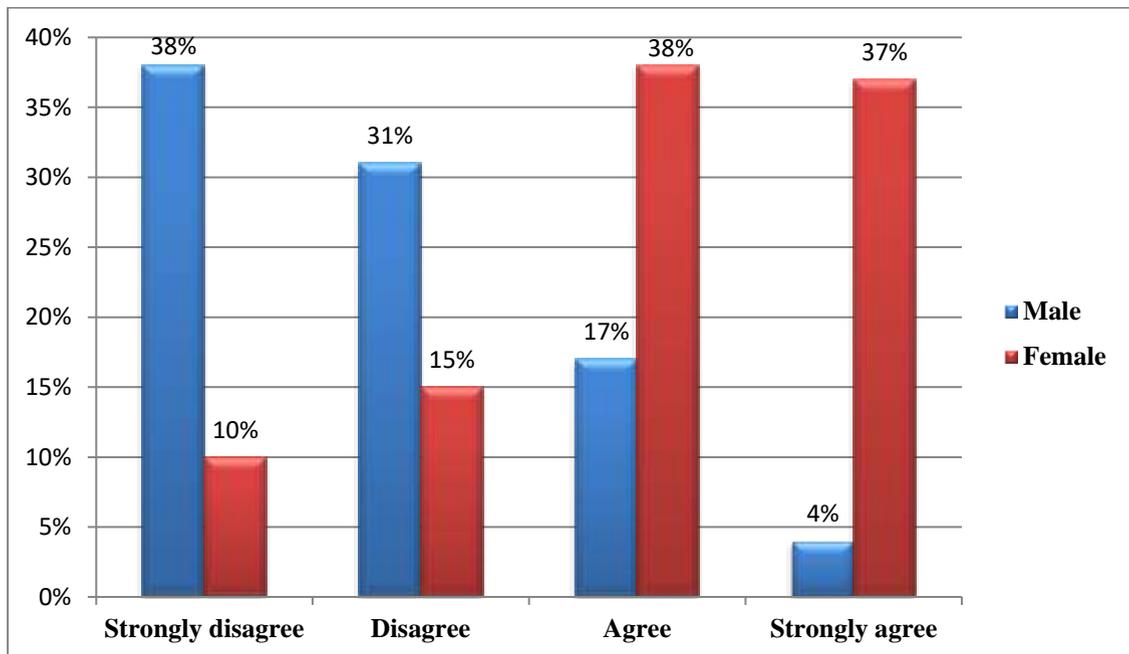
As much as 83% of the female participants and 78% of the male participants have chosen “agree” or “strongly agree” on the statement that described social media platforms as important sources of information on what is attractive and fashionable. Around 75% of the girls and 68% of the boys have chosen “agree” or “strongly agree” on the statement that listed Facebook as an important source of information on what is attractive and fashionable. Lower than Facebook but still as important, was Instagram, which was confirmed by 65% of the girls and 57% of the boys as an important source of information, of what is attractive and fashionable. As much as 82 % of the female participants and 66 % of the male participants have chosen “agree” or “strongly agree” on the statement that said that celebrities they see on social platforms are an important

source of information of what is attractive and fashionable



**Figure 01:** Adolescents who think social media platforms as important sources of information about attractiveness and a sense of being fashionable.

RQ2. Do adolescents feel any pressure from social media to lose weight?



**Figure 02:** Adolescent who feel pressure from social media to lose weight

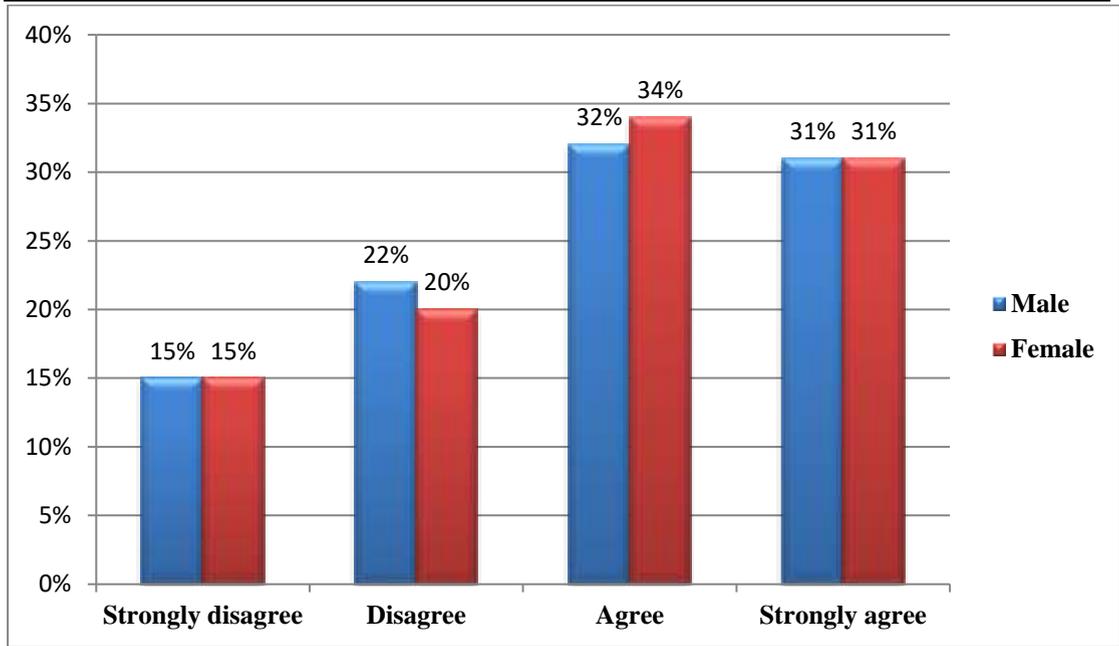
Around 75% of the female adolescents and 21% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” indicating that they feel pressure from social media to lose weight. Around 58% of the female adolescents and 23% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” expressing that they feel uncomfortable after looking at the pictures of celebrities and they want to lose weight. Around 56% of the female adolescents and 87% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” indicating that they feel pressure from social media to look pretty/muscular.

Around 57 % of the female adolescents and 89% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they feel uncomfortable after looking at the pictures of celebrities and want to be prettier and muscular. Around 60% of the female adolescents and 23% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they feel pressure from social media to have a perfect body. Around 60% of the female adolescents and 25% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they feel uncomfortable after looking at

the pictures of celebrities and want to have a perfect body as they do. Around 88% of the female adolescents and 21% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they feel pressure from social media to dress fashionably. Around 87 % of the female adolescents and 18% of the female adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they feel uncomfortable after looking at the pictures of celebrities and want to be more fashionable.

RQ3. Do adolescents compare their body images to the celebrities that they see on social platforms?

Around 65% of the female adolescents and 63% of the male adolescents “agree” and “strongly agree” that they compare their bodies to the bodies that they see on social media platforms. Around 63% of the female adolescents and 23% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they would like to change their appearance to look more like celebrities they see on social platforms. Around 68% of the female adolescents and 31% of the male adolescents who participated in the research “agree” and “strongly agree” that they try to look more like people they see in social media every day.



**Figure 03:** Adolescents who compare their body images to those of celebrities they see on social media platforms

According to The Figure Rating Scale adolescent girls identify the ideal body image and the image they would like to have with the ones that celebrities have and as much as 93% of the girls once again answered that they would like to have the ideal figure as in celebrities that they have just seen. In addition, if 79% of the girls are ready to take advice on how to look attractive and follow celebrities' diet plans or lifestyle. It is valid to state that the environment social media has made for young girls is a dangerous one. Young girls will try to keep up with the unrealistic and unreachable ideals that the media sends out on a regular basis once they realize that their bodies do not match the ideal images they see in the media. The result of this action can easily lead to depression, eating disorders and overall dissatisfaction among adolescent girls, as 67% of the participants already stated that

they feel bad about themselves and their appearance after seeing the given pictures of adolescents.

Similar as the girls, the boys identified the ideal figure and the figure they would like to have with the celebrity had. The ideal figure, according to 83% of the guys, is silhouette number 1, which shows a robust physique. The same amount of boys said that celebrities had the ideal figure, silhouette number 1, and that 88% of them said that celebrities have the ideal figure. However, only 2% of the boys stated that their figure is similar to the ideal figure.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Human beings are social creatures; they appear and exist only in interaction with other people and under their influence. Whether we want to admit it or not, an average human being is constantly

comparing to others using a variety of people and sources. People judge their worth, by attractiveness and physical appearance. We are living in the 21st century, a period of time when technology and media are easily-accessible and there is no way we can completely protect ourselves from the media influence. The privilege of using smart phones, computers and endless internet access can sometimes do more harm than we think.

According to the results, female and male adolescents consider social platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as celebrities whose images they see on social platforms, as important sources of information on what is attractive and fashionable. But the boys seem to be less affected than the girls. Furthermore, great numbers of male and female adolescents feel pressure from social media and celebrities to be more muscular and pretty, but do not feel as much pressure to lose weight, to have perfect bodies and dress more fashionably. A large amount of female and male adolescents who participated in the research compare themselves to celebrities, try to look like them; hence would eventually change their appearance to look more like them. Only 31% of male adolescents try to look like celebrities and even less than that, only 23% of the boys, would eventually change their appearance to look more like them. Social media affect females' and males' lives in almost the same mannerisms, however, the kind of pressure media puts on them is different.

Adolescents are constantly comparing themselves with their "friends" on Facebook, Instagram or any other social

media. Therefore, there are numerous cases of depression or even suicide due to social media influences. On the other hand, there are adolescents who compare themselves with celebrities, models, singers or actors that they see in music videos, movies and other media. They follow them on social media daily and naturally start wishing to look like them. Since adolescents cannot keep up with the lifestyle, appear in the media, this attempt can lead to depression, low self-esteem and can easily harm their health.

Unfortunately, struggles in body image dissatisfaction do not disappear once puberty is completed. The key is to invest in adolescents by preparing and educating them to be equipped with the necessary skills to successfully handle what they will encounter in the future. It is also important to teach adolescents the importance of finding positive characteristics that they like about themselves. After that they can embrace those traits as special and unique gifts that they can give back to the world to make it a better place.

The Figure Rating Scale indicates that social media is an important factor in body dissatisfaction. Social Media influences can have an effect on how individuals feel about their own body image. The body types presented in media can also have an influence on the physical appearance that an individual desires to obtain. Research suggests that women are mostly influenced by social media images that promote the Thin Ideal body type. Whereas, men are mostly influenced by social media images that promote a more muscular build. These influences may

cause participants to choose a silhouette on the figure rating scale that represents themselves as the opposite of the desired body type in the media. Additionally, when asked to point to the image of their desired body type, participants may choose a silhouette on the scale that is more similar to attractive body types that are presented in social media.

Recommendations from this study: Family should be involved in teenagers' lives as much as possible, and understand all the physical and mental changes and media and peer pressure they are exposed to. Adolescents who have strong support from their families show greater self-esteem and overall satisfaction and happiness.

In the last part of the questionnaire, the adolescents have agreed that lectures about how social media and advertising function could lead them and their friends toward better understanding of what social media is, how social media affects them and how to protect them from bad social media influence. Media Literacy is a useful subject for school syllabi.

Changing the way media portray the "ideal" body is a long-term goal. But the promotion of positive body image and body acceptance is very important in improving adolescents' quality of life and physical health. Social media has to send clear images of what it is to be eating healthy and to break stereotypes. It is crucial to stop presenting healthy food as expensive and hard to reach and to glorify strict diets as the only way to slenderness.

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