

Relationship among Social Media Use, Socio Cultural Norms and Physical Appearance Concerns in Young Female Adults: Role of Digital Media Beauty Standards

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine relationship among Social Media Use, Socio Cultural Norms and Physical Appearance concerns in female adults. A sample of 250 young adult female students was recruited through purposive sampling technique, face-to-face administration of printed questionnaires from Government College Women University Sialkot and the University of Sialkot. Three standardized instruments were used to assess the study variables. The Appearance Social Media Consciousness Scale (ASMC), a 13-item measure, was used to assess concerns related to appearance on social media. The Sociocultural Attitudes toward Appearance Questionnaire 4 Revised (SATAQ-4R-Female), a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was employed to measure internalization of beauty ideals and perceived sociocultural pressure. Physical appearance concerns were assessed using the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS), consisting of 11 items, where higher scores indicate greater appearance-related concerns. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlation. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between social media usage and sociocultural standards ($r = 0.36, p < .01$). Social media usage was also significantly and positively correlated with physical appearance concerns ($r = 0.361, p < .01$). Furthermore, sociocultural standards showed a strong positive correlation with physical appearance concerns ($r = 0.61, p < .01$). The study concludes that young Early adults with greater physical appearance concerns are more strongly influenced by social media and sociocultural beauty standards. A significant relationship exists between social media use, sociocultural standards, and physical appearance concerns. Females who engage more frequently with social media are more likely to internalize societal beauty standards, leading to heightened concerns about their physical appearance compared to those with lower social media usage.

Keywords: *Physical appearance, social media, sociocultural standards, beauty complex, maladaptive thinking, emotional problems, psychological well being*

INTRODUCTION

Many of the studies indicated that, nearly all teenagers (94%) use social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook, and many of them upload "selfies" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Currently, three out of every four young individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 use social media (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). With photographs of real women in a variety of shapes, sizes, ethnicities, ages, etc., the campaign "hopes to remove the excess of these images" (Convertino, et.al,2016). We pick out this study considering the fact that, a discussion of body image and sociocultural standards concerns is often missing from debates about

whether and how social media use affects adolescent mental health. Theoretical viewpoints from the fields of psychological research and other disciplines are included into our developmental-sociocultural framework, which examines how adolescent girls' developmental, sociocultural, and social media experiences are related to physical appearance. Social media considered as the sites or form of communication at which people not only generate but also exchange their ideas and information regarding some topic. The discussion of theoretically based effects of social media puts a heavy emphasis on issues related to body image. According to Wertheim et al. (2009), body image is a multifaceted term with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that can be accurately measured in a number of ways. Social media had an impact on our societal norms and outward look. Theoretical stances and research presented above have significant implications for how social media affects outward appearance. Depending on the sociocultural representation of body image, media usage may promote body satisfaction through two mechanisms: the desire to internalize societal attractiveness and the desire to judge one's own look in comparison to others. Sociocultural standards are the standards that society establishes to control behavior and manners in order to keep the social order (Fardouly et al. 2018). The impact of media on physical appearance was highlighted by sociocultural factors (Botta 1999; Thompson et al. 1999). Social media and issues with body image are strongly linked to these standards. They underline how social media and social comparisons both have an impact on concerns about appearance. Social media is often used to spread cultural norms relating to body image. Adolescence is a time of complex biological, cognitive, and interpersonal changes, and during this time, an appearance culture emerges that establishes normative appearance-related behaviors and reinforces beauty ideals. Peers frequently discuss how to increase their physical attractiveness, which leads to social comparison and exacerbates body image issues. (Jones et al., 2004). Physical appearance refers to a person's phenotype, or outward appearance these are the qualities that is related to a person's body. Our society has placed and set many standards and values regarding appearance, due to which people are concerned about their physique and try to achieve those standards. (Daniels et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

In order to obtain social approval, there's a need to focus on looks and body is compulsory for adolescents. (Clark and Tiggemann, 2008). It has confirmed from many studies that women more intensely feel dissatisfaction regarding their appearance and body (Ferguson C.J. et al., 2011). For some girls, looks is really important. They are heavily impacted by sociocultural norms and social media. For girls, our society has some unjustified standards. Girls should make every effort to follow these ideals.

Social Comparison Theory

The Festinger (1954) social comparison theory connects appearance comparisons to the idea that people use social comparison to evaluate their own social standing in relation to others. Body dissatisfaction has been connected to social comparison in both boys and girls, with particularly strong findings for girls (Jones, 2001). The social comparison theory's initial version postulated that people evaluate their own social and personal worth by how favorably they compare to others. The concept explains how people evaluate how they are doing by comparing their actions, accomplishments, and opinions to those of others. We all evaluate many aspects of our social life by comparing them to celebrities we see in the media, as well as our skills to those of our coworkers. Social comparison theory is one concept that explains our desire to compare ourselves to others. The objectification theory is another initial theory for explaining body dissatisfaction. It argues that girls learn to take on an observer's perspective of their bodies and regularly monitor them or engage in self-objectification in a culture that sexually objectifies women's bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These experiences frequently begin when a girl reaches puberty and her body begins to attract attention from others and become the object of sexualization and investigation, claim

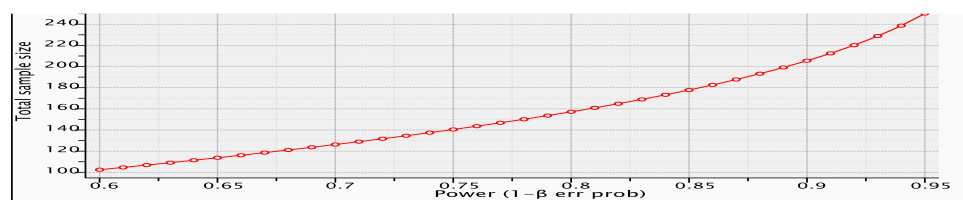
Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). Additionally, they suggested that experiences with sexual objectification and self-objectification may help to explain in part why women experience eating disorders and depression at higher rates than men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Because of this, there are less possibilities to reach peak motivational states, which leads to a decrease in awareness of one's own internal bodily sensations and a rise in feelings of shame, fear, and disdain for oneself. The accumulation of these events is a factor in a number of mental health risks that disproportionately affect women, such as depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction. Before the development of social media, a number of ideas addressed how gender-related sociocultural forces may teach girls to place an excessive emphasis on their physical beauty. For instance, the tripartite influence model of body image suggests that classmates, parents, and the media, three sociocultural influences, influence girls' and women's body image through two main mechanisms: (1) encouraging internalization of the slim ideal, and (2) encouraging appearance comparisons (Thompson et al., 1999). When a person internalizes culturally defined criteria of beauty, which at the time the tripartite model was published placed a heavy emphasis on thinness, this is referred to as internalizing the slim ideal (Thompson et al., 1999). Self-starvation and weight loss for looking attractive leading to characteristics of anorexia nervosa eating disorder. Anorexia has the greatest mortality rate of any mental diagnosis additionally; it may be a very deadly condition. A body mass index (BMI) of 18.5 is common for an adult with anorexia nervosa (a measure of weight for height). Significant anxiety related to gaining weight or becoming obese. Even while some anorexics claim they want to gain weight and are striving to do so, their actions do not support this claim. For instance, they might only consume a modest number of low-calorie foods and engage in vigorous exercise. Some people with anorexia nervosa will also purge or binge eat. Eating disorders develop in girls due to cultural pressure and media. The need to be skinny is one of the messages you hear the loudest. The media's words and images promote the idea that being skinny makes you attractive, happy, and in control of your life. But in reality, happy and successful people come in all different sizes and forms. You hear about many techniques to lose weight in addition to the push to be skinny. When we hear the phrase "going on a diet," we frequently picture cutting back on calories or altering our eating habits in an effort to lose weight. Notably, teenage girls are more likely to use Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, TikTok, as well as other highly visual social media. Teenagers look through extensively edited images of their friends, celebrities, and "influencers." These images and videos frequently show fit, attractive women who are advertising their physical fitness, or they may show ultra-slender, suggestive images of women who are dieting. The emphasis of our study is adolescent girls since young people are frequently driven to use impression control techniques connected to physical attractiveness, particularly girls. Those between the ages of 13 and 18 were shown to be more likely than children between the ages of 8 and 12 to be self-conscious about their appearance. The rate of self-consciousness was highest among adolescent girls (73%), then among teenage boys (69%), younger girls (57%), and younger boys (49%). The study found that 45 million Americans, or 16% of the country's population, reported body dissatisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Current research comprises a cross-sectional research design followed by a quantitative research method.

Sample/Sample Size



Sample size for current research was measured by G-Power calculator analysis. Sample of 250 Early adults was selected. Purposive sampling technique was used for the recruitment of the participants. Participants were recruited from different socioeconomic, educational and vocational backgrounds.

Measures

Three scales were used to assess relationship between social media usage sociocultural standards and physical appearance concerns.

The Appearance Social Media Concerns (ASMC) scale is a 13-item measure that evaluates how concerned emerging adult populations are with their appearance on social media. In the current study, the ASMC demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .88$.

The Sociocultural Attitudes towards Appearance Questionnaire-4R (SATAQ-4R) Female version was used to assess the internalization of societal beauty standards and sociocultural pressure on females. This scale uses a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater internalization of sociocultural norms; it showed good reliability in this study ($\alpha = .91$).

The **Physical Appearance Concerns Scale (PACS)** consists of 11 items measuring the degree of concern about one's physical appearance, with higher scores reflecting greater appearance-related anxiety; the scale demonstrated strong reliability in this sample ($\alpha = .87$). These measures provided a robust assessment of the key constructs under investigation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analyzed by using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Procedure

The present study was conducted following all necessary approvals from the concerned institutions, including Government College Women University Sialkot (GCWUS) and the University of Sialkot (USKT). Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the authors of all standardized scales used in the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, nature, and procedures of the research. All ethical standards as outlined in previously published research on human participants were upheld to ensure the dignity, rights, and welfare of the participants (Abbas et al., 2022; Abbas & Umair Ashraf, 2024). Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and all data were handled in a manner that maintained their anonymity and privacy.

Data collection was carried out systematically, adhering to ethical guidelines and institutional protocols throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Graphical Representation of Demographic Variable Percentage

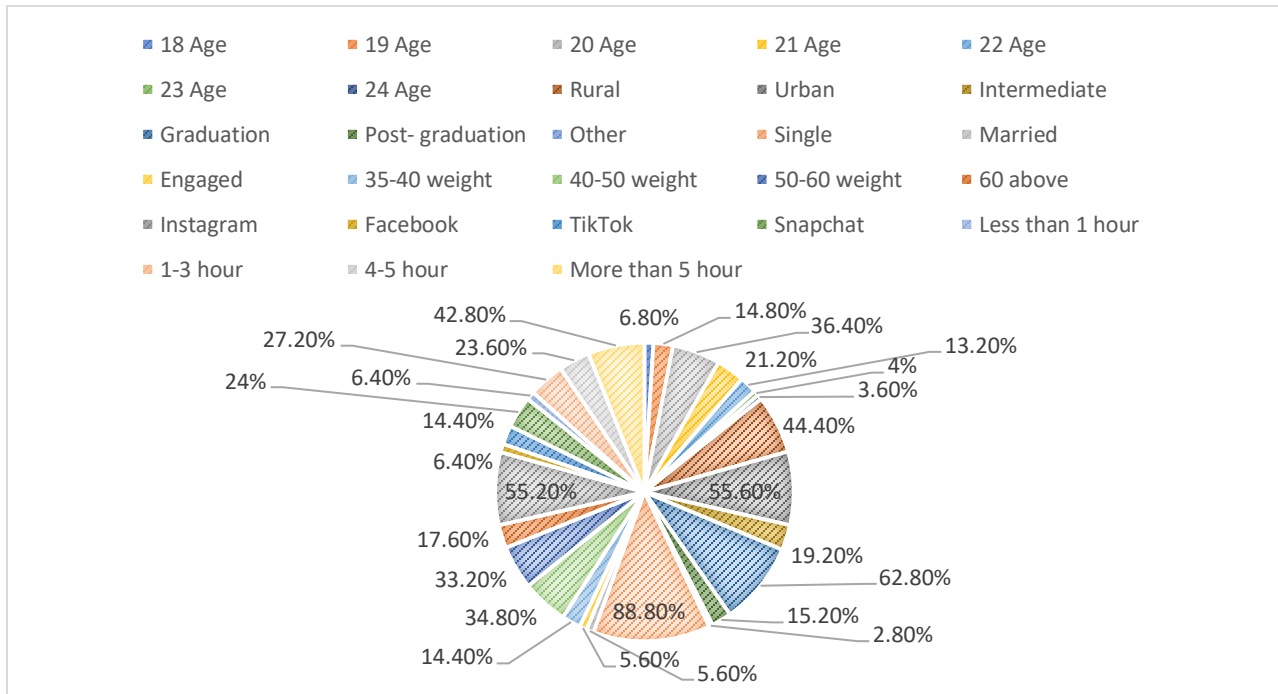


Figure 1 Percentage of Demographic Variables

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of demographic variables, the major findings indicate that the sample predominantly comprised young adults aged between 20 and 23 years, with most participants residing in urban areas and being single. The majority of respondents had attained graduation-level education, reflecting a relatively educated sample. In terms of social media engagement, Instagram emerged as the most frequently used platform, and a substantial proportion of participants reported high daily social media usage, with many spending more than three hours per day and a notable number exceeding five hours daily. Overall, the sample represents urban, educated young women with extensive social media exposure, which is well aligned with the objectives of the study.

Table 1: Correlation among social media use, sociocultural standards and Physical appearance concerns among young female adults (N=250)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
Social Media Use	51.98	17.28	1	0.36**	0.61**
Sociocultural Norms	88.36	20.03	0.38**	1	
Physical Appearance	13.67	11.60	0.38**	0.36**	1

Note: p<0.001

Table 1 shows significant positive correlations among social media use, sociocultural standards, and physical appearance concerns among young female adults (N = 250). Social media use was moderately and positively correlated with sociocultural standards ($r = .36, p < .001$) and strongly correlated with physical appearance concerns ($r = .61, p < .001$). Sociocultural standards were also positively associated with physical appearance concerns ($r = .36, p < .001$). These findings indicate that higher social media use and stronger endorsement of sociocultural standards are associated with greater concerns about physical appearance among young female adults.

Table 2: Correlation among social media use, sociocultural standards and Physical appearance concerns among young female adults (N=250)

Variables	SE(B)	β	t	P	95%CI
Constant	2.74	-20.24	-7.39	.000	(-25.64-14.85)
Social Media use	0.04	0.11	3.07	.000	(0.06-0.81)
Sociocultural Norms	0.03	0.32	10.41	.000	(0.26-0.39)

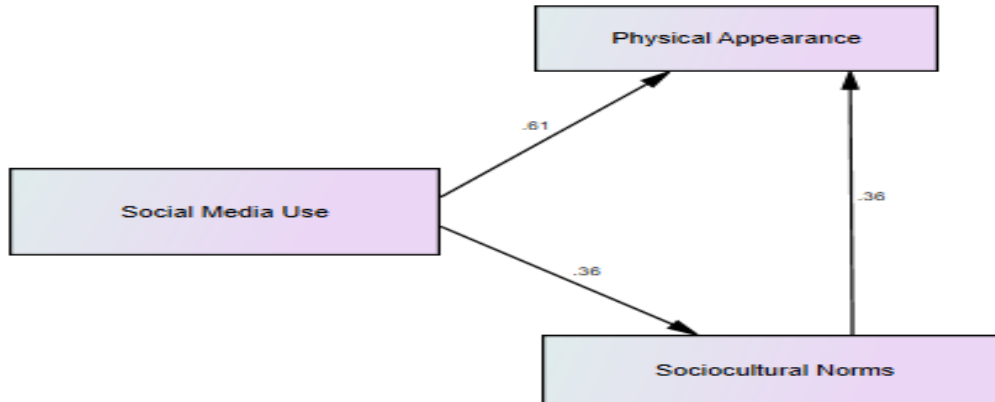
Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; SE(B) = standard error of unstandardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval. Dependent variable = Physical Appearance Concerns. $p < .001$

ModelFit:

$R = .66, R^2 = .44, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .43, \Delta R^2 = .44, F(2, 247) = 97.12,$

Table 2 elucidates the multiple regression model predicting physical appearance concerns was statistically significant, $F(2, 247) = 97.12, p < .001$, explaining 44% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R = .66, R^2 = .44, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .43$). Both predictors contributed significantly to the model. Sociocultural norms emerged as a strong positive predictor of physical appearance concerns ($\beta = .32, t = 10.41, p < .001$), indicating that greater internalization of sociocultural standards was associated with higher appearance concerns. Social media use also significantly predicted physical appearance concerns, though with a smaller effect size ($\beta = .11, t = 3.07, p < .001$). Overall, the findings suggest that sociocultural norms play a more prominent role than social media use in explaining physical appearance concerns among young female adults.

Model Diagram



Structural Pathways

Figure 2 Structural Analysis

Figure 2 demonstrates that sociocultural norms partially mediate the relationship between social media use and physical appearance concerns, as both direct and indirect paths are statistically meaningful.

Table 3 presents Structural Paths

Structural Paths				
Path	Estimates/Effets	SE	P	95% CI
Social Media Use → Sociocultural Standards (Indirect Effect)	$\beta = .36$.05	.000	(.49-.73)
Sociocultural Standards → Physical Appearance (Indirect Effect)	$\beta = .36$.04	.000	(.08-.19)
Social Media Use → Physical Appearance (Direct effect)	$\beta = .61$.06	.000	(.62-.86)

Table 3 presents the structural and mediation analyses revealed significant effects among social media use, sociocultural standards, and physical appearance concerns. Social media use demonstrated a significant indirect effect on sociocultural standards ($\beta = .36$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI (.49-.73), indicating that higher levels of social media use were associated with stronger endorsement of sociocultural standards. In turn, sociocultural standards showed a significant indirect effect on physical appearance concerns ($\beta = .36$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI (.08-.19), suggesting that greater internalization of sociocultural norms was related to increased concerns regarding physical appearance. Additionally, social media use exerted a strong and significant direct effect on physical appearance concerns ($\beta = .61$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI (.62-.86). The confidence intervals for both indirect and direct effects did not include zero, confirming the statistical significance of these pathways. The persistence of a significant direct effect alongside significant indirect effects indicates partial mediation, suggesting that sociocultural standards explain part, but not all, of the relationship between social media use and physical appearance concerns.

Summary

Overall, these findings provide empirical support for the proposed structural model and underscore the role of sociocultural standards as a key psychological mechanism linking social media use to physical appearance concerns among young female adults.

Table 4 Model Fit indices

Model Fit Indices	SE	Model fit
χ^2 / df	2.10	< 3
CFI	.95	≥ .90
TLI	.94	≥ .90
RMSEA	.06	≤ .08
SRMR	.05	≤ .08

Note:SMU = **Social Media Use**; SS = **Sociocultural Standards**; PAC = **Physical Appearance Concerns**.

Table 4 presents the hypothesized model demonstrated a good fit to the data. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio was 2.10, indicating an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df < 3$). The comparative fit index (CFI = 0.95) and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI = 0.94) exceeded the recommended cutoff of 0.90, suggesting excellent incremental fit. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.06) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR = 0.05) were below the recommended thresholds of 0.08, indicating a close fit between the model and the observed data. Overall, these indices suggest that the model adequately represents the relationships among the observed variables.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationships among social media use, sociocultural standards, and physical appearance concerns among young female adults. The sample predominantly consisted of young Early adults aged 20–23 years, residing in urban areas, mostly single, and having attained a graduate-level education, reflecting a relatively educated cohort with extensive exposure to social media, particularly Instagram, where many participants reported spending more than three hours daily, and some exceeding five hours. Correlation analyses revealed significant positive associations among social media use, sociocultural standards, and physical appearance concerns. Specifically, social media use was moderately associated with sociocultural standards ($r = .36, p < .001$) and strongly related to physical appearance concerns ($r = .61, p < .001$), while sociocultural standards were also positively correlated with physical appearance concerns ($r = .36, p < .001$). These results are consistent with international research, social media use are linked to increased self-objectification and body image distress (e.g., heightened body surveillance and appearance comparison tendencies) in female users (Twenge & Martin, 2025; meta-analytic evidence noted in the literature review). Locally, studies within Pakistani samples have similarly documented that frequent social media use predicts body dissatisfaction and negative body image perceptions among young women (e.g., Bilal et al., 2021; Akram et al., 2025), highlighting that the digital environment contributes to sociocultural appearance pressures in both Western and South Asian contexts. Multiple regression analyses indicated that sociocultural standards were the strongest predictor of physical appearance concerns ($\beta = .32, p < .001$), whereas social media use also contributed significantly but with a smaller effect size ($\beta = .11, p < .001$), explaining 44% of the variance in physical appearance concerns. The present regression results further showed that sociocultural standards exerted a stronger influence on physical appearance concerns than social media use alone, supporting theoretical perspectives such as

sociocultural and objectification frameworks which argue that internalization of societal beauty ideals mediates the relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2018) Structural equation modeling further revealed that sociocultural standards partially mediated the relationship between social media use and physical appearance concerns. Social media use demonstrated a strong direct effect on physical appearance concerns ($\beta = .61, p < .001$) alongside significant indirect effects via sociocultural standards ($\beta = .36, p < .001$), indicating that while social media directly influences appearance concerns, its impact is also transmitted through the internalization of societal beauty norms. The model exhibited excellent fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.10, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05$), confirming that the hypothesized pathways adequately represented the observed relationships. These patterns echo findings that Instagram and similar platforms can reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and thereby contribute to body dissatisfaction and related harms, such as increased social comparison and endorsement of thin-ideal norms (e.g., Arshad et al., 2025; Akram et al., 2025) These findings are consistent with the sociocultural model of body image, which posits that media exposure reinforces idealized beauty standards, thereby increasing body-related anxiety. Practically, the results highlight the importance of addressing both media literacy and the internalization of sociocultural norms in interventions aimed at reducing appearance-related concerns among young women. Despite these contributions, the study's cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the sample's focus on urban, educated young females may restrict generalizability. Future research could include more diverse populations and employ longitudinal designs to better understand the temporal dynamics of these relationships. Overall, the study provides robust evidence that social media use and sociocultural standards significantly influence physical appearance concerns, with sociocultural norms acting as a key psychological mechanism linking media exposure to body-related anxiety among young female adults.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the present study provides strong evidence that social media use and sociocultural standards significantly influence physical appearance concerns among young female adults. Overall, the findings highlights the complex nexus between digital media exposure and sociocultural pressures, highlighting that young women's appearance-related concerns are influenced not only by online content but also by the broader societal standards they internalize.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study extend the sociocultural and objectification frameworks by providing empirical support for the mediating role of internalized sociocultural standards in the relationship between social media use and physical appearance concerns. The study corroborates prior research demonstrating that media exposure reinforces beauty ideals, which in turn influence body dissatisfaction and self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 1999). These results contribute to the understanding of how contemporary digital platforms act as conduits for societal norms and offer a nuanced perspective on the mechanisms linking social media engagement to body image outcomes in non-Western contexts, such as urban Pakistan.

Practical Implications

The results have important practical implications for interventions targeting body image concerns in young women. Media literacy programs can be designed to foster critical awareness of the unrealistic and often digitally altered beauty standards promoted on social media platforms. Educational and clinical

interventions may incorporate strategies to reduce internalization of sociocultural norms, such as promoting self-compassion, enhancing resilience, and encouraging positive body image. Furthermore, parents, educators, and mental health professionals can be sensitized to the risks associated with excessive social media use and can guide young women in adopting healthier engagement patterns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causal relationships between social media use, sociocultural norms, and appearance concerns. Studies could expand the sample to include rural populations, males, and individuals from diverse educational backgrounds to enhance generalizability. Interventions could be developed and empirically tested to mitigate negative body image outcomes, focusing on both social media behavior and the internalization of societal beauty ideals. Additionally, qualitative studies could provide richer insight into how young women interpret and negotiate appearance-related messages in digital media.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, and findings reflect associations rather than temporal or causal pathways. The sample was limited to urban, educated young females, which may constrain generalizability to other demographic groups. Self-report measures were used, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in reporting social media use.

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