

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE SKINNIEST ON INSTAGRAM? HOW SOCIAL SUPPORT AND COMPARISON SHAPE BODY IMAGE IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

As digital technologies continue to advance, social networking platforms have become an integral part of everyday life. Users increasingly rely on these platforms not only for communication but also for sharing personal experiences. While such engagement can promote social connection, it has also been linked to psychological challenges, particularly in relation to body image. This study examines the relationship between social media use and body image perception, with a specific focus on perceived social support, the frequency and direction of social comparison, and the moderating role of gender. The sample comprised 114 Romanian participants aged between 19 and 58 years ($M = 27.49$, $SD = 10.66$). The results indicated a significant positive association between upward social comparison and body image concerns (Estimate = .88, $p < .001$), as well as a significant negative association between perceived social support and body image concerns (Estimate = $-.38$, $p < .05$). Gender significantly moderated the relationship between upward social comparison and body image (Estimate = .66, $p < .05$), with the association being stronger and statistically significant among women, but not among men. These findings underscore the psychological effects of social media use and highlight the importance of gender-specific dynamics in understanding vulnerability to body image dissatisfaction in the context of social comparison.

Cuvinte-cheie: rețele sociale, imagine corporală, comparație ascendentă, comparație descendentă, suport social.

Keywords: social networks, body image, upward comparison, downward comparison, social support.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media occupies a central place in people's lives, regardless of their age (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The use of these platforms has increased significantly, especially since the pandemic period, with the number of users estimated at 3.8 billion, regardless of demographic criteria (Chugh *et al.*, 2020). Social media is an umbrella term that encompasses all platforms that operate via the internet, through which people create a public or semi-public profile, upload photos and posts, and connect with others

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(Houston *et al.*, 2014), referred to as followers. Younger generations are increasingly engaging with the online environment and digital interactions.

However, this has a significant negative impact on body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015) and is associated with unhealthy eating habits (Rodgers & Melioli, 2015). Social media platforms rely heavily on shared visual content (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Kleemans *et al.*, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019), and users are encouraged to post pictures of themselves and focus on visual appearance rather than fostering authentic interactions (Rodgers & Melioli, 2015). Visual content attracts more attention and receives more likes than video, written, or audio content (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018). What is particularly problematic is the dissemination of images that are inconsistent with reality, which often leads to social comparison behaviors that directly influence how individuals perceive their bodies (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). The individuals most vulnerable to the media content shared online are women and adolescent girls (Pinkasavage *et al.*, 2014; Shroff & Thompson, 2006), though the male population should not be overlooked, as an increasing number of men report dissatisfaction with their own bodies (Andsager, 2014).

To explore human behavior in the online environment, numerous theories have been developed. In this context, Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory supports the idea that people are highly susceptible to the events and situations around them, particularly when it comes to adopting online behaviors. Individuals choose role models to imitate, with learning being centered on observation and modeling (Pânișoară, 2019).

Scientific studies conducted so far have established a strong link between the use of social media and how individuals perceive their own bodies. Harriger *et al.* (2023) state that people who are more engaged in online activities are more likely to have a distorted body image. Among the positive effects of using social media, we can mention social reintegration for lonely, elderly, or socially excluded individuals (Quinn, 2018), a reduction in social isolation (Ostic *et al.*, 2021), an increased general sense of well-being for users who engage in authentic self-presentation on social media (Berryman *et al.*, 2017), sharing and supporting ideas with others, maintaining relationships, intercultural exchange of experiences, and reputation development (Twenge & Campbell, 2019; Ostic *et al.*, 2021). Among the negative effects, we can list the fear of missing out, ghosting, and vaguebooking (Astleitner *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding social support, according to the tripartite model of body image developed by Thompson *et al.* (1999) and a study conducted by Van Den Berg (2002), it can be stated that the influence of others affects the perception of body image. Social support refers to the personal perception that one is integrated, valued, cared for, and appreciated within their social environment, which may include family, friends, or other significant individuals (Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2016). According to White (2001), people seek social support when facing difficult events, aiming to join groups where their problem is shared by others, in search of a sense of reciprocity and belonging. In the online environment, social groups represent a contemporary

alternative to face-to-face communication, with real-world interaction methods being transferred behind screens (Flynn & Stana, 2012). These virtual groups are a vital source of social support for individuals suffering from eating disorders, as anxiety about how they are perceived by others is lower, as stated by Eichhorn (2008), and they can reduce levels of stress, anxiety, or depression (Flynn & Stana, 2012).

Social comparison occurs among people both consciously and unconsciously, generating both negative and positive influences (Suls *et al.*, 2002). The concept of social comparison was introduced by Festinger (1954), who described how people assimilate all the information around them by comparing it and identifying similarities and differences, which are useful in the self-evaluation process (Kramer *et al.*, 2007; Suls *et al.*, 2002). Social comparison can be divided based on the tendency with which people choose to compare themselves to others, internal characteristics, and unconscious preferences: they may choose upward comparison, meaning with individuals considered superior, better, or more attractive, or downward comparison, when the comparison is made with individuals considered less attractive, valuable, or talented (Bessenoff, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010; Schaefer & Thompson, 2014; Suls *et al.*, 2002; Verduyn *et al.*, 2020). The virtual social space can be described as a fertile ground for the development of the social comparison process (Vogel *et al.*, 2015; Yang, 2016; Verduyn *et al.*, 2020), especially for upward comparison (Yang, 2016).

There is at least an interesting connection between social comparison and social support. Upward social comparison decreases body satisfaction, while downward comparison does not appear to have the same consequences (Verduyn *et al.*, 2020). Bessenoff (2006) notes that women, as well as adolescent girls and young women who engage in upward comparison online, such as viewing images of very thin models, are more likely to develop eating disorders and report dissatisfaction with their own bodies. Even though downward social comparison may not cause negative effects, Vogel *et al.* (2015) mention that the process still produces negative consequences. Users internalize the thin body ideal, adopting it as a personal standard; thus, social comparison arises as a means to achieve that imposed standard (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Although there is a lack of data on the impact on men, Kleemans *et al.* (2016) state that both genders, regardless of age, tend to compare themselves with people they know on social media platforms, especially regarding social and physical characteristics such as intelligence, personality, height, weight, and body shape.

Research gaps

This study aims to explore a possible significant interaction between social media use and body image, using the previously described moderating variables – perceived social support and social comparison. As previously discussed, based on the specialized literature, all these variables are interconnected, with their effect and strength influencing one another. The selected variables are relevant in the context of today's society, where social media usage has exploded, making it important to

understand and be aware of the consequences of such usage, whether positive or negative. Moreover, this study is one of the few that evaluates the impact of both variables simultaneously.

Numerous studies address the issue of the impact of social media use on body image, highlighting the negative effects (Harriger *et al.*, 2023; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019; Rodgers & Melioli, 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Perloff, 2014). Regarding studies conducted on Romanian samples, there is research indicating the negative effects of social media on children and a prevalence of juvenile depression and anxiety (Dumitru, 2024). Pop *et al.* (2022) mention that men exhibit higher self-esteem and less deterioration of body image compared to women, with most participants using social media for approximately the same number of hours per day.

What this study brings new is the investigation of the link between social media and body image in the Romanian adult population, taking into account the influence on both genders. During the documentation process for this research, we encountered a significant lack of information about the role of social support in the interaction between social media and body image perception, with only a few studies addressing this topic (Hsu *et al.*, 2021; Mikal, 2021; Giles, 2006; Wilson *et al.*, 2006; Borzekowski *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, after reviewing the literature, we could not identify any other studies that address this issue while using both of the previously described variables simultaneously. Therefore, this study contributes valuable findings to the literature by exploring a timely subject, adapted to the socio-economic context of the Romanian population.

The variables investigated are highly relevant within the current social context. Thus, the relationship between social media use and body image may be influenced by the way individuals engage in social comparisons, either upward or downward. Moreover, perceived social support can serve as a protective factor, reducing the negative effects of these comparisons on body image. In addition, gender differences may shape these processes, as previous studies (Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Pinkasavage *et al.*, 2014; Shroff & Thompson, 2006) have shown that women are more exposed to the pressure of idealized body standards and more prone to appearance-related comparisons (Tiggemann & Slater, 2002). All these variables were examined together to demonstrate how social support and social comparison can either amplify or reduce the impact of social media use and the interpretation of one's own body image.

We expect to find that individuals who use social media frequently hold distorted beliefs about their own bodies, influenced by the content promoted online (Seekis *et al.*, 2020). We also expect these beliefs to be reduced by perceived social support, as individuals with higher levels of social support are likely to be less affected by social media exposure. Furthermore, regarding biological gender, we anticipate that women will be more prone to developing a negative body image, driven by social comparison processes in online environments (Andsager, 2014; Pinkasavage *et al.*, 2014; Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. STUDY OBJECTIVES

We aim to explore the connection between social media usage and body image perception, with a focus on three moderating variables: perceived social support, social comparison and gender. We hypothesize a positive relationship, given the strong emphasis on visual content and the promotion of idealized body standards in online platforms (Rodgers & Melioli, 2015; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Perceived social support may serve as a buffer, reducing the negative impact of social media on body image. In contrast, social comparison could either intensify or alleviate these effects, depending on how individuals interpret and respond to the visual content they encounter online (Seekis *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, our analysis will examine how these two variables shape the primary relationship, determining whether they strengthen or weaken the influence of social media on body image perception.

The main hypotheses proposed by this research are as follows:

H1. *Social media use and social comparison have a statistically significant effect on body image perception.*

H2. *Social support significantly moderates the relationship between social media use and body image perception.*

H3. *Social comparison significantly moderates the relationship between social media use and body image perception.*

H4. *Gender significantly moderates the relationship between social comparison and body image.*

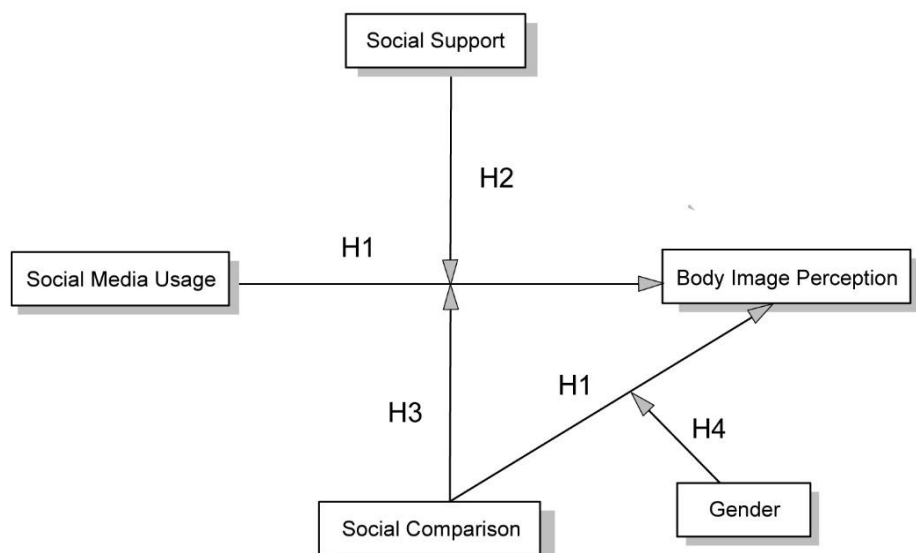


Figure no. 1 - Research conceptual model

2.2. PARTICIPANTS

A total of 114 participants were involved, using the snowball sampling method. Participation in the study was voluntary, with participants required to read an informed consent form and being informed about the purpose of the data collection and the objectives of the present study. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any repercussions or consequences. Therefore, the ethical standards and data safety criteria were met.

The collected data were initially organized in encrypted Excel tables, accessible only to the authors of the current study. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 58 years ($M = 27.49$, $SD = 10.66$). Of the total number of participants, 86 (75.4%) were from urban areas, and 28 (24.6%) from rural areas. In terms of gender, the sample included 74 women (64.9%) and 40 men (35.1%).

The eligibility criteria, both for inclusion and exclusion, were related to the age of the participants, as the study targeted individuals who were at least 18 years old. As a result, none of the participants were excluded.

Power analysis

An a priori power analysis was conducted in G*Power ($\alpha = .05$; $1-\beta = .80$; $u = 8$ predictors, the maximum number of predictors from the statistical models). For a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$; $R^2 = .13$), the required total sample size was $N = 109$ (denominator $df = 100$; noncentrality parameter = 16.35; critical $F = 2.03$). For a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.02$; $R^2 = .02$), the required total sample size increased to $N = 759$ (denominator $df = 750$; noncentrality parameter = 15.18; critical $F = 1.95$). These results indicate that the study design was adequate for detecting medium to large effects but underpowered for detecting very small effects.

Sensitivity analysis

A sensitivity analysis was also performed for the achieved sample size ($N = 114$). With $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80, the minimum detectable effect size was $f^2 = 0.14$, which corresponds to a medium effect. This means that while medium and large effects could be reliably detected, small effects ($f^2 = .02$) may not have been captured. As a result, there is an increased risk of Type II error (false negatives). At the same time, the probability of a Type I error (false positives) remains controlled by the fixed significance threshold ($\alpha = .05$). Non-significant results should therefore be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect limited statistical power rather than the true absence of an effect.

2.3. INSTRUMENTS

SNAIS Scale

The SNAIS Scale (Li *et al.*, 2016) is a self-report instrument consisting of 14 items that focus on behaviors frequently carried out in the online environment over the past 4 weeks. It comprises two factors: Social Function Use Intensity (SFUI) and Entertainment Function Use Intensity (EFUI). The items are structured as simple

statements, for example: “*I chatted with friends via messages.*” The scale instructions asked participants to report the frequency of these activities using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The Romanian version of the scale was obtained from the Research Central platform (<http://researchcentral.ro>). Regarding reliability analysis, a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = .90$ was calculated, indicating excellent internal consistency. The first factor (SFUI) showed a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = .90$, whereas the second factor (EFUI) demonstrated a lower internal consistency with $\alpha = .59$. To test whether the theoretical model fits the collected data, the results of each item were subjected to Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). For the SNAIS scale, the fit indices were: $\chi^2/df = 4.55$, CFI = 0.72, TLI = 0.67, and RMSEA = 0.17 (90% CI = .15, .19), $p < .001$.

Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16B)

The BSQ-16B Scale (Evans & Dolan, 1993) is a body image measurement instrument composed of 16 question-based items that assess how the respondent has felt about their body over the past four weeks, in relation to specific situations. The Romanian version of the instrument was retrieved from the platform <https://researchcentral.ro>. For example: “*Were you afraid that you might become fat (fatter)?*” The instructions asked participants to self-report the frequency of these experiences using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). The calculated Cronbach's Alpha was $\alpha = .95$, indicating very strong internal consistency among the items. Following Factor Analysis, the results were: $\chi^2 / df = 3.66$, CFI = 0.82, TLI = 0.80, and RMSEA = 0.15 (90% CI = .13, .16), $p < .001$, indicating an acceptable model fit.

Perceived Social Support Scale

To measure respondents' social support, the Romanian version of the Perceived Social Support Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1989) was used, retrieved from the Research Central platform (<https://researchcentral.ro>). It contains 24 items related to interpersonal relationships, such as “*There are people who share similar concerns to mine.*” A 4-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). After reverse-coding certain items, the Cronbach's Alpha was $\alpha = .89$, indicating good internal consistency. As for Factor Analysis, the results were: $\chi^2 / df = 3.28$, CFI = 0.58, TLI = 0.54, and RMSEA = 0.14 (90% CI = .13, .15), $p < .001$.

Social Comparison Scale (O'Brien et al., 2009)

The Social Comparison Scale, developed by O'Brien *et al.* (2009), investigates social comparison from two perspectives: upward social comparison and downward social comparison. It consists of two subscales: UPACS (Upward Appearance Comparison Scale) and DACS (Downward Appearance Comparison Scale). Both subscales use a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), assessing how frequently respondents compare themselves to others in upward or downward ways. UPACS contains 10 items, for example:

"I tend to compare my physical attractiveness with that of models in magazines or advertisements."

To obtain the Romanian version of the scale, all 18 items underwent a rigorous process of translation and adaptation. Starting from an initial translation, successive content analyses were carried out for each item until a final, clear form was reached. A back-translation procedure (Romanian–English) was then applied to verify whether the original meaning was preserved. The back-translated version was reviewed by a specialist (English-speaker), in order to confirm accuracy and semantic equivalence. The resulting version was piloted with a small group of Romanian adults ($n = 3$) to ensure that all items were easy to understand. Following this procedure, it was concluded that the Romanian version represented an appropriate equivalent of the original scale and it was subsequently used in the study with a larger sample.

The scale showed a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = .96$, indicating strong internal consistency. DACS includes 8 items, such as: *"When I see someone who is not as physically attractive, I think about how my body compares to theirs."* The Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .93$, also reflecting a high level of internal consistency. Factor analysis was performed for both subscales, and the model fit indices were: $\chi^2 / df = 2.53$, CFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.88, and RMSEA = 0.11 (90% CI = .10, .13), $p < .001$, indicating a good model fit.

2.4. PROCEDURE

To collect the data, a questionnaire was created using Google Forms, aimed at measuring the psychological dimensions related to the objective of the present study. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary. The questionnaire was distributed with the help of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. It included the informed consent form, demographic data, and the five scales measuring the intensity of the previously mentioned constructs. The questionnaire could only be completed online and required signing in via an email account. Email addresses were requested solely to prevent multiple submissions and to allow respondents to request the deletion of their answers if desired. The addresses were not stored, processed, or used for participant identification beyond this limited purpose. The study was conducted in accordance with institutional and ethical research standards, ensuring participant confidentiality and data protection under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The estimated time for completing the form was between 15 and 20 minutes.

2.5. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to test the initial hypotheses of the study, the statistical software R (RStudio Team, 2020) and Jamovi (The Jamovi Project, 2023) were used. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to

summarize the main variables. To identify potential associations between variables, Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed.

To test the hypotheses, linear regression analysis was conducted, examining the influence of social media use, social comparison, and perceived social support on body image perception. Moderation analyses were performed to investigate whether perceived social support, social comparison (both upward and downward), and gender moderated the relationships between social comparison use and body image concerns.

3. RESULTS

3.1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

According to the table inserted below, statistically significant correlations were observed between body image perception and perceived social support ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$), downward social comparison and social support ($r = -.28$, $p < .05$), upward social comparison ($r = 0.54$, $p < .01$) and downward comparison with body image perception ($r = 0.23$, $p < .05$), age and body image perception ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$), age and social media use ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$), gender and body image ($r = 0.32$, $p < .01$), gender and social media use ($r = 0.27$, $p < .05$), upward comparison and age ($r = -.52$, $p < .01$). It can be observed that participants' scores on perceived body image were at a moderate level, $M = 37.96$, $SD = 19.13$, while social media use was relatively high, $M = 47.32$, $SD = 11.52$. Perceived social support scores were above average and quite high, $M = 84.83$, $SD = 8.74$. However, this is not the case for upward comparison, where scores were relatively low, $M = 28.96$, $SD = 11.68$, or for downward social comparison, where scores were similarly low, $M = 16.89$, $SD = 7.27$.

Table no.1

Mean scores, standard deviations, correlations between variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. SUP	84.83	8.74	-							
2. BI	37.96	19.13	-.21*	-						
3. SM	47.32	11.52	.13	.17	-					
4. UC	28.96	11.68	-.017	.54**	.16	-				
5. DC	16.89	7.27	-.28*	.23*	.18	.44*	-			
6. RES	0.75	0.43	-.02	.11	.02	.10	.07	-		
7. AGE	27.49	10.66	.04	-.20*	-.21*	-.52**	-.16	.11	-	
8. Gender	0.98	0.48	.002	.32**	.27*	.35**	.13	.01	-.24*	-

Notes: **. $p < .01$, *. $p < .05$

SUP = Social support, BI = Body Image, SM = Social-Media, UC = Upward comparison, DC = Downward comparison, RES = Residence

3.2. RESULTS RELATED TO TESTED HYPOTHESES

H1. *Social media use, social support and social comparison have a statistically significant effect on body image perception.*

In order to test the first hypothesis, a linear regression analysis was conducted, with social support, social comparison, social media use, and demographic data (gender, age, and residence) as independent variables, and body image perception as the dependent variable, to determine whether a relationship exists between these variables.

Table no. 2

Linear Regression Analysis for Social Comparison, Social Media Use, and Demographic Data as Predictors of Body Image Perception

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
	Estimate	SE	β	t	
SUP	-.38*	.19	-.17	-2.01	<.05
SFUI	.004	.20	.002	.02	.98
EFUI	.87	.59	.15	1.47	.15
UC	.88***	.17	.54	5.07	< .001
DC	-.20	.24	-.08	-.84	.40
Gender	6.20	3.45	.16	1.80	.08
Age	.28	.18	.16	1.61	.11
Residence	1.85	3.53	.04	.52	.60

Notes: *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

SUP = Social Support, SFUI = Social Function Use Intensity, EFUI = Entertainment Function Use Intensity, UC = Upward Comparison, DC = Downward Comparison

The analysis revealed that upward social comparison had a statistically significant impact on body image perception (Estimate = 0.88, $t = 5.07$, $p < .001$), emerging as the strongest influencing factor in the model. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.54$) indicates that higher levels of upward comparison are associated with an increase in distorted body image perception by 0.54 standard deviations. Perceived social support showed a negative standardized effect ($\beta = -0.17$, $t = -2.01$, $p < .05$), suggesting that individuals who report higher levels of social support tend to have a more positive perception of their body image. The remaining variables, including the two social media use factors, downward social comparison, and demographic characteristics did not exhibit statistically significant effects on body image perception.

Overall, the model explained 36% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.36$), indicating a moderate level of explanatory power. Taking into account the results presented above, we can conclude that the first hypothesis is partially confirmed.

H2. Perceived social support significantly moderates the relationship between social media use and body image perception.

To test the second hypothesis, a moderation analysis was conducted, considering social support as the moderator variable, social media use as the independent variable, and body image perception as the dependent variable.

Results indicate that the interaction between social media use (SM) and perceived social support (SUP) was not statistically significant (Estimate = 0.02, SE = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.07], $Z = 1.03$, $p = .31$). This suggests that social support does not moderate the relationship between social media use and body image perception. In other words, the influence of social media use on body image remains relatively stable, irrespective of the level of perceived social support.

The main effect of social media use on body image perception was also non-significant (Estimate = 0.29, SE = 0.16, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.61], $Z = 1.83$, $p = .07$), indicating no direct association between these variables. However, perceived social support demonstrated a significant negative main effect on body image perception (Estimate = -0.51, SE = 0.21, 95% CI [-0.93, -0.09], $Z = -2.39$, $p < .05$), suggesting that individuals with higher levels of perceived social support are less likely to experience concerns related to their body image.

A supplementary analysis was conducted to examine the specific contributions of the two subcomponents of the social media use scale: Social Function Use Intensity (SFUI) and Entertainment Function Use Intensity (EFUI). The results revealed no significant effects of either factor on body image perception in interaction with social support (Estimate = 0.04, SE = .03, $p = .10$ for SFUI; Estimate = -0.02, SE = .06, $p = .72$ for EFUI).

Taken together, these findings provide no empirical support for the proposed hypothesis.

H3. Social comparison significantly moderates the relationship between social media use and body image perception.

To test the third hypothesis, a series of moderation analyses were conducted to examine whether social comparison moderates the relationship between social media use and body image perception. Social comparison was conceptualized as consisting of two distinct dimensions: upward and downward social comparison. In total, six moderation models were tested, in which each dimension of social comparison served as a moderator for both specific factors of social media use (Social Function Use Intensity – SFUI and Entertainment Function Use Intensity – EFUI) as well as for the overall social media use score.

Table 3 presents the moderation estimates assessing whether upward (UC) and downward (DC) social comparison moderate the relationship between different facets of social media use (general use – SM, and the two derived factors - SFUI and EFUI) and body image perception. Specifically, the interaction between social media use and upward comparison ($SM \times UC$) was not significant (Estimate = -0.001,

SE = .01, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.02], $Z = -0.14$, $p = .89$). Similarly, the interaction between social media use and downward comparison (SM $\times$ DC) also failed to reach statistical significance (Estimate = -0.04, SE = .02, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.001], $Z = -1.93$, $p = .06$). These results suggest that neither upward nor downward social comparison significantly moderates the association between social media use and body image perception.

Although the interaction between SFUI $\times$ DC was not statistically significant (Estimate = -0.05, SE = 0.02, $Z = -1.94$, $p = .05$) it indicates potential trend where individuals with higher tendencies for downward comparison might experience a weaker relationship between social function use intensity and body image concerns. However, all other interaction terms, including those involving upward comparison and EFUI, were not statistically significant. Therefore, the findings do not provide empirical support for H3.

Table no. 3

Moderation Estimates for Social Comparison in the Relationship Between Social Media Use and Body Image Perception

	95% CI					
	Estimate	ES	Lower	Upper	Z	p
SM * UC	-.001	.01	-.02	.02	-.14	.89
SFUI * UC	-.002	.01	-.03	.02	-.18	.86
EFUI * UC	.003	.04	-.07	.08	.07	.94
SM * DC	-.04	.02	-.08	.001	-1.93	.06
SFUI * DC	-.05	.02	-.09	.001	-1.94	.05
EFUI * DC	-.10	.07	-.25	.05	-1.28	.20

Notes: SM*UC – Interaction between Social Media Use and Upward Comparison, SFUI*UC – Interaction between Social Function Use Intensity (1st factor of SM use) and Upward Comparison, EFUI*UC – Interaction between Entertainment Function Use Intensity (2nd factor of SM use) and Upward Comparison, SM*DC – Interaction between Social Media Use and Downward Comparison, SFUI*DC – Interaction between Social Function Use Intensity and Downward Comparison, EFUI*DC – Interaction between Entertainment Function Use Intensity and Upward Comparison

H4: *Gender moderates the relationship between social comparison and body image.*

To examine the fourth hypothesis, which proposed that gender moderates the relationship between social comparison and body image perception, a moderation analysis was conducted. In this analysis, biological gender was included as the moderating variable, with social comparison (both upward and downward) as the independent variables, and body image perception as the dependent variable.

The interaction between upward social comparison and gender (UC $\times$ Gender) emerged as statistically significant (Estimate = 0.66, SE = 0.31, 95% CI [0.04, 0.82], $Z = 1.27$, $p < .05$), suggesting that the strength of the association between upward comparison and body image perception differs by gender. This result

provides evidence of gender-based variation in how individuals respond to upward comparisons. Conversely, the interaction between downward social comparison and gender did not reach statistical significance (Estimate = 0.12, SE = 0.50, 95% CI [-.86, 1.11], $Z = .24$, $p = .81$).

To explore this interaction further, a simple slopes analysis was performed. The results of the simple slopes analysis revealed that for females, higher levels of upward social comparison were significantly associated with increased body image concerns (Estimate = 0.97, SE = 0.16, $t = 6.21$, $p < .001$). In contrast, among males, this relationship was not statistically significant (Estimate = 0.32, SE = 0.27, $t = 1.19$, $p = .24$). These findings indicate that upward social comparison acts as a significant predictor of body image perception only in females, while its impact appears minimal for males.

Figure no. 2 visually illustrates this moderating effect, showing a steeper slope for females compared to males, confirming that upward comparison has a stronger influence on body image perception among women. Thus, the hypothesis is partially supported, as gender significantly moderated the effect of upward (but not necessarily downward) comparison on body image perception.

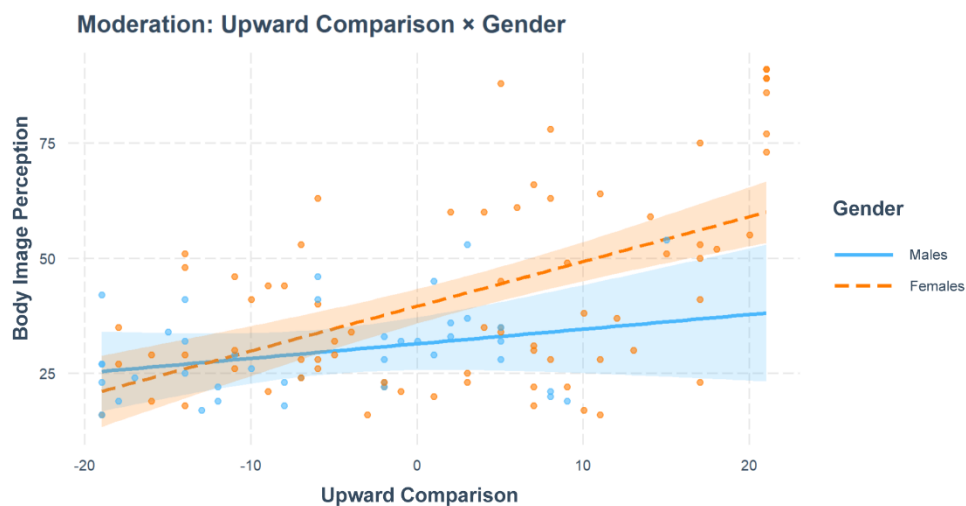


Figure no. 2 – The moderating effect of gender in the relationship between upward social comparison and body image

4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the rapid evolution of technology and the numerous methods of exposure designed to help us stay connected with others, society has reached a point where it can no longer deny the negative repercussions on users. The present

study aimed to investigate the association between social media consumption and body image perception among a sample of Romanian adults (both women and men) while exploring the potential impact of social comparison and perceived social support. Based on the results obtained through statistical procedures appropriate for the variables studied, we can draw a few clear conclusions.

According to the results from the first hypothesis, only 36% of the model explains the variance in body image, so the hypothesis is only partially confirmed. A particularly noteworthy result concerns upward social comparison. Individuals who frequently compare themselves to those perceived as more attractive tend to exhibit more distorted views of their own body image, an outcome that aligns with the study's initial expectations. On the other hand, individuals who report higher levels of perceived social support tend to show a reduced tendency toward negative body image evaluations, such as feelings of disgust when looking in the mirror. This highlights the buffering effect of a supportive social environment. Previous research has consistently demonstrated the significant influence of social comparison on body image perception (Bonfanti *et al.*, 2024; Y. Li *et al.*, 2025; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Interestingly, downward social comparison (comparing oneself to individuals perceived as less attractive) did not show a meaningful impact on body image in this study.

The second hypothesis investigates a possible effect of social support in the relationship between the use of social media platforms and the perception of body image. To the best of our knowledge, the variable of social support is newly investigated, with no prior studies in the literature specifically aiming to explore it as a moderating factor in this context. The premise was that social support could serve as a protective factor against people's vulnerability to distorted body perception due to models and lifestyles promoted on social media. Although the results did not support a statistically significant interaction between social media use and social support in predicting body image, the main effect of social support remained significant in the model. This suggests that, independent of social media use, higher perceived social support is associated with lower body image concerns. These findings align with prior research indicating that social support plays a very important role in mitigating body dissatisfaction, particularly among older adults (López-Montón, Aonso-Diego, & Estévez, 2025). Similarly, Olenik-Shemesh and Heiman (2016) found that low levels of social support were linked to more negative body image evaluations, reinforcing the protective value of supportive interpersonal environments.

The third hypothesis examined the moderating role of two distinct forms of social comparison (upward and downward) in the relationship between social media use and body image perception. Although the results of the current study did not yield statistically significant interaction effects, the observed trends suggest a meaningful potential that may reach significance with a larger sample or more

sensitive measures. Prior research consistently supports the relevance of social comparison type in shaping body image outcomes in the context of social media use. For instance, Bailey and Ricciardelli (2009) found that engaging in more upward comparisons and fewer downward comparisons was associated with increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. Similarly, Diel *et al.* (2024) reported that a focus on upward comparisons was linked to heightened self-improvement motivation but also more negative emotions. In contrast, downward comparison focus was associated with reduced motivation, but more positive emotional states. These findings highlight the complex psychological dynamics of social comparison processes in digital environments.

Finally, the influence of gender on the two types of social comparison and on body image perception was investigated, concluding that in the case of upward comparison, there is an influence based on biological sex. Thus, depending on gender, upward social comparison tendencies were associated with more negative perceptions of one's own body. These results are confirmed by the literature (Myers & Crowther, 2009; Sohn, 2009; Gonzales & Blashill, 2020; Pop *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have identified gender as an important factor in shaping body image concerns more broadly (Jones, 2001; Guimond *et al.*, 2007; Guimond & Chatard, 2014), highlighting the need for further research into the nuanced role of gender across different comparison processes. Regarding downward comparison, there are no significant differences between genders. Considering the conceptual meaning of downward comparison, we can conclude that people who engage in it are not influenced either negatively or positively in terms of their perception of their physical characteristics. According to the literature, there are far fewer studies in this area, so the results analyzed could not be optimally compared. Only a few studies mention that there is no clear effect of downward comparison with respect to the two genders (Myers & Crowther, 2009; Nicksic & DuCharme, 2004).

Even though the study's hypotheses were not fully confirmed, several other relevant findings emerged. Furthermore, this study is among the few that included perceived social support in an analytical model, even though it proved to be statistically insignificant. While its moderating effect on the relationship between social media use and body image was not statistically significant, higher levels of perceived social support were associated with lower levels of negative body image, suggesting a potential protective trend that warrants further investigation.

In conclusion, research into the effects that current technologies may have on people is of significant relevance today and should be reviewed and reexamined periodically, as their effects and impacts can vary greatly from year to year and from one population to another. It is important to stay connected not only to the latest technologies but also to ourselves, so that studies on well-being and mental health can closely observe how the transition from the real to the virtual world can either positively or negatively affect people's ability to adapt to their environment.

4.1. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the findings, this study can be useful in raising awareness about the impact of social media on body image, particularly within a Romanian sample covering a wide range of ages. Starting from this study, as well as from existing literature, we can assert that social media increases people's susceptibility to social comparison and makes them more likely to question their own body image. Given the rising popularity of social media use from a young age (Çimke & Gürkan, 2023; Rousseau & Rodgers, 2024), we propose the implementation of workshops or dedicated educational sessions in schools, starting as early as primary education, to explain the negative effects of consuming content that promotes unrealistic ideals and the emotional impact of such content, especially in terms of visual media.

Additionally, it is essential to raise awareness about eating disorders and their effects on health, as well as on psychological, emotional, and physical development. Through such educational initiatives, young people can also learn how to seek help and support, and how to assist others in similar situations.

The current study can serve as a strong foundation for future research focused on more specific age groups, in order to identify at-risk categories (e.g., adolescents, young adults, elderly individuals, postpartum women), since this study only included individuals aged 18 and over. According to our findings, women appear to be particularly vulnerable to social comparison through online platforms. Thus, considering that the sample focused on adults of various ages, we suggest launching awareness campaigns both online and on television about how to curate content that promotes well-being and self-acceptance of one's physical characteristics. Continued research in Romania is also recommended to identify vulnerable population groups.

4.2. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. The relatively small sample size ($N = 114$), which was predominantly young and female (ages 19–22), limits the generalizability of the findings. The underrepresentation of men and older adults restricts the ability to draw broader conclusions about gender and age-related differences in body image perception and social media use.

Also, although gender was examined as a moderating variable, the limited number of male participants reduced the statistical power to detect potential effects or interactions involving gender, particularly in the context of downward comparison, where effects may be more subtle or context-dependent. Additionally, the literature contains very few studies investigating how men are affected or not by social media in relation to body image (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Kleemans *et al.*, 2016; Lonergan *et al.*, 2021), which made the theoretical conceptualization and statistical comparison of the results more difficult.

Moreover, while the study aimed to investigate both upward and downward social comparison, existing literature on downward comparison in relation to social media and body image is sparse. This lack of empirical precedent made it more difficult to contextualize and interpret findings, as well as to develop a robust theoretical foundation for the expected effects. This study is also one of the few that explicitly investigates the impact of downward comparison, which made the analysis and interpretation of results more challenging.

Based on the statistical analyses conducted, we can state that perceived social support is not relevant in the relationship between social media use and body image perception. However, it may be worth considering in research focused on eating disorders or in studies investigating individuals who lack social support and are more prone to spending time on social media. At the same time, although the role of perceived social support was examined, the study did not differentiate between types or sources of support (for example, familial, peer-based, or online), which may have different implications for body image outcomes. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design prevents any conclusions about causality between the variables. Future studies must consider longitudinal research designs to better understand the temporal relationships and potential causal pathways between social media use, social comparison, social support, and body image perception. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods or mixed-methods approaches could provide more nuanced insights into how individuals interpret and internalize social media content, as well as how different forms of support buffer against its psychological impact.

Lastly, cultural factors were not explicitly considered or controlled for in the design, yet they may play an important role in shaping body image standards, the interpretation of upward comparisons, and the perceived impact of social media content. The near-significant effect observed in this study was unexpected and contradicts existing literature, potentially indicating important cultural differences. For example, studies by Andrason (2016), Fox & Vendemia (2016), and Tiggemann & Polivy (2010) suggest that people tend to perceive their bodies more negatively when exposed to content that leads to upward comparison, contrary to the findings of the current study, which showed the opposite. This finding warrants further exploration in cross-cultural studies with more diverse and larger samples.

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REZUMAT

Pe măsură ce tehnologia continuă să avanseze, platformele de socializare au fost integrate în viața de zi cu zi. Utilizatorii se bazează tot mai mult pe aceste platforme nu doar pentru comunicare, ci și pentru a-și împărtăși experiențele personale. Deși un astfel de comportament poate promova conexiunea socială, acesta a fost asociat și cu provocări în sfera psihologică, în special în ceea ce privește imaginea corporală. Acest studiu examinează relația dintre utilizarea rețelelor sociale și percepția asupra imaginii corporale, cu un accent pe sprijinul social perceput, frecvența și direcția comparației sociale, precum și pe rolul moderator al genului. Eșantionul a fost format din 114 participanți români, cu vârsta cuprinsă între 19 și 58 de ani ($M = 27.49$, $SD = 10.66$). Rezultatele au indicat o asociere pozitivă semnificativă între comparația socială ascendentă și preocupările legate de imaginea corporală (Estimare = .88, $p < .001$), precum și o asociere negativă semnificativă între suportul social perceput și preocupările legate de imaginea corporală (Estimare = $-.38$, $p < .05$). Genul a moderat semnificativ relația dintre comparația socială ascendentă și imaginea corporală (Estimare = .66, $p < .05$), asocierea fiind mai puternică și semnificativă statistic în rândul femeilor, dar nu și în rândul bărbaților. Aceste rezultate evidențiază impactul psihologic al utilizării rețelelor de socializare și subliniază importanța diferențelor de gen în înțelegerea vulnerabilității legate de nemulțumirea față de propria imagine corporală, în contextul comparațiilor sociale.