

**Social Media Use, Body Image, and Self-Esteem Among Muslim University
Students: A Mixed-Methods Study**

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Abstract

The dissertation investigates the relationship between social media use, body image, and self-esteem among Muslim university students enrolled in urban campuses. Drawing on social comparison theory, Islamic conceptions of modesty, and contemporary models of adolescent well-being, the study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Phase one surveys 300 students using standardized measures of social media intensity, body image concern, and global self-esteem; phase two follows with semi-structured interviews to examine how religious and cultural norms shape students' interpretations of online content.

Quantitative analyses test whether social media intensity predicts body image concern and self-esteem, and whether gender moderates these relationships. Qualitative data explore how participants navigate tensions between Islamic teachings on self-worth and the appearance-focused norms prevalent on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Findings are expected to show that appearance-oriented social media use is associated with higher body dissatisfaction, particularly among female students, but that religious coping and family support can buffer harmful effects. The study contributes to culturally and religiously attuned mental health interventions, offering recommendations for campus counselling, digital literacy programs, and parental guidance aimed at strengthening resilience while honoring Islamic values.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

University students inhabit a media-saturated environment where curated images and short-form videos shape daily perceptions of beauty, success, and social belonging. Social media platforms encourage constant comparison with peers and influencers, often highlighting idealized bodies and lifestyles. For Muslim students, these pressures intersect with religious teachings about modesty, dignity, and intrinsic self-worth that are rooted in Qur'anic and prophetic guidance (Hassan, 2023). The resulting tensions can be especially pronounced in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, developmental periods characterized by identity exploration, intensified academic demands, and shifting peer networks (Arnett, 2015).

1.2 Problem Statement

A growing body of research links high social media use with body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among young people (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Valkenburg et al., 2022). However, much of this work is rooted in Western, secular contexts and does not account for the religious frameworks that shape self-understanding in Muslim communities. Empirical research exploring how Muslim students integrate, resist, or reinterpret appearance-focused norms online remains limited. Without such evidence, universities may overlook both risks and protective factors that arise from religious beliefs, community norms, and gendered expectations (Ahmad & Jafree, 2023).

1.3 Research Objectives

This study has three main objectives:

- To examine associations between social media intensity, body image concern, and global self-esteem among Muslim university students.
- To explore how gender and religious engagement moderate these relationships.
- To understand, qualitatively, how Muslim students interpret and negotiate social media content in light of Islamic teachings.

1.4 Significance of the Study

By focusing on Muslim university students, the dissertation addresses a gap in the literature on body image and mental health. It contributes to Islamic psychology by examining how faith-based concepts such as *tawakkul* (trust in God) and *sabr* (patience) inform responses to appearance-related pressures (Nasrin, 2024). Practically, the findings can guide campus mental health services, religious life offices, and student organizations as they design culturally responsive interventions that promote digital well-being.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Social Media, Body Image, and Self-Esteem

Social comparison theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes to those of others (Festinger, 1954). In online environments, appearance-focused comparisons are amplified by algorithmic curation and the pervasive use of filters and editing tools (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Numerous studies report that exposure to idealized images on Instagram and similar platforms predicts higher body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among young adults and adolescents (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022). These effects appear stronger when users internalize thin or muscular ideals and engage in frequent upward comparisons.

2.2 Muslim Contexts and Religious Frameworks

In Muslim-majority and diaspora contexts, body image is shaped not only by global media but also by religious and cultural norms concerning modesty, gender roles, and the public display of the body (Mobeireek, 2023). Islamic teachings emphasize that human worth derives from taqwa (God-consciousness) rather than physical appearance, and encourage believers to avoid vanity and excessive self-display. At the same time, contemporary Muslim youth engage actively with social media, where expectations around aesthetic presentation may conflict with or reinterpret traditional norms (Bano et al., 2025). Empirical work suggests that religious commitment can function as a protective factor, moderating links between media exposure and body dissatisfaction (Ahmad & Jafree, 2023).

2.3 Gendered Experiences

Research in both Western and Muslim contexts indicates that women typically report higher body dissatisfaction and greater exposure to appearance-focused content than men (Tamres et al., 2002; Dwaairy, 2006). For Muslim women, hijab practices can have complex implications: some studies describe the headscarf as a buffer against objectification, while others note pressures to conform to new forms of “modest fashion” online (Hamid, 2024). Men may experience fewer explicit appearance pressures but are increasingly targeted with muscular and fitness ideals. Few studies, however, examine these experiences using mixed methods that foreground students’ own narratives.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

Despite rapidly expanding research on social media and mental health, there is limited evidence on Muslim university students’ body image experiences in relation to faith and gender. Existing studies often treat religiosity as a control variable rather than an interpretive lens. This dissertation responds by integrating standardized measures with qualitative interviews that foreground students’ meanings and coping strategies.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. A cross-sectional survey provides quantitative estimates of associations between social media use, body image concern, and self-esteem. Subsequent interviews probe how participants explain these relationships and how religious beliefs shape their responses. Integration occurs at the interpretation stage, where quantitative patterns are juxtaposed with narrative themes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants will be Muslim undergraduate students enrolled at two urban universities. Stratified sampling will ensure approximately equal representation of male and female students and include diversity in academic majors. A target sample of 300 survey respondents is planned, with 20–24 students purposefully selected for follow-up interviews based on gender, levels of social media use, and religiosity scores.

3.3 Instruments

The online survey will include: (a) a social media intensity scale adapted from Ellison et al. (2007), (b) the Body Shape Questionnaire short form to assess body image concern, and (c) the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Measures of religiosity and religious coping will be adapted from prior work in Islamic psychology (Nasrin, 2024). Demographic items will capture age, gender, major, and campus. Semi-structured interviews will explore participants' experiences of social media use, perceptions of beauty norms, feelings about their own bodies, and the role of religious teachings, family, and peers in shaping their responses.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations will examine distributions and initial relationships. Multiple regression models will test whether social media intensity predicts body image concern and self-esteem when controlling for demographic variables. Interaction terms will assess moderation by gender and religiosity. Interview transcripts will be analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, with particular attention to coping strategies and interpretations of religious norms.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation will be emphasized. Given the sensitivity of body image and mental health topics, participants will receive information about campus counselling services and local helplines.

(The latter part of the thesis has been intentionally omitted to protect data privacy)

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