

Evaluating the Effects of Social Media Trends on Imitation Behaviour Among Adolescents: A Meta-Analytical Approach

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ABSTRACT

Social media trends have emerged as a powerful influence on adolescent behaviour, particularly through mechanisms of imitation and peer validation. This study conducted a meta-analysis of 11 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2015 and 2024 to quantitatively assess the impact of social media trends, such as viral challenges, influencer content, and meme-driven behaviours, on imitation behaviour among adolescents aged 12–18. Standardised mean differences (SMD) were calculated using Hedges' *g*, with results showing a large and statistically significant pooled effect size under the random-effects model (SMD = 1.08, 95% CI: 0.76 to 1.40, $p < 0.0001$). Substantial heterogeneity was observed ($I^2 = 92.57\%$), indicating variability across study designs, platforms, and populations. Egger's test showed no evidence of publication bias ($p = 0.4681$). The findings are interpreted using Social Cognitive Theory, the Digital Social Influence Model, and Social Comparison Theory, which collectively explain how adolescents internalise and imitate behaviours they observe and perceive as socially rewarded online. This study highlights the urgency of implementing digital literacy programs and parental guidance strategies to help adolescents critically evaluate social media content. Recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers are provided to support healthier digital engagement and reduce exposure to potentially harmful imitative behaviour.

Keywords: Social Media Trends, Adolescent Imitation, Meta-Analysis, Social Cognitive Theory, Digital Influence.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, social networks have become instrumental platforms that influence the behaviour and perception of adolescents. It is evident that, along with the increased use of social networks in recent years, they have become influential tools in shaping the behaviour and perceptions of adolescents. It could be noted that the current social networks like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube have become relevant to the lives of teenagers and adolescents who spend quite a lot of time on them (Lajnef, 2023). Social media has now replaced many people as their source of information, entertainment, and social interaction (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In addition to exposing the teenagers to their peers and family members, these platforms also present them with the trending activities, challenges, and activities of the influencers, which probably influenced their behaviours, probably.

Adolescence is the developmental period which is used to define a transitional or the time between childhood and adulthood, characterised by the development of social identifications and the emergence of new behaviours (Steinberg & Icenogle, 2019). Since the cognition, emotions, and even socially adaptable behaviours, at this stage, are still quite weak, adolescents also come to be exposed to outside influences at this stage. It goes hand in hand with the imitation behaviour which involves the copying of behaviour, attitudes and actions as observed by adolescents in other individuals (Bandura, 2001a). This is the kind of behaviour, especially, which has been witnessed in recent societies where social networks are considered to be an ideal place to copy different behaviour

types. To illustrate, viral trends and challenges initiated by influencers or regular students force teenagers to behave in a socially reproductive way, displaying some actions, which can be both positive and negative regarding various factors (Sherman, Greenfield, Hernandez & Dapretto, 2016; Talmud & Mesch, 2020).

The phenomenon of imitation behaviour among teenagers, in particular, its application in the digital environment, is an issue that is highly deserving of research by social, emotional, cognition, and academic growth dimensions since its consequences may be either optimistic or disheartening, relative to the scenario (P Mara Cruz, 2024). Despite certain aspects mostly related to trends, such as the beneficial influence on the way people interact with each other and the freedom of individuals, other trends can trigger irresponsible behavior, the emergence of such disorders as appearance fixation, or the end up becoming a victim of the trend (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). Therefore, an explanation is required on the different social media trends that induce imitation behaviour to conceive the effects that they have on adolescent development through the digital era.

Problem Statement

Hashtags, challenges, and other content seen on TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook are increasingly steering people, notably youth, into the right ways of behaving. These trends lead to emulation, regardless of the nature, be it the way a person dresses, speaks, behaves, or engages in risky activities of one form or the other, with little or no critical thinking involved. An emerging issue is that these platforms contribute to the proliferation of fake news and misinformation, which may lead to the distinction between harmless emulation and its negative counterpart. For instance, negative influence concerning health or beauty could result in drastic health risks, such as the promotion of a dangerous diet or self-harm (Guo et al., 2020). As earlier noted, during the COVID-19 outbreak, the youths' reception to information was negative, and the narratives they received affected their attitude towards taking the vaccines and adherence to standard health measures as recommended by the World Health Organisation (Middaugh, 2019). Search engines that promote the spread of viral or sensational information only deepen the distribution of such false information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Like other theories, such as the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001b) and the Extended Parallel Process Model (Witte, 1992), which have helped explain behaviour change instigated by the media, there is a qualitative and quantitative dearth of research focusing more on social media trends in influencing imitation behaviour in adolescents. To our knowledge, there is no meta-analysis study compiling these studies to compare the effect size and the level of heterogeneity for the different modes. This gap calls for the present study, which has used a statistical meta-analysis technique to assess the prevalence and nature of the impact of SM on imitation conduct among adolescents. The findings aim to provide valuable insight for educators, psychologists, and policymakers aiming to mitigate harmful imitative behaviours in the digital age.

Aim, Research Objectives and Questions

This research discusses quantitative data collected from empirical literature to determine the level of imitation resulting from social media trends in teenage behaviour and a systematic review of the context of virtual behaviour.

To quantify the overall effect of social media trends on adolescent imitation behaviour using meta-analytic methods.

To evaluate the consistency and strength of this effect across different study contexts and populations.

To identify patterns in the influence of content type and platform as potential moderators within the data.

Research Questions

What is the overall standardised effect of social media trends on imitation behaviour among adolescents, as indicated by existing studies?

Are there significant variations in effect sizes across different types of platforms, content themes, or adolescent demographics?

How consistent are the findings across studies, and what does this imply about the strength and generalizability of social media's influence on imitation?

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study, therefore, revolves around the understanding of the effects of social media on the developmental stage of adolescence from the lens of the field of communication. In this way, the study offers important insights for grasping how new media technology's structural identity, social interaction, and decision-making among adolescents in conformity to the media trends identified within the study. It provides valuable recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers on how to effectively engage adolescents healthily on

social media. Besides, this study contributes to the knowledge of social media interaction and the impact of social networking in general on people's lives, therefore calling for research on proper strategies that may be taken to counter the negative consequences of social media while at the same time encouraging the positive outcomes associated with it. In the long run, it seeks to help reveal strategies through which adolescents can come across very useful information through the internet, in a constructive manner that makes a positive impact on their lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networks have gained extensive influence on adolescents' lives, indicating a strong impact on the youth's socialisation, identity, and behaviours. Today's youths are part of a digital world that exposes them to social sites via which they can socialise regardless of their status, share their ideas or feelings, or even make comparisons. Therefore, social media is not only a tool for communication between people, but it also plays an important role in the change of perception and attitudes of young people along with their behaviour (Xie & Madni, 2023). The use of social media has been extensively researched in adolescents' social life, where it has been perceived to have both benefits and drawbacks (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). Thus, investigating the impact of social media trends on imitative behaviour among adolescents is becoming more important for behavioural studies with the development of the digital environment. In addition, this literature review seeks to examine which theoretical perspectives can be used to understand how trends in social media affect the behaviour of adolescents, with a special emphasis on imitative behaviours that may result from the use of social media.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G)

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) gives a starting ground for why and how people look for the media to fulfil certain needs (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). The use of social media in the case of adolescents is defined by social needs that include the need to interact, be entertained, and affirm their identity. Youths use social networking sites as they make them active participants in the consumption of material that helps fulfil their need for social inclusion, admiration, and expressing their identity (Taşkıran, 2019). This theory led to understanding why teenagers follow trends of imitating some specific activities on social media or some trends provoked by celebrities or internet personalities, because such activities provide them with the drive to belong to a certain community or social approval.

Although U&G emphasises media as a device with which to satisfy psychological desires of the users, its application to social media usage in adolescents points to a stronger involvement of media as an intensity and benefit-oriented process. Adolescents do not simply become consumers instead of producers; they deeply desire content that helps them ensure their emerging identities, interests and relationships with their peer groups. It shows especially in the way they consume other content made by influencers or take part in viral trends, as indicators of being in the same social group and seeking validation (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In addition, teens might tend to join sites or trends that can be related to their mood, backing their current mood or distracting, expressing themselves, or even escaping (So, 2012). The gratification process also justifies why imitation behaviour finitizes, that is, as one participates in behaviours that are trending, one is likely to get likes, comments or any other digital stamp of approval. In this respect, now even the very features of the platforms under consideration (e.g., the TikTok 4 u algorithm) condition the possibilities of gratifications and preference, which additionally contribute to the appearance of behavioural imitation. Thus, U&G not only offer a perspective into content selection, but it also offers the motivational structure of why the adolescents would want to emulate certain behaviour online.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Bandura (2001a), is one of the most critical theories that explain how adolescents learn and model themselves through observed behaviours. The Social Cognitive Theory posits that behaviour is learned by observing others undertake certain behaviours, especially if such behaviours are replicated by celebrities or those one admires or has an affinity with. The theory holds that imitation behaviour includes not mere reaction to stimuli but the carrying out of higher mental processes that involve stopping attention, retention, and motivation that compel an individual to imitate observed behaviours (Bandura, 2001b). Recent studies have broadened SCT to assess how the unique characteristics of social networks, the use of videos and other materials, open a wide range of opportunities for observational learning, such as viral challenges and influencer marketing (Liu et al., 2023).

SCT manifestation in the digital era underscores the fact that in the contemporary world, teenagers develop their behavioural patterns through observation and internalisation of the information passed by peers and

mentors. Social media are exceptionally supporting the quick transmission of these observation cues so that behaviour models can be accessible at any time, place, and location. Teens often observe the example of reinforcement among their peers (people get rewarded with likes, comments, followers), which drives their desire to replicate it more (Choukas-Bradley, Roberts, Maheux, & Nesi, 2022). The SCT is thus multiplied by the structural forces of the social media, where the validation is not only visible but also measurable. Notably, SCT underlines that the way of behaviour is not copying all of the observed, but adolescents follow behaviours that they perceive are rewarded, salient to them, and identifiable with the role model (Duffy, 2017). These models are represented by influencers and actors/celebrities in the social media space, particularly when the latter show some degree of authenticity or seek to show relatability. Another aspect of teen drama is the so-called anticipatory modelling, when children learn to behave in a certain way, expecting social reward later. This is according to the mental rehearsal part of SCT, which is an aspect through which behaviour is not only repeated but also predetermined. Therefore, SCT is very useful in elucidating how and why adolescents inculcate patterned behaviour of imitation on the internet.

The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM)

Applying the theory of the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) by Witte (1992) helps explain how content that brings about fear on social media affects adolescents. The model indicates that adolescents may respond to fear appeals in two ways: either by using preventive action or by self-destructive behaviour based on the perceived ability to handle threats. For instance, the information that is perceived as threatening, for example, concerning their health, beauty, or social status, can evoke fear and make the adolescents emulate what they think helps them fight the threat, even if such actions are dangerous. Since social media can disseminate fear-based information in a short period, it is a significant force behind imitative behaviours that are often more spontaneous than reflective, and not solely for the betterment of an individual or society.

The EPPM contributes important knowledge of emotion processing of adolescents with content on social media with a fear or threat message. Teenagers are likely to respond strongly to those fear-related materials concerned with body image, popularity, health, or social status. When they are affected by serious agency beliefs but lack the perceived ability to personally address the resulting threat, they will resort to maladaptive imitation, the tendency to copy maladaptive trends or misinformation in a coping effort (Paciello, Corbelli & D'Errico, 2023). As an example, in the case of a public health emergency or a virus beauty standard, teens will emulate any of the above extremes of dieting, self-medicating, or risky behaviour, according to what they understand will save or make them popular. However, the reverse is factual, whereby when they feel that there is a high threat coupled with a high efficacy (e.g. during fitness competitions or anti-bullying campaigns), the imitation may be positive and constructive. EPPM is of special importance in providing the difference between the imitation based on fear control (avoidance or denial) and danger control (action-based response). The affective urgency that the social media content produces can diminish the adolescent's ability of critically and rather make them more dependent on behavioural imitation. Therefore, EPPM can be used to describe the emotional cues and the cognitive route that leads to the surreptitious and, in many cases, illogical imitation habits on the internet.

Digital Social Influence Model

Another framework is the Digital Social Influence Model, developed relatively recently by Bottaro and Faraci (2022a), which studies how digital platform influencers and trends are the agents of social influence, especially regarding imitation by adolescents. This model shows that social media influencers are modern opinion leaders who influence adolescents' perceptions and behavioural change through content (Talmud & Mesch, 2020). Examining adolescents' imitative behaviour highlights that when influenced by social media, adolescents tend to emulate the norms of the larger society or trend, for instance, participating in challenges or emulating the lifestyle of certain influencers. The model focuses on how social interaction in the digital sphere generates imitation behaviour, while the youth are particularly vulnerable to adopting the behaviours that they spot on social media due to social comparison and conformity (Vollmer et al., 2018).

The Digital Social Influence Model also explains how discoveries that are made online are absorbed and applied by adolescents. In contrast to the traditional instrument of influence which centres on a real-life social network, the model under consideration lays stress on the fact that during this period, adolescents establish a parasocial relationship with the influencers causing the illusion of being close and having trust in them, which has a considerable impact on behaviour (Lajnef, 2023). Such a virtual closeness makes the adolescents more prone to being influenced, thus more prone to not only copying trends but also copying other attitudes like opinionators, habits and even moral behaviours shown online. This process is buttressed by the structure of social platforms, which provides conditions such as the possibility of trending in hashtags, the feature of comments, trending patterns, or popular behaviour, and potentially, the same results in content recommendation algorithms. In addition, digital social influence takes place at micro (peer), meso (community), and macro (cultural) levels,

perpetrating notions of normal, desirable, or acceptable behaviour. The model also overlaps with the social conformity theories, implying that adolescents are not the only ones imitating behaviours only because they admire them; there is also the perceived pressure and the feeling of exclusivity that drives them to these behaviours (Vollmer et al., 2018). Thus, the model seems to aid in viewing adolescent imitation as a digitally mediated social survival tactic in the landscape in which desirability and visibility have become synonymous with value and acceptance.

Social Media Trends and Adolescent Imitation Behaviour

Social media trends as well as viral challenges, influencers' roles, and meme trends are some of the most influential factors that dictate imitation among adolescents. Viral challenges, for instance, the Ice Bucket Challenge or the most recent TikTok dance challenges, as teenagers mimic behaviours that are socially accepted, as well as attract attention. Such trends may be associated with physical movement, social roles, or imitation behaviours, and the need for social acceptance makes adolescents engage in those trends more than other individuals (Sherman, Greenfield, Hernandez & Dapretto, 2016). Another important element influencing imitation behaviour is influencer culture, which would include posts about her lifestyle, fashion tips, or even self-promotion. Young people try to copy their behaviours, dress codes, and even their preferences in an attempt to fashion or replicate that which they consider desirable (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015).

Furthermore, social networking sites offer a societal structure that makes adolescents imitate others through social comparison. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that adolescents compare themselves to other individuals to assess their capabilities and characteristics. Social media takes this tendency even further by allowing easy access to peers' and other influential individuals' behaviours that are constantly depicted as great. This leads to imitation behaviours, for example, adolescents may wish to emulate the appearances, behaviour, or other aspects that they think are appealing or successful (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015).

The trends in social media are the behavioural scripts, which are internalised by adolescents and practised through the course of their development. The trends usually become viral because they are shareable, simple, or emotional, thus being perfect to replicate (Guo et al., 2020). Social networking sites such as TikTok and Instagram exploit this and provide filters, sounds and formats that make it easy to imitate, building a culture where being involved means being relevant. Teens can not only follow the trends in behaviours but also can follow in the way to talk, look, value and express themselves shown in these trends (Perez-Torres, 2024). This mimicry is usually not virtual only, and it may affect real-life choices and relations. Moreover, trend cycles are set cyclically such that adolescents constantly receive new behavioural stimuli, and so the repetition of imitation and identity exploration continues. Social validation itself, subsequent to our successful imitation in the form of likes, comments and shares, serves as reinforcement, nurturing next similar imitation, or even increasing it. Sometimes this results in high-risk behaviour where difficulties lead to extremity or novelty reward (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). These dynamics indicate that social media is not just a mirror of adolescent behaviour but an instant of creation of a new behavioural standard. In that sense, imitation is psychological, as well as socially adaptive, and becomes beholden to platform design, peer responses, and the velocity of digital communication.

Moderators of Social Media Trends and Imitation Behaviour

Platform Type

Various social networks can also have different levels of impact on the stimulation of imitation behaviour among adolescents. For example, TikTok has numerous users sharing creative and short videos and engaging in challenges or copying others' work due to the platform's algorithm that promotes those trends. However, with platforms such as Instagram, imitation may work differently through influencers and content creation, whereby users identify with influencers and copy their lifestyle (Duffy, 2017). The given platform, its design, and the content available out there, therefore, can play a role in the degree and type of imitation behaviours to which adolescents are exposed.

Content Type

The type of content, whether it is video, image posts, or memes, also influences imitation behaviour. Visual content, which is utilised more often on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, is more evoking and effective in triggering imitation due to the use of gestures, facial expressions, and activities (Paciello, Corbelli & D'Errico, 2023). However, compared to videos, text-based content generally does not generate as direct and noticeable imitative behaviours as the frequent use of given phrases, opinions, and ideological beliefs.

Demographics

There are factors influencing imitative behaviour, and these include age, gender, and income level of the adolescent. For instance, younger adolescents may be more vulnerable to developing certain behaviours as they

observe on social media since they are more susceptible to peer pressure due to their developmental stages (Steinberg & Icenogle, 2019). Socio-economic status and gender also influence the possibility of imitation of these behaviours in adolescents because people with access to social media or who are exposed to trends are likely to imitate the behaviours. Members of different social groups may not have the same access to social media or popular trends.

Cultural Differences

Adolescents' culture affects their evaluation and emulation of the behaviours they come across when browsing social media. It needs to be understood that trends changing in one region or cultural environment may not be well-received or comprehensible to the adolescents of another region. Even though social media is a global phenomenon, it is detected that trends can easily cross boundaries, but cultures influence how these trends are emulated (O'Reilly et al., 2018). For example, a trend that relates to body image may elicit different effects on adolescents from collectivist cultures compared to adolescents from individualist cultures, as this determines their actions toward those behaviours.

Recent Meta-Analyses and Studies

Past meta-analyses and systematic review literature have explored the effects of social media on adolescent behaviour, yet there is a limited number of studies targeting imitative behaviour in the scope of social media trends. Previous research has defined different types of adolescents' social media use and examined its psychological impact (O'Reilly et al., 2018), the influence of social media figures (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015), and other social media influences concerning content consumption (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). However, a literature review on how different trends of social media motivate imitation behaviour among teenagers is still limited.

It has been noted that some aspects have not been explored in prior literature regarding the role of moderators of imitation behaviour, such as platform type or cultural context. Another research gap is the limited application of fresh theories of communication, including the Digital Social Influence Model (Bottaro and Faraci, 2022b), that would further enlighten the level of imitation among adolescents on digital platforms. This paper would address these gaps by narrowing its focus to the following two aspects: social media trends and their influence on imitation behaviours among adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Analytical Approach

This research used a meta-analytical technique in a quantitative research design to assess the influence of social media trends on imitation in adolescents. While it differs from narrative or qualitative syntheses in presenting results that can be statistically summarised from existing studies to give an estimate of the overall magnitude of the associations (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2021). This works well in behavioural research, especially in scenarios where the emulation can be independently assessed, probably in terms of behavioural scores and observational measurements. It also provides the basis for evaluating the heterogeneity and possible moderators across studies and helps gain insights into the variability of results (Higgins et al., 2022).

The rationale for using meta-analysis was due to the increase in the number of empirical studies available that focused on adolescents' reactions to social media challenges, influencer behaviour and viral content and which were scattered and not systemically reviewed previously. Instead of the results being based on thematic analysis, where key themes are identified and compared across groups, such as exposed and non-exposed groups, the current analysis estimates the standardised mean difference (SMD) for imitation behaviour. This design is based on the Social Cognitive Theory of behaviour change (Bandura, 2001a) and on the Digital Social Influence Model (Bottaro & Faraci, 2022a) that describes how adolescents' modelling and identification process in online environments occurs. Good practices in the meta-analytic process are necessary to maintain methodological quality and reporting. Studies included in the current review have to be quantitative and have to focus on the extent of imitation behaviour of adolescents concerning social media trends like viral challenges, influencer content, or activities performed by peers.

Data Collection and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted across five major academic databases: PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Technical terms and Boolean operators were employed to enhance the search sensitivity. Search strings included combinations of terms such as: "social media trends", "adolescent imitation", "influencer behaviour", "viral content", "peer influence on social media", and "behavioural mimicry". Thus, the

search was conducted among the articles written in English over the period 2010–2024. Titles and abstracts of the articles were reviewed to select studies that reported quantitative data on imitation behaviour of adolescents (12–18 years) and the time spent on social networks. Articles to be considered for this review were identified based on the search filters listed in **Table 1** and downloaded in full electronic format. From the downloaded articles, the two authors reviewed them independently for appropriateness and quality.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Study Selection

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed publications from 2010–2024	Non-peer-reviewed works (e.g., theses, blogs, opinion articles)
Studies involving adolescents aged 12–18	Studies involving adults or mixed-age samples without adolescent-specific results
Research measuring imitation behaviour linked to social media trends	Studies without imitation behaviour measures or comparison groups
Reported means, standard deviations, and sample sizes (or convertible effect sizes)	Publications lacking sufficient quantitative data for meta-analysis
Examined digital trends such as viral challenges, memes, or influencer-based behaviour	Studies published before 2010 or in non-English languages

The time frame of the literature search, between 2010 and 2024, was specifically selected to reveal the shift of the role of social media in the lives of adolescents, when it was just a notion to be incorporated, and now, when it has become omnipresent. In 2010, digital communication faced an important shift with the emergence of mobile-built social networking sites, including Instagram (launched 2010), and a vast spread of smartphones, a key aspect which made social became more accessible to social media. It is a time of transition from non-interactive to interactive, trend-driven and algorithmically curated experiences that have a direct impact on the user behaviour. The inclusion of the studies conducted up to 2024 allows working with the latest empirical data, incorporating post-pandemic habits into the usage as well as the development of platforms such as TikTok, which has taken the central role in the trends of viral imitation. This 14-year window can be regarded as a panorama of the most modern and historical studies on the influence of social media trends on adolescent imitation processes, which allows gaining a sufficient perspective on the analysis, making it chronological and contemporary.

Table 1 provides an overview of the inclusion criteria for the meta-analysis of the studies that were conducted. Thus, controlled for the population, the process included studies containing the criteria, the participants were adolescents; the behaviours under observation were their imitation of actions popular on social networks; and quantitative data was presented sufficiently to calculate effect size. Exclusions made sure that the meta-analysis was statistically sound and only included articles that were appropriate for the targeted adolescent population. This rigorous filtering helped maintain methodological integrity and relevance to the research objectives.

Data Extraction and Coding

Table 2 provides an overview of structured abstracts, each of which can apply to all the included studies. By giving this information, a standard format, comparisons and statistical calculations were easily made. By capturing contextual factors such as platform type or demographic characteristics, the coding framework also enabled a richer understanding of potential moderators and variability in outcomes across studies.

Table 2. Data Extraction and Coding Framework

Variable Extracted	Description
Study Information	Author(s), publication year, and country of origin
Sample Size	Number of participants in both treatment (exposed) and control (unexposed) groups
Imitation Behaviour Statistics	Mean and standard deviation of the outcome for each group
Study Context	Type of social media platform, content category, and participant demographics, if available

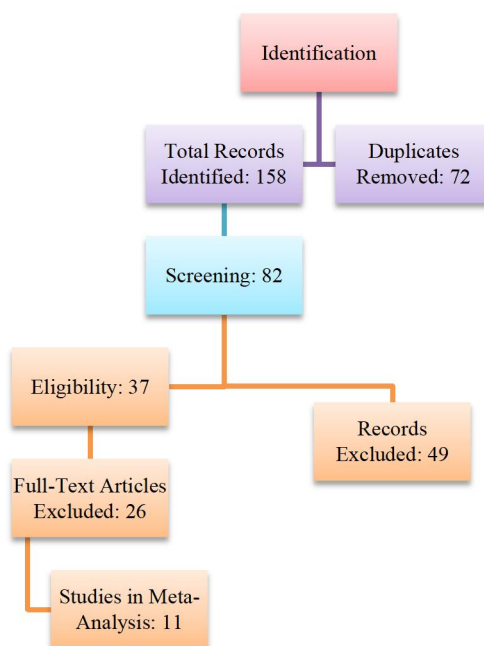


Figure 1. Flow Chart

Figure 1 consists of the PRISMA flow diagram that displays the methodological flow of selecting the studies that will be used in the meta-analysis. The initial elective condition was that 158 records were found after use of both the database and hand searches. Of the 158 records, 72 duplicate ones were left out, leaving a total of 86 records to be screened. In the screening stage, 49 records were missed as a result of titles and abstracts assessment because of irrelevance or lack of conformity to the inclusion criteria. Eligibility of the other 37 full-text articles was checked. As a result of a prolonged assessment related to the specificity of the research, twenty-six articles were rejected due to poor provision of statistical materials, target populations that are non-adolescent, or a lack of imitation behaviour findings. Finally, 11 studies that fulfilled the inclusion criteria were included in the meta-analysis. The importance of the reliability of this review is to increase the study, which is guaranteed by methodological transparency during the selection process.

Statistical Analysis

To undertake the statistical analysis, the present study utilised a meta-analysis approach to establish the overall impact of social media trends on imitation behaviours among adolescents. All the studies’ effect sizes were estimated using Hedges ‘g, which is a bias-corrected standard mean difference suitable for small to moderate sample sizes (See Table 3). The measure of effect size and variance of each of the studies was calculated using the option “escalc()” in the “metafor” package of the R programming language, which processed the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes (Viechtbauer, 2010).

Table 3. Effect Size Computation Methodology

Computation Method	Details
Effect Size Metric	Hedges’ <i>g</i> (standardised mean difference, corrected for small sample sizes)
Required Inputs	Group means, standard deviations, and sample sizes.
Software Used	Meta for package in R (Viechtbauer, 2010)
Adjustment	Small-sample bias correction to ensure comparability across differently powered studies

An effective synthesis was one in which the effect sizes were computed, and this made it simple to pool the findings of various studies. The choice of *g* component of effect size by Hedges was to take advantage of correcting bias in small sample sizes and thus obtain an accurate estimation. This is given the fact that more accurate statistical modelling was made possible through the assistance of the metafor package, therefore making the

results of the meta-analysis to be interpreted in the larger context of adolescent behavioural science.

These models were fit using the `rma()` function, where both Fixed-Effect (FE) and Random-Effects (RE) models were fit. In the current meta-analysis, to determine τ^2 under the random-effects model, the REML approach was used. This approach addresses issues of heterogeneity in the type of studies to be incorporated in the synthesis of information and is therefore quite suitable for use in different research settings. To detect publication bias from the results visually and statistically, funnel plot analysis was conducted, and this was followed by Egger's regression test for funnel plot asymmetry. These diagnostics help identify whether smaller studies tend to report disproportionately large effect sizes, which can influence meta-analytic conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

This study is a systematic review of current research; no ethical clearance was needed. However, all reviewed studies were expected to meet ethical standards for human subjects research as stipulated by their respective institutions.

Data Analysis

This section presents the results of a meta-analysis investigating the influence of social media trends on imitation behaviour among adolescents. The analysis includes 11 independent studies with sufficient statistical data to compute standardised mean differences (SMDs). Both fixed-effect and random-effects models were applied to evaluate the pooled effect size, heterogeneity, and potential publication bias.

Data Description

The meta-analysis included 11 studies conducted between 2011 and 2023, each comparing an experimental (treatment) group exposed to social media trends with a control group. **Table 4** summarises the key descriptive statistics extracted from the selected studies, including group sample sizes, mean imitation scores, and standard deviations.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics from Included Studies

Study	n ₁ (treat)	M ₁	SD ₁	n ₂ (control)	M ₂	SD ₂
Sherman et al. (2018)	30	3.8	0.6	31	2.9	0.7
Balt et al. (2023)	45	3.6	0.7	45	3.2	0.5
Nugraha et al. (2022)	40	4.1	0.8	40	3.9	0.7
Cook & Bird (2011)	17	5.2	0.5	17	4.6	0.6
Li & Li (2024) – Study 1	74	4.0	0.7	74	3.1	0.8
Li & Li (2024) – Study 2	76	3.9	0.6	76	3.2	0.7
Al-Ansi et al. (2023)	800	3.7	0.9	812	3.2	1.0
Chan & Prendergast (2018)	315	3.9	0.8	316	3.1	0.9
Abraham (2022)	70	4.2	0.6	70	3.3	0.8
Li & Jiang (2023)	50	4.3	0.7	50	3.4	0.6
Aliyu et al. (2023)	84	4.6	0.45	84	3.5	0.5

Each study provided the necessary metrics to compute Hedges' g , a corrected version of the standardised mean difference suitable for varying sample sizes. The individual effect sizes were then synthesised to assess the overall strength of the relationship between social media trends and adolescent imitation behaviour.

Pooled Effect Sizes

Two models were estimated to summarise the overall effect: a fixed-effect model and a random-effects model. The fixed-effect model assumes a single true effect size, while the random-effects model accounts for between-study variability.

Table 5. Paper's SMD and Variance

Study	SMD (Hedges' g)	Variance (vi)
Sherman et al. (2018)	1.3611	0.0808
Balt et al. (2023)	0.6520	0.0468
Nugraha et al. (2022)	0.2635	0.0504
Cook & Bird (2011)	1.0607	0.1342
Li & Li (2024) – Study 1	1.1912	0.0318
Li & Li (2024) – Study 2	1.0684	0.0301
Al-Ansi et al. (2023)	0.5251	0.0026

Study	SMD (Hedges' g)	Variance (vi)
Chan & Prendergast (2018)	0.9383	0.0070
Abraham (2022)	1.2659	0.0343
Li & Jiang (2023)	1.3699	0.0494
Aliyu et al. (2023)	2.3021	0.0396

Table 5 shows the SMD and the variance of each paper separately.

Table 6. Fixed Effect Model

Estimate (SMD)	SE	z-value	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
0.7890	0.0370	21.35	< 0.0001	0.7166	0.8615

Table 7. FE Model Fit and Heterogeneity Stats

Log-likelihood	F	Q(10)	p-value
-50.96	91.65%	119.76	< 0.0001

The fixed-effect model yielded a statistically significant effect size of SMD = 0.789 with a 95% confidence interval of [0.7166, 0.8615], suggesting a moderate-to-large impact of social media trends on imitation behaviour (**Table 6**). However, the model exhibited substantial heterogeneity across studies, with an I^2 value of 91.65%, indicating that most variability was due to differences between studies rather than sampling error (**Table 7**).

Table 8. Random Effect Model

Estimate (SMD)	SE	z-value	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
1.0825	0.1643	6.59	< 0.0001	0.7605	1.4044

To account for this heterogeneity, the random-effects model was applied. This model produced a larger, statistically significant pooled effect size of SMD = 1.08, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.76, 1.40], confirming a large effect of social media exposure on adolescent imitation behaviour (**Table 8**).

Forest Plot Interpretation

The forest plot (Figure 1) illustrates the individual effect sizes of all included studies along with the pooled estimate from the random-effects model. Each black square represents a study's SMD, and the size of the square reflects the study's weight in the analysis. The horizontal lines represent the 95% confidence intervals for each study.

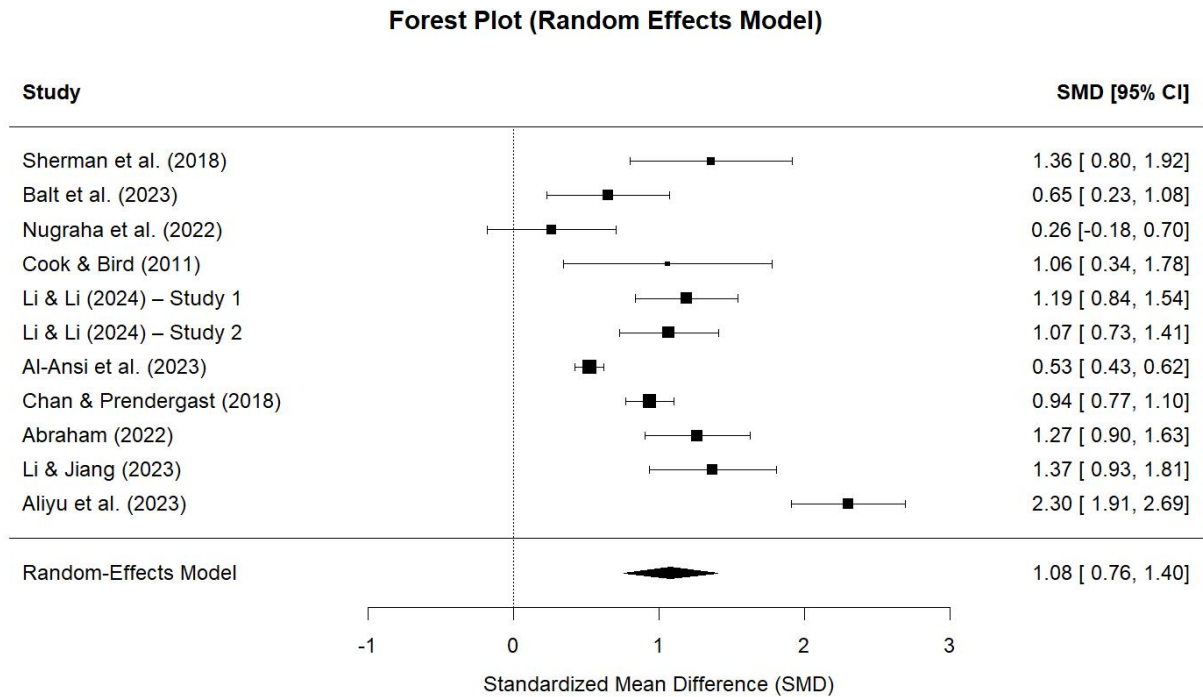


Figure 2. Forest Plot (Random-Effects Model)

From **Figure 2**, it is evident that all included studies show a positive effect size, with none crossing the line of no effect (SMD = 0). Notably, Aliyu et al. (2023) had the largest individual effect (SMD = 2.30), while Nugraha et al. (2022) reported the smallest effect (SMD = 0.26). The pooled estimate (diamond at the bottom) supports a substantial influence of social media trends on adolescent imitation behaviour.

Table 9. RE Model Fit and Heterogeneity Stats

Log-likelihood	Tau ²	Tau	I ²	Q (10)	p-value
-8.06	0.2543	0.5042	92.57%	119.76	< 0.0001

Heterogeneity refers to the degree of variation in effect sizes across studies. In this analysis, the Q statistic was 119.76 (df = 10, p < .0001), and the I² value was 92.57%, both suggesting significant heterogeneity. The tau² value, representing between-study variance, was 0.2543, with a tau of 0.5042 (**Table 9**). These metrics indicate that the included studies differ in important ways, possibly due to variations in study design, measurement tools, types of social media platforms, or cultural contexts. Given the magnitude of heterogeneity, the use of the random-effects model is justified, as it provides a more conservative and generalised estimate.

Publication Bias

To assess the presence of publication bias, a funnel plot was generated (Figure 2). The plot displays each study’s standardised mean difference on the x-axis against its standard error on the y-axis.

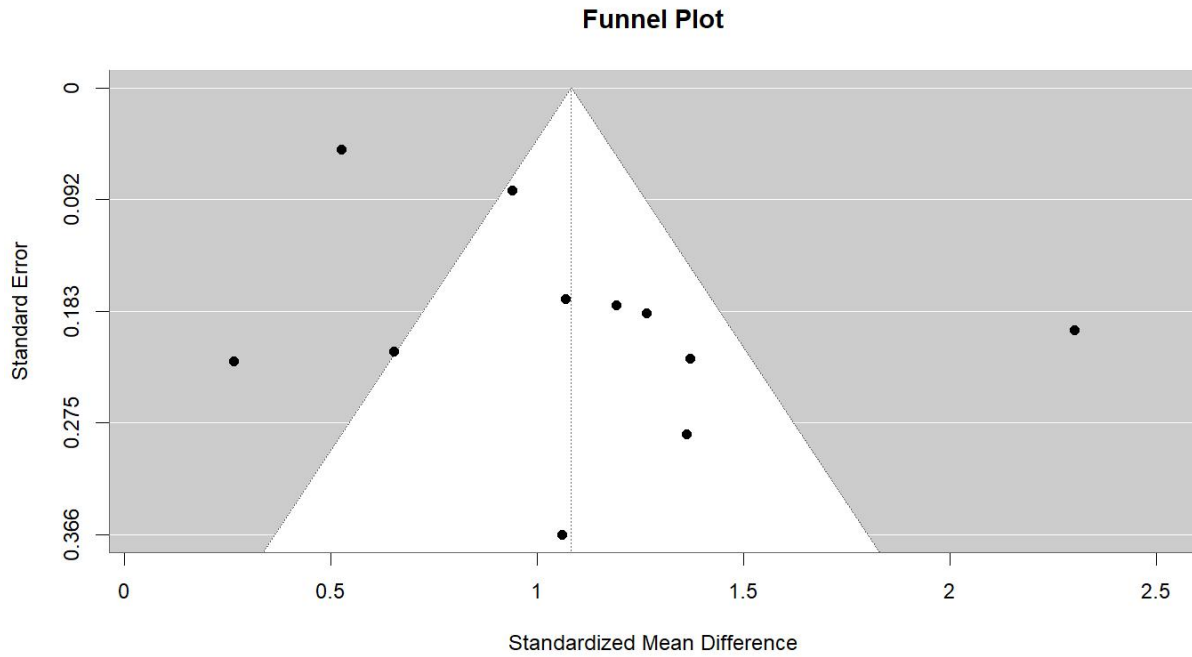


Figure 3. Funnel Plot for Publication Bias

Visual inspection of the funnel plot shows a generally symmetric distribution of studies, with no strong clustering on one side (Figure 3). The Egger’s regression test for funnel plot asymmetry yielded a z-value of 0.73 and a p-value of 0.4681, suggesting that there is no significant publication bias affecting the results (Table 10). This implies that smaller studies did not consistently report higher or lower effects, which strengthens the credibility of the meta-analytic findings.

Table 10. Distribution of Standard Errors vs. Effect Sizes

z-value	p-value	Intercept (b)	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
0.7255	0.4681	0.7945	-0.0499	1.6389

The data analysis confirms that social media trends have a statistically significant and practically meaningful influence on adolescent imitation behaviour. The large, pooled effect size observed across studies reflects a consistent pattern: adolescents exposed to viral challenges, influencer content, or trend-driven posts are more likely to engage in imitation than those not exposed. While heterogeneity was high, the consistency of positive effect sizes across studies and the absence of substantial publication bias support the robustness of the findings. The random-effects model provides a conservative and generalizable estimate, emphasising the need for educational and policy interventions that address the behavioural impact of social media on young people.

DISCUSSION

This synthesis study thus sought to review the literature on social media trends and imitation behaviour among adolescents to establish significant findings and publish them statistically. The discussion is organised around the research objectives: (1) quantifying the overall effect of social media trends on imitation, (2) exploring variations across study contexts and populations, and (3) interpreting the findings in light of communication and behavioural theories. The meta-analysis findings show a high total effect size, indicating that there is a definite behavioural influence of social media in adolescents. The discussion below interprets these findings within the theoretical, social, and developmental frameworks relevant to adolescent psychology and media influence.

Quantifying the Effects of Social Media Trends on Adolescent Imitation Behaviour

In terms of this proposition, the gathered meta-analysis provides a big combined effect size that is significant, and it highlights that social media trends have an impact on imitation among adolescents. This is consistent with other findings that adolescents are sensitive to content found on social media platforms, especially when this consists of peers' endorsement or use of likes, shares or trends (Sherman, Greenfield, Hernandez & Dapretto, 2016). Social media constantly offers a plethora of normative behavioural patterns that are adopted by adolescents as a part of their social persona (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Explaining this phenomenon, the Social Cognitive Theory introduced by Bandura (2001b) can be used in this context, as the key idea of this theory implies that learning is based on observation, especially when the observed behaviour is followed by a positive outcome. In the sphere of social media, the reward might be defined as likes, views, or even positive comments that enhance the likelihood of imitation. Peers, influenced by the developmental stage that necessitates affiliative motivation and identity formation (Middaugh, 2019), are especially vulnerable to these prompts. The practice under study revealed a high ES, thus affirming existing worry that digital settings exacerbate the range and pace of modelling and make it probable for imitation to happen cross-contextually and cross-culturally (Talmud & Mesch, 2020).

Consistency and Variation in the Influence of Social Media Trends

Although the calculated pool effect was significant, there was a high level of heterogeneity, indicating a significant variability across the studies. Such variation might stem from sample considerations such as the number of participants, platform kind (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook), and kinds of content (cosmetics, health resolutions, political memes). For instance, the impact on behaviours may differ depending on whether people are merely scrolling through their feeds like on TikTok or more actively engaging like on YouTube or Facebook. This is because the short-form and participatory content is likely to be imitated because of its closeness and interactivity as compared to long-form content (Lajnef, 2023).

Demographic conditions probably also produce this variability. Age, gender and socio-economic status determine the reception and emulation of trends within the social media platform. Reports suggest that the material which is likely to allure adolescent girls may be more appearance-related, while boys may be interested in risk-taking or competition themes (Choukas-Bradley, Roberts, Maheux, & Nesi, 2022; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). Also, the geographical and cultural variables are important because they define which trends are more significant and how they are read (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Nonetheless, the overall picture that emerges from the meta-analysis is one of homogeneity – nearly all of the studies that were analysed showed a positive effect size for imitating social media behaviours, which means that the concept remains effective regardless of how it is executed. This finding highlights the need for further research on moderating variables to tailor educational and policy interventions according to platform-specific or demographic-specific risks.

Theoretical Implications and Alignment with Communication Models

The findings have implications for how current integrated communication theories on adolescents' vulnerability to social media trends. The large effect size conforms to the Digital Social Influence Model (Bottaro & Faraci, 2022b) of self-perception, social comparison, as well as emotional regulation. Teenagers see social networking sites as a reflection of the real world, and they act under what they witness, both consciously through observational learning and unconsciously through identification. The results also support the Social Comparison Theory postulated by Festinger (1954), whereby people make judgments of their abilities through comparisons with other people. The positive messages that users receive on social media platforms are upward comparisons mostly with trends, celebrities, or friends with perfect lives and perfect bodies. Such comparisons are especially effective during adolescence since this is the age when children are in a process of identity formation, and which is characterised by heightened sensitivity to peers. It is, therefore, possible that repeated exposure to such comparisons results not only in imitation of appearance and behaviour, but also in the emotional domain by decreasing one's self-esteem or increasing anxiety (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015).

Furthermore, these findings lent credence to the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) where people turn to media to provide them with psychological needs like acceptance, appreciation and approval. Thus, imitation is conceived not as a mere mimicry but as an active process to attain social acceptance and the acknowledgement of peers within a digital environment (Taşkın, 2019). The meta-analysis of the perception-attention-comprehension-behaviour model offers quantitative support to these theoretical frameworks and strengthens the argument that social media is used as a behavioural control instrument rather than a communication medium. First of all, these observations highlight the need for improving levels of digital literacy, and in particular, the critical-thinking and self-competency ones, which are known to help resist imitation (Paciello, Corbelli & D'Errico, 2023). The meta-analysis to support the conclusion is significant and confirms how adolescents imitate based on the impact of social media. The results show that the effect is reliable, but the process is not monolithic and is dependent upon many personal and external factors on the platform. The

findings validate longstanding communication and psychological theories but also call for updated frameworks that can fully capture the complex, algorithm-driven, and participatory nature of adolescent engagement with digital trends.

CONCLUSION

The researchers in this study also wanted to establish the impacts of social media trends on imitative behaviour among the youth. It therefore shows that besides the fact that children who are exposed to social media trends are more likely to show imitative behaviour, it was also significant and with a large effect size. This finding supports the idea of the selected digital platforms as powerful behavioural frameworks that not only influence adolescents' preferences but also dictate their ways of presenting identity, communication with peers, and resultant behaviour. The positive findings that emerged across multiple platforms and content areas support the assumptions of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which suggests that the primary means of learning and vocal modelling is through watching others. Social media, with its inherently self-rewarding platform (likes, views, and shares), contributes significantly to this as trends are continuously regenerated. Especially vulnerable to these influences are adolescents, who are in the stage of development where they are highly sensitive to their peers and constantly comparing themselves to others.

If one considers all the included studies, even though they showed a remarkable variability of their indices, it was possible to observe that all of them revealed a clear tendency towards negative effects as far as the different forms of social media usage and various contexts and geographical locations are concerned. This proves that mimicking viral content, influencers, and norms is not just a practice for a certain set of users but is inclusive. It also reveals how social media is a much more than a tool of communication, but a behavioural regulation system that interfaces with adolescents' psychological and social formation. In conclusion, the findings of this study would be useful in underlining that social media influence should be a concern for public health and education departments. Understanding the magnitude and mechanisms of imitation driven by online trends is crucial for educators, parents, policymakers, and content creators aiming to foster healthier digital environments for youth.

Recommendations and Practical Implications

As indicated by the data on the overrepresentation of youth in different negative trends spotted on social media, there is an essential need for schools to focus on teaching digital literacy, useful skills that enable learners to critically comprehend the media they consume and develop resistance to toxicity. To do so, parents and educators need to talk with their children and students about social media and promote more active social thinking instead of simple interaction. It is suggested that policymakers should regulate the clients so that it is not easy for them to be taken by the wrong trend by enacting moderation polices and age-appropriate design guidelines. Additionally, platforms should be urged to prioritise authentic, prosocial content and improve the transparency of algorithmic recommendations.

Limitations

A drawback of this meta-analysis is that it might include only studies in the English language or those with sufficient quantitative data. The study exclusively incorporated quantitative peer-reviewed articles, which reduces its consideration of qualitative evidence. Furthermore, the high heterogeneity indicates that contextual variables, such as the type of trend, platform design, or cultural norms, were not fully captured in the synthesis.

Future Work

For future works, it is suggested that moderator analyses be carried out to assess the impact of age, gender, content type, and the platform on imitation. Longitudinal studies are also essential to understand whether the imitation seen in social media consistently produces short-term behaviours or becomes notably permanent. Lastly, integrating neuroscientific or psychological metrics into meta-analyses could provide deeper insight into the mechanisms underlying social media-driven imitation in adolescence.

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