

The endless scroll of perfection: How digital platforms shape student's body image and novelty-seeking behavior



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Abstract In their quest to better understand the world, students look for something "new and different" in everyday life. Studies have shown that students look for new ways to conform to social norms, engage in recent trends in fashion and body modification, and new ways to obtain approval and validation from others. However, single integrative studies examining these dynamics are insufficient. Therefore, the current correlational study examined the mediating role of social media use in the relationship between body image and the need for novelty among university students. A sample of 331 participants between ages 19 and 39 (51.1% Male; Mage=23.24; SDage=3.18) completed self-report measures of body image, social media use, and need for novelty. Structural equation modeling using Smart PLS version 3 was used for data analysis. The results of the study reveal that body image does not directly predict the need for novelty. However, indirect effects were found between body image and the need for novelty through social media use. No significant differences were found in the need for the novelty of students based on gender. The findings suggest that the self-determination theory is useful for conceptualizing relationships between body image and the need for novelty through social media use among emerging adults.

Keywords: university students, need for novelty, social media, embodiment

1. Introduction

Novelty-seeking is an essential aspect of human development. Infants and adolescents crave novelty to seek new experiences and stimulate their developing brains (Reio & Choi, 2004). Seeking new and exciting experiences can provide people with a sense of adventure and excitement that they may not be able to access in their everyday lives (Sheldon, 2012). The need for novelty is a personality trait associated with sensation seeking and stimulation (Lepp & Gibson, 2008). People seek sensation because they have a biological need for novelty, complexity, and intensity (Sheldon, 2012). Some people may also seek novelty for reasons such as escaping boredom or routines, satisfying curiosity, achieving excitement or thrill, or gaining social status or recognition (Arnett, 1994). Studies have shown that infants and adolescents crave novelty the most (Reio & Choi, 2004). Adolescents seek novelty and stimulation to broaden their horizons and develop social identities (Reio & Choi, 2004). Research indicates that people who score high on self-reported measures of novelty seeking have a greater propensity to engage in risky behaviors such as drug misuse, risky sexual activities, and accidental injuries (Cross et al., 2013).

Emerging adulthood is a period in which young people seek new experiences and try different identities (Arnett, 2000). It is a critical period characterized by physical and psychological transformation, when the instinctual curiosity of the human brain for exploration and novelty is principally exercised to take on decision-making, risk assessment, and impulse control (Casey et al., 2011). Constructive social interaction is therefore necessary at this stage as a foundation for understanding consequences, empathy and self-regulation. According to (Arnett, 1994), socialization is as important as biology in determining the form of expression of novelty seeking. Therefore, stimulating and quality social experiences among adults might augment biological and maturational processes that sensitize individuals to novel stimulation (Reio & Choi, 2004). One primary agent of socialization is school because many young people spend many years within learning institutions. Aside from the understanding, generation, and retention of knowledge, schools are tasked with assisting the development of students in various ways, such as the cultivation of students' values, goals, social roles, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration skills (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010; Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Within the household, socialization includes encouraging emerging adults to seek higher education for its economic and social benefits (Carey, 2016). Given these findings, novelty seeking is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of emerging adults' socialization, whether in school or at home.

The social, ethical, and psychological development of emerging adults in contemporary society coincided with an unprecedented technological revolution. Adolescents and emerging adults today are the predominant internet users for socialization, communication, and information retrieval. They seek new friendships online to expand their social circle and



satisfy their need for social interaction and connection (Peter et al., 2005). Technology provides young people with quick and easy access to new music, fashion, and lifestyle content through the internet and social media (Ito et al., 2008). Studies have shown that the gratification of fashion needs is among the top reasons university students use social networking sites (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Because of their need to socialize, emerging adults are most susceptible to pressures to conform to societal ideals, engage in peer-directed behaviors and consolidate risky behaviors initiated in early adulthood into their lifestyle (Arnett, 2000; Kim et al., 2019).

Experimental findings have shown that when students are exposed to idealized images on media platforms, it leads to a temporary state of self-objectification and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Krawczyk & Thompson, 2015). These temporary feelings can lead students to make permanent modifications to their bodies. Additionally, research indicates that for emerging adults, body modification can preserve one's identity and celebrate memories, art, and youth (Tazzyman, 2017). Furthermore, it may serve as a permanent reminder (Bergh et al., 2017). According to Pew Research Center (2007), more than half of individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years have had some body modifications, such as a tattoo, an unorthodox hair color, or a piercing somewhere other than the ear lobe. In most cases, these behaviors result from the desire to conform to prevailing norms and pressures from friends, media, and significant others.

According to Hollway et al. (2006), body projects are one way that people may express themselves, make themselves feel better, and take back some measure of control in their lives. It is also a way to question the status quo, and the norms society has come to accept. Hence, it is apparent that when individuals possess a strong desire for autonomy, they should feel less compelled to comply with cultural standards and expectations. Indeed, some empirical evidence points in this direction (Mask & Blanchard, 2011). In developing countries such as Nigeria, emerging adults constitute one-third of the population. Studies have shown that individuals in this age group tend to engage in high-risk behaviors because they are new, trendy, and sometimes highly pleasurable (Mensah et al., 2018; Odeigah et al., 2019). Many of these behaviors are bodily related, from body modification to other high-risk sexual activities. Research has shown that short-term decisions to modify the body structure without considering its biological and social implications can result in long-term repercussions (Brodie et al., 2015).

Human behavior is driven by a set of basic psychological requirements, which are the subject of self-determination theory (SDT), a branch of psychology. First proposed in the 1970s by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, the SDT suggests that people have three fundamental psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence refers to the need to feel adequate and capable in one's activities; relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to others and to experience a sense of belonging; and autonomy refers to the need to feel in control of one's own life and choices. According to González-Cutre et al. (2016), novelty is a basic psychological need. Its satisfaction is essential for forming efficient motivational orientations and achieving one's full potential. Studies have shown that body modification among young people expresses their desire for autonomy and individuality (Mensah et al., 2018). Studies have also shown that social media helps young people display the best version of themselves on dating platforms to secure new intimate partners (Adrian, 2008; Sumter et al., 2017). This helps them satisfy their competence and relatedness needs online. Notably, not meeting these needs may impede the psychological functioning of youths. However, excessive fixation on satisfying these needs, particularly through social media, may result in an endless scroll of perfection.

Research has shown that young people may seek novelty in some behaviors as a means of satisfying their need for stimulation, relatedness, and identity exploration (González-Cutre et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Zuckerman, 2007). The role that body image and gender play in the search for novelty has not been sufficiently explored. Some studies have called for examining gender differences in the need for novelty (Reio & Choi, 2004). Additionally, studies on the role of social media use as a mediator in the relationship between body image and the need for novelty are scarce. Therefore, the current research examines gender differences in the need for novelty among university students, the role of body image in influencing the need for novelty among students, and the mediating role of social media use in this relationship.

1.1. Objectives

This study aims to achieve three objectives:

Objective 1: To determine the difference in the need for novelty among students on the basis of gender.

Objective 2: Determine how body image may influence the need for novelty among students.

Objective 3: Determine the mediating role of social media use in the relationship between body image and the need for novelty among students.

2. Materials and methods

A cross-sectional quantitative research design was used in the study. The participants included 331 final-year public university students in southwestern Nigeria. Public universities are owned, funded, and controlled by the state or federal government of Nigeria. The samples were selected through a multistage sampling technique. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia. A self-report questionnaire was

used to collect data for the study after a pilot study had been conducted. The data were subjected to preliminary preparations in IBM SPSS Version 22 before analysis.

We adopted three established instruments from the fields of psychology and communication studies. The Arnett Inventory of Sensation Seeking (AISS)(Arnett, 1994), the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (Thompson et al., 2004), and the Media and Technology Usage and Attitudes Scale (Rosen et al., 2013). The results of the validity and reliability of all the constructs can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Construct validity and reliability of the measures.

No	Construct	No of items	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
1	Body image	6	0.867	0.898	0.594
2	Social media usage	5	0.773	0.844	0.522
3	Need for Novelty	3	0.60	0.775	0.536

3. Results

Multivariate analysis was conducted via IBM SPSS version 22 and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) version 3.3. The results of the independent sample t test intending to examine the gender difference in the need for novelty of students did not reveal a statistically significant difference, $t(329) = 4.25$, $p = 0.370$, despite male students ($M=13.9$, $SD=3.1$) reporting higher scores than female students did ($M=12.4$, $SD=3.3$). These findings suggest that the male and female participants in this study had similar levels of need for novelty. Structural equation modeling was conducted to determine the predictive effect of body image on the need for novelty. Moreover, a bootstrapping routine was simultaneously performed in PLS to determine the mediating role of social media use on the relationship between body image and the need for novelty.

3.1. Measurement Model

Reliability and convergent and discriminant validity were assessed to examine the relationships between the measurements used in the study and its constructs. We used a reflective model. The results show that the study's measurements did not violate the assumptions of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and average variance expected on the basis of (Henseler et al., 2015). The reliability and average variance expected results are shown in Table 1. However, Tables 2 and 3 present the discriminant validity results obtained via the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT, respectively.

Table 2 Fornell–Larcker criterion & cross loadings.

	Fornell-Larcker criterion	Body image	Need for Novelty	Social media usage
1	Body image	0.771		
2	Need for Novelty	0.182	0.732	
3	Social media usage	0.334	0.251	0.722

Table 3 Heterotrait–Monotrait Heteromethod.

	HTMT	Body image	Need for Novelty	Social media usage
1	Body image			
2	Need for Novelty	0.251		
3	Social media usage	0.353	0.326	

3.2. Structural model

After we examined the accuracy of the measures, the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (F^2), cross-validated redundancy (Q^2), and path coefficient were used to examine the exploratory power of the need for the novel model. In this study, the squared multiple correlation coefficient (R^2) of the need for novelty was 0.074, indicating that body image explains 7.4% of the variance in the need for novelty. F^2 tests the magnitude of effects independent of the sample. Values greater than 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 are considered small, average, and large, respectively, on the basis of Cohen, 1988). The F^2 for the need for novelty with the exogenous variable body image was 0.012; however, the F^2 for the need for novelty with social media use in the model was 0.044. The predictive relevance of the inner model was assessed via Q^2 . In general, values of endogenous constructs greater than zero, 0.25, and 0.50 are considered small, medium, and large, respectively (Hair et al., 2019). The Q^2 for the need for novelty in this study is 0.029, whereas the Q^2 for social media use is 0.053. Figure 1 depicts the structural model of the study.

The results in Table 4 show that the direct effect of body image on the need for novelty was not significant ($\beta=0.111$, $t=1.667$, $p=0.096$); however, a significant indirect effect of social media use was found on the relationship between body image and the need for novelty ($\beta=0.071$, $t=2.907$, $p=0.004$).

4. Discussion

The statistically nonsignificant difference in male and female students' need for novelty suggests that students of both genders present similar levels of need for novelty. This is consistent with the findings of meta-analytical studies which show that the novelty-seeking levels of men and women are identical regardless of the psychometric scales used for empirical measurement (Miettunen et al., 2007). Similar findings were also reported in another meta-analytic study in which gender differences in overall scores on the sensation-seeking scale reported in 72 empirical studies over 34 years remained stable (Cross et al., 2013). The full mediating effect of social media on the relationship between body image and the need for novelty suggests that social media may assist students and emerging adults in the search for new ways to conform to appearance ideals. This may occur through searching for new beauty products and services online and for approval and validation from followers on their social media platforms. The findings of this study suggest that social media, as a mediator within self-determination theory, provides a platform for the satisfaction of students' three primary psychological needs in various ways. First, as students catch up with trendy fashion styles and body ideals, their ability to express their variation in these new trends through their social media platforms can make them feel unique, thereby satisfying their need for autonomy. Second, the positive feedback that students receive online can reinforce their sense of competence. Additionally, given that social media is the leading platform for fulfilling relatedness needs for contemporary youths (Gündüz, 2017; Zhao, 2006), the ability to engage in trendy fashion styles and body ideals can reinforce students' feelings of belonging, because of the craving for new things. Previous studies indicated that alongside competence, some of the fundamental needs of emerging adults are identity, independence, self-esteem and relatedness (Arnett, 2001; Butkovic et al., 2020; Dittmar & Isham, 2022; Kroger et al., 2010; S. Martin et al., 2020), and further evidence suggests that emerging adults tend to gravitate toward social media to satisfy some of these needs (Bagheri & Milyavskaya, 2020; Chen, 2019; Wood et al., 2016).

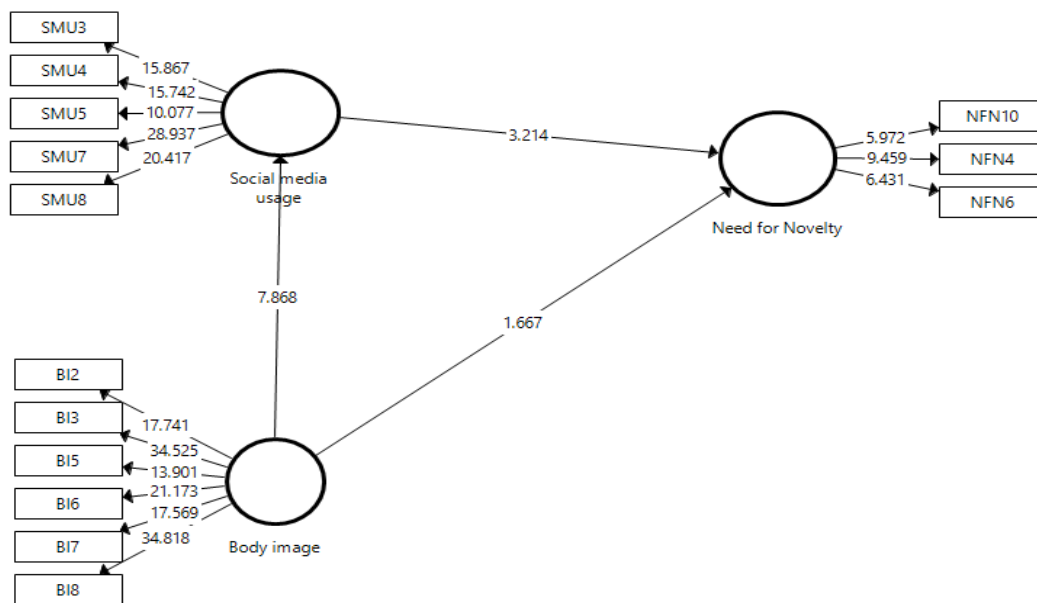


Figure 1 Structural model of the study.

Table 4 Direct and Indirect Hypothesis Testing.

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Body image -> Need for Novelty	0.111	0.112	0.067	1.667	0.096
Body image -> Social media usage	0.334	0.344	0.042	7.868	0
Social media usage -> Need for Novelty	0.213	0.222	0.066	3.214	0.001
Body image -> Social media usage -> Need for Novelty	0.071	0.076	0.024	2.907	0.004

The use of social media to meet psychological needs inevitably leads to addiction among young users (A. Chen, 2019). A consistent finding in the neurobiological drug addiction literature is that repeated exposure to a rewarding substance increases the brain's reward system sensitivity to cues associated with the substance (Ihssen & Wadsley, 2021). Hence, an additional like, connection, or compliment that a user's post gain on social media comes with neurostimulation. Studies have shown that individuals who are dissatisfied with their body image are likely to engage in social comparison on social media platforms, where there is a constant stream of idealized embodiments of beauty and perfection. This can lead to a desire for novel ways to present oneself online to match or surpass the perceived beauty standards of others (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Also, individuals with body dissatisfaction are more likely to use social media to seek validation

from others (Lonergan et al., 2019). This can result in a need for novel peer attention and approval, perpetuating a cycle of seeking out and posting increasingly novel or attention-grabbing content (Duan & Dholakia, 2018).

The body plays a vital role in individuals' overall need for novelty in other areas. Our bodies are both who we are and what we possess. In contemporary society, they have also become a vehicle for conveying our aspirations, uniqueness, and sense of affiliation (Hollway et al., 2006). Studies have shown that clothing is an everyday activity for most people. Individuals use clothes to display their competence, without which they are liable to the discrimination of others (Oh et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2018). This desire for competency was ingrained in the satisfaction of the relatedness and uniqueness needs of individuals. The excessive satisfaction of these needs is the current prevalence of the conspicuous fashion consumption characteristics of many students today (Nabi et al., 2019; Souiden et al., 2011). The aspiration to appear competent has been shown to drive conformity to emerging fashion trends, particularly when individuals find themselves in the presence of affluent peers (Galak et al., 2016).

5. Conclusions

This study provides both theoretical and practical contributions. The findings proved that social media use is one factor that drives students' pursuit of novel goals. Indirectly, social media also helps students portray newly internalized beauty ideals to their peers, as it motivates them to fulfill the need for competence and relatedness. The findings also suggest that being motivated to have the ideal body may encourage students to look for new ways to conform to beauty ideals in their environment. These qualities are essential in maintaining and establishing new relationships and undertaking new activities in contemporary society. These findings can inform parents on ways to assist their wards in navigating the physical changes that accompany post-adolescence and emerging adulthood. It also equips student counsellors with insights to enhance their understanding and support of students' physical and emotional development during this critical transitional phase. The 7.4% variance in the need for novelty explained by body image suggests a modest portion of variance; however, the model is considered acceptable for an exploratory study, as other fit indices, such as the SRMR (0.079) and d_D (0.197), are reasonable. Hence, while body image and social media use have some influence on the need for novelty, other variables not included in the model may explain the unexplained variance in the need for novelty; therefore, further studies may consider the use of more social-psychological predictors and mediators. Further research may also consider alternative measurements of the need for novelty for likely increased variance. Despite its limitations, this study offers valuable insights into the developmental processes of emerging adults and provides a basis for continued investigation.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia [UPM/TNCPI/RMC/1.4.18.2 (JKEUPM)].

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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