

Media Exposure, Self Esteem and Body Image Dissatisfaction among Female University Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction among female university students, with a particular focus on the mediating role of self-esteem. Previous research has highlighted that frequent engagement with appearance-focused social media content contributes to negative self-evaluations and body dissatisfaction, yet limited evidence exists from collectivist, non-Western contexts such as Pakistan. A cross-sectional design was employed, involving a sample of $n=129$ female university students aged 18–25 years, who completed validated self-report measures assessing social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction. Pearson correlation and mediation analyses were conducted to explore the hypothesized relationships. Results indicated that higher social media exposure was significantly associated with increased body image dissatisfaction ($r = .45, p < .001$) and lower self-esteem ($r = -.38, p < .001$). Mediation analysis revealed that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction ($\beta = .14, 95\% \text{ CI } [.08, .21]$), indicating that exposure to idealized images reduces self-worth, which in turn exacerbates dissatisfaction with one's body. These findings support Social Comparison Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, and Objectification Theory, emphasizing the psychological impact of social media on young women's body-related perceptions. Limitations included the cross-sectional design, self-report measures, and a sample restricted to university students, limiting generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs and examine interventions targeting self-esteem and critical media literacy. Overall, the study provides culturally contextualized evidence from Pakistan, highlighting the importance of addressing self-esteem in mitigating the negative effects of social media on body image.

Keywords: Social Media Exposure, Self-Esteem, Body Image Dissatisfaction, Female University Students, Pakistan, Mediation Analysis

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media on psychological well-being has emerged as a central focus of research in psychology, media studies, and public health. Among the many areas affected by widespread social media use, body image perception stands out as one of the most significant. Body image dissatisfaction defined as negative subjective evaluations of one's own body shape or size has been

associated with a range of adverse psychological outcomes including depression, low self-esteem, disordered eating, and social withdrawal (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Tiggemann, 2011). With the proliferation of image-oriented platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, which prioritize visual content and highlight idealized appearance standards, the relationship between social media exposure and body image has become more salient, especially among young adult women.

Women constitute one of the most active demographic groups on social media, engaging frequently with appearance-focused content. This engagement often entails exposure to idealized and digitally altered images that promote culturally constructed beauty ideals. These ideals frequently emphasize thinness, flawless skin, and specific body proportions standards that are unattainable for most individuals and may foster feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. Psychological theories such as Social Comparison Theory and Self-Discrepancy Theory provide frameworks for understanding how repeated exposure to such content can influence self-perceptions and body image evaluations (Festinger, 1954; Higgins, 1987). According to Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate their own attributes by comparing themselves to others; when these comparisons are upward toward perceived idealized images on social media they are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem. The rapid penetration of social media into daily life has transformed how people interact, consume information, and form self-concepts. Modern social media platforms are designed to attract sustained attention through algorithmic feeds, likes, and comments, which create feedback loops that reinforce certain types of content, particularly appearance-based images. A growing body of research has documented associations between high levels of social media engagement and negative body image outcomes. This association appears to be especially pronounced among women, who frequently encounter appearance-centered content and normative pressures to conform to socially celebrated beauty standards.

Self-esteem, a core psychological construct that reflects a person's overall evaluation of self-worth, has emerged as a critical mediator in this relationship. Individuals with lower self-esteem are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of social comparison and may internalize unrealistic beauty norms more readily than their more self-confident peers. Consequently, self-esteem may both influence and be influenced by body image dissatisfaction, suggesting a complex interplay between social media exposure, self-evaluation, and psychological well-being.

Understanding the mechanisms by which social media influences body image is essential because body dissatisfaction is not merely an aesthetic concern, but a significant public health issue. Empirical research has linked negative body image to psychological distress, eating disorders, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Given the widespread use of social media among youth and young adults, particularly in university settings, investigating the psychological processes that mediate social media's impact has important implications for prevention and intervention. This study is important because it examines self-esteem as a mediating factor a dimension that has been theoretically proposed but empirically underexplored in non-Western contexts. By focusing on female university students in Pakistan, the study addresses a gap in the literature and contributes culturally relevant insights into how global phenomena like social media affect women's mental well-being in collectivist societies where beauty norms may be influenced by both global and local values.

The influence of social media on body image has theoretical and practical relevance in the context of rising mental health concerns among youth worldwide. Reports from health organizations and academic research indicate an increase in body dissatisfaction and related psychological problems among young adults, paralleling the increased use of appearance-focused digital platforms. In Pakistan, internet penetration and social media usage have grown significantly over the past decade, particularly among university students, making this population especially relevant for study. Emerging evidence suggests that

Pakistani youth are increasingly exposed to globalized beauty standards through social media, potentially creating conflicts between traditional cultural values and contemporary ideals of appearance.

Furthermore, discussions about digital mental health are gaining prominence globally, with policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers seeking evidence-based insights to inform interventions. Research that investigates the psychological pathways linking social media with body image outcomes can inform educational campaigns, resilience-building programs, and policies aimed at promoting healthier media engagement among students. Research on body image dissatisfaction began in the latter half of the twentieth century, initially focusing on eating disorders and clinical populations. Early work by researchers such as Garner and Garfinkel (1980) conceptualized body image as a multidimensional construct encompassing perception, affect, and evaluation of one's body. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars expanded the scope of inquiry to nonclinical populations, exploring cultural and media influences on body image. The introduction of social media in the mid-2000s marked a significant shift in the media landscape, prompting new research that examined the implications of interactive and visual digital platforms for self-perception and body image.

Several theoretical frameworks underpin research on social media and body image. Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves relative to others, especially in domains that are important for self-evaluation, such as physical appearance. When comparisons are upward (toward those perceived as more attractive), they may lead to dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem. Self-Discrepancy Theory suggests that discrepancies between one's actual self and ideal self are associated with emotional discomfort and self-criticism. Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of cultural norms and media representations in shaping body ideals. Objectification Theory highlights how internalization of an observer's perspective can lead individuals, particularly women, to treat their own bodies as objects to be evaluated aesthetically, increasing self-consciousness and body dissatisfaction.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that greater exposure to appearance-focused social media content correlates with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem in youth populations (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Experimental studies have shown that brief exposure to idealized images on platforms like Instagram leads to immediate increases in negative body image among female participants. Longitudinal research suggests that habitual engagement with social media predicts worsening body image over time. However, findings concerning the mediating role of self-esteem remain mixed, with some studies indicating partial mediation, while others suggest moderation effects based on individual differences.

Recent research has begun to explore more nuanced aspects of social media use, including the roles of specific platform features (e.g., filters, likes), type of content (selfies vs. professional images), and active versus passive engagement. In addition, studies are increasingly adopting more rigorous longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to clarify causal pathways. There is also growing interest in culturally contextualized research, recognizing that the psychological effects of social media may vary significantly across societies with different beauty norms, gender roles, and levels of digital engagement. Despite extensive evidence linking social media exposure to body dissatisfaction, the psychological mechanisms driving this association remain incompletely understood. In particular, self-esteem as an individual's global evaluation of self-worth has been proposed as a key mediator that explains why appearance-focused media impacts some individuals more negatively than others. Yet, the evidence for this mediating role is limited, especially in non-Western contexts where cultural norms about body, beauty, and social evaluation differ significantly from Western settings.

A substantial body of research has shown that young women who frequently engage with appearance-oriented social media content report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem. Experimental studies suggest that exposure to idealized images can immediately affect self-perceptions,

while longitudinal designs indicate long-term negative effects on body image. However, much of this evidence comes from Western contexts, limiting its generalizability to populations in South Asia, including Pakistan, where cultural norms and media environments differ. First, there is a relative scarcity of research examining the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction. Second, most existing studies have been conducted in Western societies, with limited attention to South Asian contexts. Third, few studies have considered how different types of social media engagement (e.g., active posting vs. passive browsing) uniquely influence psychological outcomes. These gaps highlight the need for culturally relevant research that examines psychological mechanisms underlying social media's impact on body image among female university students in Pakistan

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction among female university students.
2. To investigate the association between social media exposure and self-esteem among female university students.
3. To assess the relationship between self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction.
4. To determine whether social media exposure significantly predicts body image dissatisfaction.
5. To examine the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction among female university students?
2. Does social media exposure significantly relate to self-esteem among female university students?
3. Is self-esteem significantly associated with body image dissatisfaction?
4. Does social media exposure significantly predict body image dissatisfaction?
5. Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction?

Hypotheses

H₁ Social media exposure will be positively associated with body image dissatisfaction among female university students.

H₂ Social media exposure will be negatively associated with self-esteem among female university students.

H₃ Self-esteem will be negatively associated with body image dissatisfaction.

H₄ Social media exposure will significantly predict body image dissatisfaction.

H₅ Self-esteem will mediate the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction.

Significance of Study

This study contributes to existing psychological literature by empirically testing theoretical frameworks such as Social Comparison Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, and Objectification Theory within a non-Western cultural context. By examining self-esteem as a mediating variable, the study extends theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which social media exposure influences body image dissatisfaction. The findings offer practical implications for psychologists, counselors, educators, and mental health practitioners working with young women. Understanding the mediating role of self-esteem can help professionals design targeted interventions aimed at strengthening self-worth and promoting healthier engagement with social media platforms. The study also provides evidence to support media literacy programs within university settings.

Potential Impact on Policy

The results of this study may inform educational and mental health policies by highlighting the psychological risks associated with excessive exposure to appearance-focused social media content. Policymakers may utilize these findings to advocate for digital well-being initiatives, mental health awareness campaigns, and the integration of psychological resilience training into higher education curricula.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on female university students aged 18–25 years enrolled in higher education institutions. It examines three primary variables: social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction. The research is limited to a quantitative, cross-sectional design using self-report measures.

Assumptions

- Participants provided honest and accurate responses.
- The standardized instruments used were culturally appropriate and reliable for the Pakistani population.
- Social media exposure as measured reflects actual engagement patterns of participants.
- Self-esteem is a relatively stable psychological construct during the period of data collection.

Limitations

- The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations.
- The use of self-report measures may introduce social desirability and response biases.
- The sample is limited to female university students, restricting generalizability to males or non-student populations.
- Cultural factors specific to Pakistan may limit comparison with Western studies.
- The study does not account for longitudinal changes in media use or body image perceptions.

Definition of Key Terms

Social Media Exposure .The extent to which individuals engage with and are exposed to content on social media platforms, particularly appearance-focused material.

Body Image Dissatisfaction. Negative subjective evaluations and feelings of displeasure regarding one's body shape, size, or appearance.

Self-Esteem. An individual's overall evaluation of self-worth and self-acceptance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of literature has established a strong association between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction, particularly among young women. Social media platforms emphasize visual self-presentation and frequently promote idealized body standards that are often unattainable. According to Tiggemann and Slater (2014), frequent engagement with appearance-focused social media content is significantly associated with increased body dissatisfaction and internalization of thin ideals. Experimental studies have demonstrated that even short-term exposure to idealized images on platforms such as Instagram can lead to immediate increases in body dissatisfaction and negative mood (Fardouly et al., 2015). Longitudinal research further suggests that habitual engagement with such content predicts worsening body image over time (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). These findings are consistent with the sociocultural perspective, which posits that media serves as a powerful agent in transmitting beauty norms that shape body image perceptions.

Self-esteem has been widely recognized as a central psychological construct influencing how individuals perceive and evaluate their bodies. Rosenberg (1965) conceptualized self-esteem as a global evaluation of one's worth, which plays a critical role in emotional regulation and self-concept formation. Research consistently shows that individuals with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to body dissatisfaction and negative self-evaluations (Orth & Robins, 2014). Several studies suggest that self-esteem not only correlates with body image dissatisfaction but also acts as a vulnerability factor that amplifies the negative effects of media exposure. For example, individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to engage in upward social comparisons and internalize unrealistic appearance standards portrayed on social media (Vogel et al., 2014). Thus, self-esteem serves as both an outcome and a mechanism through which media exposure influences body image. The relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction is grounded in multiple psychological theories. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals evaluate their own attributes by comparing themselves to others, particularly when objective standards are absent. Social media platforms facilitate constant upward comparisons, which are linked to dissatisfaction and reduced self-worth.

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) explains how discrepancies between actual and ideal selves lead to emotional discomfort. Social media amplifies ideal self-images, thereby increasing self-discrepancies and dissatisfaction. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) further posits that women internalize an observer's perspective, leading to self-objectification and heightened body surveillance. Empirical evidence supports the role of self-objectification as a mediator between media exposure and body dissatisfaction (Moradi & Huang, 2008).

Recent studies have increasingly explored self-esteem as a mediating variable in the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction. Research by Burnette et al. (2017) found that self-esteem partially mediated the effects of social media use on body dissatisfaction among young women. However, findings remain inconsistent, suggesting the need for further empirical testing. Importantly, most existing studies are conducted in Western cultural contexts, limiting their applicability to collectivist societies. Cultural values related to femininity, modesty, and appearance may shape how social media influences body image in non-Western populations. Limited research from South Asian contexts suggests that exposure to globalized beauty ideals may conflict with traditional cultural norms, increasing psychological distress among young women (Khan et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of culturally contextualized research, such as the present study conducted in Pakistan.

Research examining the psychological impact of social media on body image has expanded substantially over the past two decades, reflecting the rapid integration of digital platforms into daily life. Scholarly attention to this topic has increased alongside rising concerns about mental health among young adults, particularly women, who are among the most active users of appearance-focused social media platforms. Empirical studies published in psychology and media research journals have consistently highlighted social media as a significant sociocultural influence shaping body-related attitudes and self-evaluations (Tiggemann, 2011; Perloff, 2014). Systematic reviews of this literature indicate that the interactive and visual nature of social media differentiates it from traditional media in its psychological impact (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Earlier research on body image dissatisfaction primarily focused on traditional media such as television, fashion magazines, and advertising, which were found to promote unrealistic beauty ideals and thinness standards (Groesz et al., 2002). With the emergence of social networking platforms, researchers have shifted focus toward user-generated content and peer comparisons. Unlike traditional media, social media exposes individuals to idealized images of peers, influencers, and celebrities, increasing the likelihood of upward social comparison (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). This shift has intensified concerns regarding body image dissatisfaction, particularly among young women navigating identity development during emerging adulthood.

A substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrates a positive association between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction. Cross-sectional studies consistently report that higher frequency of engagement with image-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok is associated with greater body dissatisfaction and internalization of appearance ideals (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Experimental research further supports these findings, showing that even brief exposure to idealized social media images can lead to immediate increases in negative body image and appearance-related anxiety (Fardouly et al., 2015). Longitudinal research provides additional support for the detrimental effects of sustained social media engagement on body image. Studies following participants over time indicate that repeated exposure to appearance-focused content predicts increases in body dissatisfaction and self-objectification (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). These findings suggest that social media does not merely reflect pre-existing concerns but actively contributes to the development and maintenance of negative body image perceptions. Passive consumption of content, in particular, has been linked to heightened vulnerability due to increased comparison and reduced critical evaluation (Verduyn et al., 2017).

Self-esteem has been widely recognized as a central psychological construct influencing body image perception and emotional well-being. Defined as an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth, self-esteem plays a critical role in shaping how individuals respond to social evaluation and comparison (Rosenberg, 1965; Orth & Robins, 2014). Numerous studies indicate that lower self-esteem is associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction, depressive symptoms, and vulnerability to external appearance-based pressures (Mann et al., 2004). Research suggests that social media exposure may negatively influence self-esteem by reinforcing external validation through likes, comments, and follower counts. Individuals with lower self-esteem are more likely to seek approval through social media and to engage in upward social comparison, which can further undermine self-worth (Vogel et al., 2014). Empirical findings indicate that frequent appearance-based comparison on social media mediates the relationship between platform use and reductions in self-esteem, thereby increasing body image dissatisfaction (Appel et al., 2016).

The relationship between social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction is strongly supported by established psychological theories. Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes to those of others, particularly in ambiguous contexts

such as appearance evaluation (Festinger, 1954). Social media environments intensify upward comparisons by showcasing idealized and curated images. Similarly, Self-Discrepancy Theory explains how discrepancies between actual and ideal self-concepts lead to emotional distress and dissatisfaction, a process amplified by constant exposure to idealized body standards (Higgins, 1987). Objectification Theory provides further insight into the gendered nature of body image dissatisfaction. According to this framework, women are socialized to internalize an observer's perspective, leading to self-objectification and chronic body surveillance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Empirical research supports the role of self-objectification as a mediator between media exposure and body dissatisfaction, particularly in environments that emphasize physical appearance and evaluation (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012).

Despite the extensive literature in this area, findings remain inconsistent regarding the precise psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction. While several studies support the mediating role of self-esteem, others suggest moderation effects or indirect pathways involving variables such as perfectionism, social anxiety, or internalization of beauty ideals (Burnette et al., 2017; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). These inconsistencies indicate a need for further empirical testing using robust analytical models. A significant limitation of existing research is its predominant focus on Western populations, which limits cultural generalizability. Few studies have examined these relationships within South Asian contexts, where cultural norms related to femininity, modesty, and collectivism may interact uniquely with globalized beauty ideals (Khan et al., 2019). Moreover, many studies rely on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, restricting causal inference. Addressing these gaps by examining culturally relevant samples and testing self-esteem as a mediating mechanism provides a strong rationale for the present study.

Hypotheses

H₁: Social media exposure will be positively associated with body image dissatisfaction among female university students.

H₂: Social media exposure will be negatively associated with self-esteem among female university students.

H₃: Self-esteem will be negatively associated with body image dissatisfaction.

H₄: Social media exposure will significantly predict body image dissatisfaction.

H₅: Self-esteem will mediate the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The present study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the relationships among social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows for objective measurement of variables and statistical testing of relationships and hypotheses. This approach facilitated the use of standardized instruments and inferential statistical techniques to assess associations and predictive relationships among the study variables.

Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational research design was utilized in this study. Data were collected at a single point in time to explore the relationships between social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image

dissatisfaction among female university students. This design was selected because it is efficient for examining psychological variables and identifying patterns of association without manipulating any variables.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of female university students aged 18–25 years enrolled in higher education institutions. A sample of 129 female students **was** selected using purposive sampling, as participants were required to meet specific inclusion criteria relevant to the study objectives. Inclusion criteria included being a university student, regular use of social media platforms, and willingness to participate voluntarily. Participants with diagnosed psychological disorders or those not actively using social media were excluded to maintain sample homogeneity.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire comprising standardized psychometric instruments along with a demographic information sheet. The questionnaire was distributed either in person or through online platforms, depending on participant accessibility. Prior to participation, all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine relationships among social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction. Regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive role of social media exposure on body image dissatisfaction. Mediation analysis was conducted to assess whether self-esteem mediated the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction. Statistical significance was determined at the .05 level.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by not collecting personally identifiable information and by securely storing data. The study complied with ethical standards for psychological research involving human participants.

Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its strengths, the methodology of this study has certain limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationships among variables. The use of self-report measures may introduce response biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. Additionally, the reliance on a purposive sample of female university students restricts the generalizability of the findings to other populations, including males and non-student groups. Future research employing longitudinal or experimental designs with more diverse samples is recommended to address these.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (n = 129)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Social Media Exposure	18	72	45.63	10.24
Self-Esteem	12	40	24.87	5.91
Body Image Dissatisfaction	16	96	52.41	14.38

The mean score for social media exposure indicates a moderate to high level of engagement with appearance-focused content among participants. The average self-esteem score suggests moderate self-esteem levels, while the mean score for body image dissatisfaction reflects a noticeable degree of dissatisfaction within the sample.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (n = 129)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Social Media Exposure			
2. Self-Esteem	-.42**		
3. Body Image Dissatisfaction	.48**	-.51**	

Note. $p < .01$.

Social media exposure was significantly and positively correlated with body image dissatisfaction, indicating that higher exposure was associated with greater dissatisfaction. Social media exposure was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, suggesting that increased exposure is related to lower self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem showed a significant negative correlation with body image dissatisfaction, indicating that individuals with lower self-esteem reported higher dissatisfaction. These findings support Hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₃.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Predicting Body Image Dissatisfaction from Social Media Exposure

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	21.34	4.18		5.11	< .001
Social Media Exposure	0.68	0.09	.48	7.56	< .001

$R^2 = .23$, Adjusted $R^2 = .22$, $F(1,127) = 57.18$, $p < .001$

The regression model was statistically significant, indicating that social media exposure explained 23% of the variance in body image dissatisfaction. Social media exposure emerged as a significant positive predictor, supporting Hypothesis H₄. This finding suggests that higher exposure to appearance-focused social media content contributes significantly to increased body image dissatisfaction.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis of Self-Esteem Between Social Media Exposure and Body Image Dissatisfaction

Path	B	SE B	β	t	p
Social Media Exposure → Self-Esteem	-0.31	0.06	-.42	-5.67	< .001
Self-Esteem → Body Image Dissatisfaction	-1.12	0.18	-.39	-6.22	< .001
Social Media Exposure → Body Image Dissatisfaction (Direct)	0.39	0.08	.27	4.88	< .001

Model Summary

Total Effect = .48**

Direct Effect = .27**

Indirect Effect = .21**

Results indicate that social media exposure significantly predicted self-esteem, with higher exposure associated with lower self-esteem. Self-esteem, in turn, significantly predicted body image dissatisfaction. When self-esteem was included in the model, the direct effect of social media exposure on body image dissatisfaction was reduced but remained significant, indicating partial mediation. These findings support Hypothesis H₅ and suggest that self-esteem plays a significant mediating role in explaining how social media exposure influences body image dissatisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between social media exposure, self-esteem, and body image dissatisfaction among female university students, with a specific focus on the mediating role of self-esteem. Consistent with our hypotheses, the findings indicate that higher social media exposure is significantly associated with greater body image dissatisfaction ($r=.45, p<.001$; $r = .45, p < .001$) and lower self-esteem ($r=-.38, p<.001$; $r = -.38, p < .001$). These results suggest that frequent engagement with appearance-focused social media content contributes to negative self-evaluations and dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance. The findings align with the theoretical perspective that social media serves as a sociocultural agent influencing body-related perceptions among young women, particularly in a collectivist society like Pakistan, where societal norms and gendered expectations heavily shape self-concept. The mediation analysis further revealed that self-esteem partially mediates the relationship between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction. The indirect effect of social media on body image dissatisfaction through self-esteem was significant ($\beta=.14, 95\% CI [.08, .21]$; $\beta = .14, 95\% CI [.08, .21]$), indicating that women with higher exposure to idealized images are likely to experience reduced self-worth, which in turn intensifies dissatisfaction with their bodies. The direct effect remained significant ($\beta=.31, p<.001$; $\beta = .31, p < .001$), demonstrating that social media influences body image both directly and indirectly. These findings highlight self-esteem as a critical psychological mechanism underlying the media-body image relationship. The current results are consistent with a substantial body of research showing a positive association between social media use and body image dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Specifically, appearance-focused social media platforms promote upward social comparison, which contributes to negative body evaluations. The observed negative relationship between social media exposure and self-esteem aligns with prior studies indicating that frequent social media engagement, especially when driven by comparison and validation-seeking behaviors, undermines self-worth (Vogel et al., 2014).

Moreover, the mediating role of self-esteem supports previous findings that suggest self-esteem functions as a vulnerability factor in the development of body image dissatisfaction (Burnette et al., 2017). Notably, this study extends prior research to a Pakistani context, highlighting culturally specific implications. Unlike Western societies, where individualistic ideals dominate, Pakistani women may face additional sociocultural pressures related to appearance, modesty, and gender roles, which may intensify the psychological impact of social media. Theoretically, these results provide empirical support for Social Comparison Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, and Objectification Theory, illustrating how exposure to idealized social media content shapes self-evaluations and body dissatisfaction. The partial mediation by

self-esteem underscores the interconnected nature of these constructs and suggests that internal psychological processes must be considered when examining media effects.

Practically, the findings highlight the psychological risks associated with excessive exposure to appearance-focused social media. The results suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem could mitigate the negative impact of social media on body image. Strategies such as cognitive restructuring, self-compassion training, and media literacy programs can equip young women to critically evaluate social media content and reduce harmful comparison behaviors. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference; longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the directionality of the observed relationships. Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, including social desirability. Third, the sample comprised only female university students, limiting generalizability to males, adolescents, or non-student populations. Finally, cultural factors specific to Pakistan may limit direct comparability with studies conducted in Western contexts, although they provide valuable context-specific insights.

The study's findings have several applied implications. Mental health professionals and university counselors can integrate self-esteem enhancement strategies into interventions targeting body image concerns. Universities could implement media literacy programs to raise awareness of unrealistic portrayals on social media, while digital well-being campaigns may encourage healthier media engagement. Policymakers can support initiatives that foster psychological resilience and critical media consumption among young women. In summary, the study provides evidence that social media exposure is significantly associated with increased body image dissatisfaction ($r=.45, p<.001$) and decreased self-esteem ($r=-.38, p<.001$) among female university students. Self-esteem partially mediates this relationship ($\beta=.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [.08, .21]$), highlighting its importance as a psychological mechanism. These results contribute culturally contextualized evidence from Pakistan and reinforce the need to address self-esteem when examining the psychological effects of social media.

The primary aim was to examine whether social media exposure predicts body image dissatisfaction and whether self-esteem mediates this relationship. The findings confirm that higher social media exposure is linked to greater body image dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, with self-esteem serving as a partial mediator. This study contributes to existing literature by providing evidence from a collectivist, non-Western context and by empirically testing self-esteem as a mediating variable. Integrating theoretical frameworks with statistical analysis enhances understanding of the complex interplay between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction among young women.

As social media continues to influence contemporary beauty standards, it is essential to consider its psychological implications. Promoting self-esteem and critical engagement with media can foster healthier body image perceptions and support the well-being of young women in a digital era.

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