

Perceived Social Media Appearance Pressure, Body Image Concerns, and Distress Tolerance Among Working Women in Pakistan: A Cross-Sectional Mediation Study

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms expose working women to sustained idealized appearance content, generating a form of perfection pressure with measurable psychological consequences. This cross-sectional study examined whether perceived social media appearance pressure (SMAP) predicts body image concerns (BIC) and distress tolerance (DT) in working women in Pakistan (N = 240; Mage = 31.4, SD = 5.6), and whether BIC mediates the SMAP–DT relationship. Data collection was conducted between March and July 2023. The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4) social media subscale, Body Shape Questionnaire-8C (BSQ-8C), and Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS) were administered via an online survey. Hierarchical multiple regression and bootstrapped mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4; 5,000 iterations) were conducted, with age and daily social media use as controls. SMAP was significantly associated with BIC ($\beta = .52, p < .001, R^2 = .31$) and DT ($\beta = -.38, p < .001$). BIC partially accounted for the SMAP–DT association in a pattern consistent with mediation (indirect effect $b = -.18, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.27, -.09]$; $\kappa^2 = .21$), with the direct effect remaining significant ($b = -.22, p = .004$). Findings indicate that social media appearance pressure is associated with reduced distress tolerance partly through its association with body image concerns, and partly through mechanisms beyond appearance alone. Implications for DBT-informed clinical interventions, workplace wellness programs, and future longitudinal research are discussed.

Keywords: *social media appearance pressure, body image concerns, distress tolerance, working women, Pakistan, mediation, SATAQ-4, DBT*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between social media use and psychological well-being in women has received growing empirical attention over the past decade. What began as a research concern primarily centred on adolescent girls has expanded meaningfully to encompass adult women, including those in professional employment — a group whose social media engagement is substantial, whose psychological vulnerability to appearance-related pressure has been documented, and whose clinical needs remain comparatively underserved in the literature. Pakistan's social media user base crossed 49 million active users in 2023, with women representing a rapidly growing share of that population (DataReportal, 2023). For working women navigating the compounded demands of formal-sector employment, culturally prescribed domestic responsibility, and an intensifying digital environment, the psychological stakes of that engagement are meaningful and largely unexamined.

Social media platforms do not simply distribute content — they curate and amplify it according to algorithmic logics that systematically favour idealized, aspirational imagery. The result is that women who use Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook encounter, with regularity and at volume, images of physical perfection — filtered skin, sculpted bodies, and effortlessly arranged lives — that bear increasingly little relationship to the ordinary range of human appearance and experience (Fioravanti et al., 2022). The psychological consequences of chronic exposure to this content are not trivial. A growing experimental literature confirms that even brief exposure to idealized imagery on social media platforms produces reliable, detectable deteriorations in body satisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; de Valle et al., 2021). The mechanism is well-theorized: social comparison processes, specifically upward appearance comparisons, generate a perceived negative contrast between the viewer's actual self and the idealized comparison target, producing body dissatisfaction as a near-automatic output (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014).

The present study is concerned with a specific downstream consequence of this process that has received insufficient attention: the erosion of distress tolerance. Distress tolerance — the capacity to endure and function amid negative emotional states without avoidance or maladaptive responding — is a transdiagnostic clinical variable that occupies a central position in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and has been empirically linked to a broad range of psychopathological outcomes including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance misuse, and non-suicidal self-injury (Leyro et al., 2010; Simons & Gaher, 2005). It is, in simple terms, a core component of psychological resilience. When that capacity is compromised, vulnerability to clinical difficulties increases across multiple domains simultaneously. The question this study takes up is whether the appearance pressure generated by social media environments — and the body image concerns associated with that pressure — represents one pathway through which distress tolerance may be reduced in working women.

This question is theoretically motivated by two independent but complementary literatures. The first is the social media and body image literature, which has established the pathway from social media exposure through appearance comparison and ideal internalization to body dissatisfaction with considerable empirical rigour (de Valle et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 1999). The second is the clinical literature on body dissatisfaction and emotional dysregulation, which has identified robust associations between negative body image and difficulties with emotion regulation — including reduced tolerance for emotional distress (Velazquez et al., 2023; Vartanian et al., 2018). What has not yet been examined is whether these two streams converge: whether body image concerns function as a psychological bridge through which social media appearance pressure impairs distress tolerance. The mediation model proposed in this study represents an attempt to test exactly that connection.

The choice of Pakistani working women as the study population is not incidental. Pakistan's cultural context introduces a set of conditions that are theoretically relevant to the variables under examination but have been underrepresented in the body image and social media literatures, which have been heavily dominated by Western European and North American samples (Grogan, 2021). Pakistani women occupy a cultural field shaped by patriarchal norms that simultaneously celebrate and scrutinize femininity, and that attach particular significance to physical appearance as a marker of social value and marital eligibility (Aksar et al., 2024). Women who work in formal employment in Pakistan navigate an additional layer of scrutiny: their professional presence in public life is itself culturally contested in some contexts, and their appearance and behaviour remain objects of social evaluation in ways that are less marked for their male counterparts (Akbar & Ghazal, 2023). Social media does not exist outside this cultural field. It amplifies existing pressures by providing a highly visible platform on which appearance-based judgments are publicly rendered, and by extending the scope of the social gaze beyond the immediate community to encompass national and global beauty standards simultaneously.

Moreover, the growing penetration of social media in Pakistan has proceeded rapidly and ahead of any institutional response to its psychological implications. There are, at present, no national clinical guidelines addressing social media and body image in Pakistan, no workplace mental health policies that specifically address digital appearance pressure, and very limited empirical literature in clinical psychology that addresses this population with the specificity it warrants. The present study is designed to contribute to that literature in a way that is both theoretically grounded and practically actionable.

It is also worth acknowledging what is novel about the specific three-variable framework tested here. Numerous studies have examined SMAP and BIC in relation to each other. Fewer have examined SMAP and DT. None, to the authors' knowledge, have examined all three in a mediation model in which BIC serves as a mechanism linking SMAP to DT. This gap is particularly significant given that DT is a measurable, modifiable clinical target. If body image concerns function as one pathway linking social media environments to reduced distress tolerance, then interventions that address body image within social media-exposed populations may have effects that extend beyond appearance self-evaluation to the broader domain of emotional regulatory capacity. That is a clinically significant claim, and establishing its empirical foundations is the primary contribution of this study.

Three formal hypotheses are advanced. H1: Social media appearance pressure (SMAP) will be positively and significantly associated with body image concerns (BIC). H2: Social media appearance pressure (SMAP) will be negatively and significantly associated with distress tolerance (DT). H3: Body image concerns (BIC) will partially mediate the relationship between SMAP and DT in a cross-sectional pattern consistent with mediation, such that higher SMAP is associated with higher BIC, which is in turn associated with lower DT, and this pattern holds after controlling for the direct effect of SMAP on DT.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations: Social Comparison Theory

Any adequate account of how social media exposure generates body image concerns must be grounded in social comparison theory. Leon Festinger (1954) proposed that human beings have a persistent, motivationally-driven tendency to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with others. This tendency is engaged most powerfully when objective standards of evaluation are unavailable, which is precisely the epistemic condition that appearance judgments occupy: there is no objectively correct body shape, and so appearance-based self-evaluation is inherently social and relational. Festinger's original formulation identified two directions of comparison — upward (comparing oneself to those perceived as superior) and downward (comparing oneself to those perceived as inferior) — and noted that upward

comparisons tend to produce unfavourable self-appraisals when the gap between self and comparison target is perceived as uncloseable.

Social media has transformed the scale, frequency, and quality of appearance-based social comparison in ways that Festinger could not have anticipated. Prior to social media, women's appearance comparison targets were bounded by their immediate social environment — a constraint that, however psychologically meaningful, at least maintained some correspondence between comparison targets and realistic human appearance. Social media eliminates this constraint. Instagram, TikTok, and similar platforms place algorithmically curated images of physically exceptional individuals — often further enhanced by filters, editing software, and professional photography — in direct visual competition with the viewer's own appearance. The result is a chronic, high-frequency exposure to upward comparison targets who are, almost definitionally, unattainable referents (Vogel et al., 2014). Vogel et al. (2014) demonstrated experimentally that Facebook users who were exposed to attractive others experienced decreased self-evaluations specifically in the domains of physical attractiveness and social appeal. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) extended this to Instagram, finding that exposure to celebrity and peer images produced significant increases in body dissatisfaction and negative affect relative to control conditions involving travel images. These effects emerged within minutes of exposure, suggesting that the upward comparison mechanism is rapid, automatic, and not dependent on effortful cognitive processing.

Sherlock and Wagstaff (2019) examined the association between Instagram use frequency and body image concerns in young adult women and found that passive Instagram scrolling — as opposed to active engagement through posting and interaction — was the stronger predictor of body dissatisfaction. This distinction between passive and active social media use has since been replicated in multiple studies (de Valle et al., 2021) and has important implications for how social media appearance pressure should be conceptualized: it is not merely a function of how much time women spend on these platforms, but of how they engage with the content they encounter.

The Tripartite Influence Model and Internalization

Thompson et al.'s (1999) Tripartite Influence Model provides a structural account of how sociocultural appearance pressures — including media pressure — translate into body dissatisfaction. The model identifies three sources of appearance pressure: family, peers, and media. These sources do not affect body image directly; instead, their effects are mediated through two psychological processes: internalization of thin-ideal standards and appearance-based social comparison. Internalization is the mechanism by which an externally promoted appearance standard comes to function as an internally endorsed value — the individual no longer merely perceives the ideal as externally defined but adopts it as a personal standard against which to evaluate themselves. This transition from external pressure to internal standard is what makes the psychological effects of social media appearance exposure durable and self-reinforcing rather than transient.

Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022) systematically extended the Tripartite model to incorporate social media as a contemporary and increasingly dominant source of appearance pressure. Their developmental-sociocultural framework argues that social media introduces several features that distinguish it from traditional media as a source of appearance pressure. First, social media conflates peer pressure with media pressure: influencers and celebrities are presented in the same format and visual register as personal acquaintances, blurring the distinction between what is aspirational and what is normative. Second, social media pressure is interactive and personalized: algorithmic content curation means that the appearance-related content a user encounters is shaped by her own prior engagement patterns, creating feedback loops that can intensify exposure over time. Third, social media pressure operates continuously and across

multiple contexts simultaneously, without the temporal and spatial boundaries that limit traditional media exposure.

Piccoli et al. (2022) provided empirical support for a serial mediation model in which Instagram use predicted body image concerns through two sequential processes: appearance-related comparisons and internalization of beauty norms. This finding is important for the present study because it confirms that the Tripartite model's mediating mechanisms are empirically operative in social media contexts specifically — not merely in the context of traditional magazine or television exposure for which the model was originally developed. The SMAP construct used in the present study maps onto the media pressure component of the Tripartite model; BIC represents the downstream body dissatisfaction outcome; and the theoretical argument linking them proceeds through the internalization and comparison mechanisms specified by the model.

Objectification Theory and the Body as a Source of Chronic Distress

Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory offers a complementary account of why social media appearance pressure has consequences that extend beyond body dissatisfaction per se to affect broader psychological functioning. The theory proposes that in societies where women's bodies are routinely treated as objects to be evaluated on appearance criteria, women internalize an external observer's perspective on their own bodies. This process — self-objectification — leads to chronic self-surveillance, body shame, and a disconnection from internal bodily states. The consequences of chronic self-objectification include reduced awareness of internal affective states, a narrowed attentional focus on appearance-relevant information, and — critically for the present study — diminished access to the psychological resources that support emotional regulation.

Social media intensifies self-objectification by providing a continuous stream of appearance-evaluative feedback and an ever-present external gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Each image posted, each comment received, each comparison made contributes to the internalization of an evaluative perspective on the self. For working women in particular, this process is amplified by the fact that their professional appearance is itself a source of social evaluation: they are assessed not only in their personal lives but in professional settings in which physical presentation carries social and economic consequences. This double exposure — personal and professional — means that working women may be more vulnerable to the self-objectification consequences of social media than their non-working counterparts, though this hypothesis has not been directly tested.

The connection between Objectification Theory and distress tolerance operates through the concept of body shame. Body shame — the experience of the self as deficient, inadequate, or objectionable on appearance grounds — is a specific form of shame that is associated with chronic negative affect, ruminative self-focus, and avoidance of emotionally activating situations (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This kind of chronic shame is precisely the aversive affective experience that distress tolerance resources are mobilized to manage. When body shame is sustained and intense, it functions as a continuous drain on the regulatory capacity that distress tolerance represents. The individual learns, gradually and without explicit awareness, that negative emotional states are evidence of personal inadequacy rather than ordinary human experiences to be tolerated and processed. This is the mechanism through which BIC is proposed to mediate the SMAP–DT relationship in the present study.

Distress Tolerance: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Clinical Significance

Distress tolerance was formally operationalized by Simons and Gaher (2005) as an individual's perceived and actual capacity to experience negative emotional or physical states. Their Distress Tolerance Scale

(DTS) conceptualizes the construct across four dimensions. Tolerance refers to the perceived ability to endure distress. Appraisal refers to the subjective evaluation of distress as acceptable or catastrophic — whether negative emotional states are appraised as manageable or as evidence of psychological failure. Absorption refers to the degree of attentional capture by negative emotional states — how much of one's cognitive and attentional capacity is consumed by distress. Regulation refers to the urgency to reduce or escape distress — the degree to which individuals are driven to eliminate negative affect at the expense of more adaptive long-term responses.

Low distress tolerance is not merely a subclinical disposition. Leyro et al.'s (2010) systematic review established robust associations between low distress tolerance and anxiety disorders, major depressive disorder, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and deliberate self-harm. The clinical significance of this finding is that distress tolerance operates as a transdiagnostic mechanism: it influences vulnerability to a wide range of clinical presentations simultaneously rather than predicting any single disorder specifically. This transdiagnostic quality is precisely what makes it a clinically valuable target for intervention. DBT's distress tolerance module, developed by Linehan (2015), includes a structured set of skills — including TIPP (Temperature, Intense exercise, Paced breathing, Paired muscle relaxation), radical acceptance, and turning the mind — that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the clinical consequences of low distress tolerance across multiple populations (Linehan, 2015).

The specific relationship between body image concerns and distress tolerance has been examined in several studies, though not yet in the context of social media exposure specifically. Velazquez et al. (2023) demonstrated that emotion regulation difficulties predicted body dissatisfaction in young adult women, with anger as a specific affective mediator — suggesting that the body image–emotion regulation relationship operates through identifiable affective pathways. Vartanian et al. (2018) demonstrated that norm-based self-evaluations — comparing oneself against an internalized ideal — were more psychologically damaging than direct peer comparisons, precisely because they are self-generated and therefore not attributable to an external source that could be dismissed or discounted. This finding has direct relevance to the internalization mechanism through which SMAP is proposed to affect BIC: once an idealized standard has been internalized, it functions independently of any specific social comparison event and generates ongoing self-evaluative distress.

Social Media, Gender, and Psychological Well-Being in Pakistan

The literature on Pakistani women's engagement with social media and its psychological consequences is growing but remains sparse by the standards of Western research literature. Most existing work takes a sociological or communications studies framing, examining use patterns, gender norms, and digital participation rather than clinical psychological outcomes (Aksar et al., 2024). What this literature establishes clearly, however, is that Pakistani women's social media experiences are shaped by a distinctive configuration of cultural factors that intensify the psychological stakes of appearance-related content.

Aksar et al. (2024) surveyed 240 Pakistani women on social media use and psychological well-being and found that patriarchal social structures moderated the relationship: women embedded in more traditional gender-role expectations reported greater psychological distress as a consequence of social media exposure. The authors argued that social media in Pakistan does not create appearance pressure from outside an existing cultural system; rather, it amplifies pressures that are already structurally present, extending the scope and reach of the social gaze beyond the immediate community. The implication for the present study is that the SMAP–BIC–DT pathway may be stronger in a Pakistani sample than in Western samples not because Pakistani women are psychologically different, but because the cultural environment they inhabit makes appearance-based social comparison more consequential and more difficult to escape.

Akbar and Ghazal (2023) assessed working women in Pakistan using the DASS-21 in the aftermath of COVID-19 and documented elevated stress, anxiety, and depression tied specifically to workplace pressures and the intensification of gender-based challenges in the pandemic period. While their study did not focus on social media specifically, the baseline levels of psychological distress it documented are consistent with the hypothesis that Pakistani working women have constrained psychological regulatory resources — resources that social media appearance pressure may further deplete. This is precisely the configuration of conditions that the present study's hypotheses are designed to test: a population under structural psychological pressure encountering an additional digital stressor, with the consequences registered in a clinically significant variable.

There is also an important specificity to the working women demographic that warrants acknowledgment. Women who work in formal-sector employment in Pakistan occupy a socially contested position: their presence in professional public life is itself a site of cultural negotiation, and their appearance is evaluated against dual standards — the standards of professional competence and the standards of traditional femininity (Akbar & Ghazal, 2023). Social media functions as a space where both sets of standards are simultaneously performed and evaluated. The Instagram feeds of Pakistani working women are populated not only with global beauty ideals but with locally specific ideals of fair skin, appropriate modesty, and domestic capability that global platforms deliver alongside universal appearance norms. This layering of local and global appearance pressures is one of the features that makes this population theoretically interesting and practically important as a focus of clinical research.

Research Gaps and the Present Study

Three specific gaps in the existing literature motivate the present study. First, while the SMAP–BIC relationship has been examined extensively, the extension of this pathway to DT as an outcome has not been tested. DT is a clinically significant variable with well-established consequences for psychopathology, and its inclusion transforms the inquiry from a question about appearance self-evaluation to a question about emotional regulatory capacity — a substantially more clinically actionable outcome. Second, the mediation of the SMAP–DT relationship through BIC has not been examined in any published study. Establishing this pathway would identify a specific mechanism through which social media appearance pressure damages emotional functioning and would provide a clinical rationale for body image interventions as a component of DT-focused treatment. Third, the Pakistani working women population has not been examined within the social media–body image–emotion regulation framework, despite being a population whose cultural context, structural vulnerability, and clinical needs make it a theoretically and practically significant focus of inquiry.

The present study addresses all three gaps simultaneously through a cross-sectional mediation design. The authors acknowledge at the outset — and discuss explicitly in the limitations section — that cross-sectional data support covariance-consistent with mediation rather than mechanistic causal claims in the strict sense (Maxwell & Cole, 2007). The findings are interpreted accordingly, and the discussion explicitly identifies longitudinal and experimental designs as necessary next steps.

METHOD

Participants and Design

A cross-sectional correlational design was used. The sample comprised $N = 240$ working women ($M_{age} = 31.4$, $SD = 5.6$, range = 22–45) recruited between March and July 2023 from formal-sector organizations across Lahore ($n = 98$), Karachi ($n = 84$), and Islamabad ($n = 58$). Sectors represented: education ($n = 67$, 27.9%), healthcare ($n = 51$, 21.3%), marketing and media ($n = 58$, 24.2%), finance and administration ($n =$

41, 17.1%), and information technology ($n = 23$, 9.6%). Mean daily social media use was 3.2 hours ($SD = 1.4$). Marital status: married ($n = 139$, 57.9%), single ($n = 86$, 35.8%), divorced or widowed ($n = 15$, 6.3%). All participants held at minimum a bachelor's degree.

Inclusion criteria: female, formally employed, active social media user (≥ 30 minutes daily on at least one platform), aged 22–45. Exclusion criteria: current psychiatric inpatient status or active psychosis. A priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 indicated that $N = 240$ provides power $> .95$ to detect a medium effect ($f^2 = .15$) at $\alpha = .05$ in a regression model with up to four predictors. As an independent, minimal-risk research project, this study did not receive formal Institutional Review Board or institutional ethics committee approval. The study adhered to internationally accepted ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained digitally from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Measures

Social Media Appearance Pressure (SMAP). The social media pressures subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4; Schaefer et al., 2015) was used. This 5-item subscale assesses perceived pressure from social media to conform to appearance-related standards (e.g., 'I feel pressure from social media to change my appearance'). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = definitely disagree, 5 = definitely agree); higher scores indicate greater perceived pressure. The SATAQ-4 demonstrates strong psychometric properties including factorial validity, convergent and discriminant validity, and cross-sample reliability across multiple cultural contexts (Schaefer et al., 2015). Internal consistency in the present sample: $\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.82$.

Body Image Concerns (BIC). The Body Shape Questionnaire-8C (BSQ-8C; Dowson & Henderson, 2001) assessed body shape-related cognitions and affect over the preceding four weeks. The BSQ-8C is an 8-item abbreviated form of the original BSQ (Cooper et al., 1987) rated on a 6-point Likert scale; higher scores indicate greater concern. A score ≥ 26 indicates clinically significant body image concern. The measure has demonstrated reliability and validity across clinical and non-clinical adult populations. Internal consistency in the present sample: $\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.91$.

Distress Tolerance (DT). The Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS; Simons & Gaher, 2005) is a 15-item self-report measure assessing perceived capacity to tolerate negative emotional states, rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree); higher scores indicate greater tolerance. The DTS comprises four subscales: Tolerance, Appraisal, Absorption, and Regulation. It is the most widely validated self-report measure of distress tolerance, with well-established factor structure and convergent validity across clinical and non-clinical populations (Leyro et al., 2010). Internal consistency in the present sample: $\alpha = .83$, $M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.78$.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Data were collected via an anonymized online survey distributed through organizational HR departments, university alumni networks, and professional associations. Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess common method variance; the single factor accounted for 28.4% of total variance (threshold $< 50\%$), indicating that common method variance was not a primary threat to validity. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and PROCESS macro v4.1 (Hayes, 2018). Descriptive statistics and Pearson intercorrelations were computed first. Hierarchical multiple regression tested H1 (SMAP predicting BIC) and H2 (SMAP predicting DT), with age and daily social media use as Step 1 controls. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were inspected for multicollinearity. Bootstrapped mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4;

5,000 iterations; bias-corrected 95% CIs) tested H3. Consistent with Maxwell and Cole (2007), significant indirect effects are interpreted as cross-sectional patterns consistent with mediation rather than as mechanistic causal claims.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Forty-one percent of participants ($n = 98$) scored at or above the BSQ-8C clinical threshold of 26, indicating clinically significant body image concern. DTS scores fell in the lower-to-moderate range ($M = 2.58$ on a 1–5 scale). All three instruments demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α range .83–.88). Harman's single-factor test yielded a single-factor solution accounting for 28.4% of total variance, below the 50% threshold, suggesting common method variance was not a substantial confound. VIF values in all regression models were below 2.1, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency, and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables ($N = 240$)

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3
1. Social Media Appearance Pressure (SMAP)	3.71	0.82	.88	—		
2. Body Image Concerns (BIC)	3.44	0.91	.86	.54***	—	
3. Distress Tolerance (DT)	2.58	0.78	.83	-.42***	-.48***	—

Note. SMAP = Social Media Appearance Pressure; BIC = Body Image Concerns; DT = Distress Tolerance. All correlations are Pearson r . α = Cronbach's alpha. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

H1: SMAP Predicting Body Image Concerns

Table 2 presents the hierarchical regression predicting BIC. In Step 1, daily social media use was a significant predictor ($\beta = .14$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.19]); age was not ($p = .089$). In Step 2, SMAP was a strong significant predictor ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.70]), accounting for an additional 27% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .27$). The full model explained 31% of variance in BIC, $F(3, 236) = 35.38$, $p < .001$. H1 was supported.

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Body Image Concerns ($N = 240$)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
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Step 1 — Controls: $R^2 = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 237) = 4.91$, $p = .008$

Age	−0.03	0.02	−.08	−1.71	.089	[−0.07, 0.01]
Daily social media use (hours)	0.11	0.04	.14	2.89	.004	[0.03, 0.19]

Step 2 — Social Media Appearance Pressure: $R^2 = .31$, $\Delta R^2 = .27$, $F(1, 236) = 88.42$, $p < .001$

Social Media Appearance Pressure	0.58	0.06	.52	9.40	< .001	[0.46, 0.70]
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Note. SMAP = Social Media Appearance Pressure. Unstandardized (B) and standardized (β) coefficients are reported. 95% CIs are for unstandardized B. VIF < 2.1 for all predictors. Overall model: $R^2 = .31$, $F(3, 236) = 35.38$, $p < .001$.

H2: SMAP Predicting Distress Tolerance

Table 3 presents the hierarchical regression predicting DT. Daily social media use was a significant negative predictor in Step 1 ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .033$). SMAP added significantly in Step 2 ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .14$, 95% CI [−0.50, −0.22]). In Step 3, both BIC ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$) and SMAP ($\beta = -.23$, $p = .004$) remained significant, confirming partial rather than full mediation and providing initial evidence for H3. The full model explained 25% of variance in DT, $F(4, 235) = 19.54$, $p < .001$. H2 was supported.

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Distress Tolerance (N = 240)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Step 1 — Controls: $R^2 = .03$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 237) = 3.72$, $p = .025$						
Age	0.02	0.02	.06	1.31	.192	[−0.02, 0.06]
Daily social media use (hours)	−0.08	0.04	−.10	−2.14	.033	[−0.15, −0.01]
Step 2 — Social Media Appearance Pressure: $R^2 = .17$, $\Delta R^2 = .14$, $F(1, 236) = 39.87$, $p < .001$						
Social Media Appearance Pressure	−0.36	0.07	−.38	−5.36	< .001	[−0.50, −0.22]
Step 3 — Body Image Concerns Added: $R^2 = .25$, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $F(1, 235) = 24.61$, $p < .001$						

Social Media Appearance Pressure	-0.22	0.08	-.23	-2.88	.004	[-0.37,-0.07]
Body Image Concerns	-0.35	0.07	-.41	-4.96	< .001	[-0.49,-0.21]

Note. SMAP = Social Media Appearance Pressure; DT = Distress Tolerance. Step 3 enters SMAP and BIC simultaneously after controls. 95% CIs are for unstandardized B. VIF < 2.1 for all predictors. Overall model: $R^2 = .25$, $F(4, 235) = 19.54$, $p < .001$.

H3: BIC as Mediator of the SMAP–DT Relationship

Table 4 presents the bootstrapped mediation results. The indirect effect of SMAP on DT through BIC was significant ($b = -.18$, Boot 95% CI $[-.27, -.09]$; $\kappa^2 = .21$, indicating a medium effect size), as the CI excluded zero. The direct effect of SMAP on DT remained significant after accounting for BIC ($b = -.22$, $p = .004$, 95% CI $[-.37, -.07]$), confirming partial mediation. BIC accounted for approximately 45% of the total SMAP–DT effect ($P_m = .45$). Following Maxwell and Cole (2007), this pattern is interpreted as cross-sectional evidence consistent with a mediation account, pending longitudinal replication. H3 was supported.

Table 4

Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis: Body Image Concerns as Mediator (PROCESS Model 4; 5,000 Iterations; N = 240)

Path	b	SE	Boot LL	Boot UL	κ^2
<i>Outcome: Body Image Concerns</i>					
a SMAP → BIC (path a)	0.58	0.06	0.46	0.70	—
<i>Outcome: Distress Tolerance</i>					
b BIC → DT (path b)	-0.35	0.07	-0.49	-0.21	—
c SMAP → DT (total effect)	-0.40	0.07	-0.54	-0.26	—
c' SMAP → DT (direct effect)	-0.22	0.08	-0.37	-0.07	—
<i>Indirect Effect</i>					
a×b SMAP → BIC → DT	-0.18	0.05	-0.27	-0.09	.21

Note. SMAP = Social Media Appearance Pressure; BIC = Body Image Concerns; DT = Distress Tolerance. Boot LL and Boot UL = bootstrapped 95% bias-corrected confidence interval lower and upper limits. κ^2 = kappa-squared effect size (Preacher & Kelley, 2011); .21 indicates a medium indirect effect. Indirect effect CIs excluding zero indicate a significant indirect effect. Pm = proportion of total effect mediated = .45.

DISCUSSION

All three hypotheses were supported. SMAP was positively associated with BIC (H1), negatively associated with DT (H2), and BIC partially mediated the SMAP–DT relationship in a pattern cross-sectionally consistent with mediation (H3). The indirect effect was of medium magnitude ($\kappa^2 = .21$), and the direct effect of SMAP on DT remained significant after accounting for BIC, indicating that appearance pressure may be associated with distress tolerance through at least one additional pathway beyond body image concerns alone.

The SMAP–BIC Association

The $\beta = .52$ association between SMAP and BIC is among the stronger effect sizes reported in the social media–body image literature and is consistent with de Valle et al.'s (2021) meta-analytic estimates. Its magnitude in a sample of adult working women — not the adolescent girls who have been the dominant focus of this literature — is notable. It suggests that professional identity and adult developmental status do not substantially buffer the body image consequences of social media appearance pressure. This finding aligns with Objectification Theory's prediction that self-objectification processes, once established, persist across adult developmental contexts (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and with Vogel et al.'s (2014) experimental finding that appearance comparisons in social media contexts produce self-evaluative effects in adult women as reliably as in younger samples.

BIC as a Partial Mediator of DT

The partial mediation finding is theoretically meaningful in two respects. First, the significant indirect effect ($b = -.18$, $\kappa^2 = .21$) supports the proposal that social media appearance pressure is associated with reduced distress tolerance partly through its association with body image concerns that produce sustained shame-based negative affect. Sustained aversive affect of this kind, when not therapeutically processed, functions as a progressive drain on distress tolerance capacity, consistent with Linehan's (2015) account of how chronic invalidating experiences produce distress intolerance over time. Second, the significant residual direct effect ($b = -.22$) indicates that body image concerns are only one of multiple mechanisms through which SMAP reduces DT. The remaining direct effect likely reflects social media's more general perfectionism-inducing effects: pressures not only to have an ideal body but to maintain an idealized professional life, domestic environment, and social presentation simultaneously. This broader perfectionism may drain distress tolerance independently of appearance-specific concerns.

Implications for the Pakistani Cultural Context

The mean DTS score of 2.58 (SD = 0.78 on a 1–5 scale) in this sample is substantially lower than scores reported in Western adult non-clinical samples, where means typically range from 3.2 to 3.8 (Leyro et al., 2010). This is not a statistical accident. It reflects the compounded distress exposure that Pakistani working women face: professional demands, domestic responsibilities, and both global and locally specific social media appearance pressures operating simultaneously within a cultural context that intensifies social scrutiny of women's appearance and behaviour (Aksar et al., 2024). The present findings are consistent with a pathway linking these conditions to clinical psychological functioning.

Limitations and Future Directions

Four limitations require explicit acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design, while adequate for an initial examination of this model, does not permit causal inference. Following Maxwell and Cole (2007), the mediation findings are interpreted as covariance patterns consistent with the proposed model, not as demonstrated causal mechanisms. Longitudinal designs with at least three waves — SMAP measured before BIC, BIC measured before DT — are required to establish temporal precedence. Second, SMAP is measured by a 5-item subscale that captures appearance pressure specifically but does not capture the broader lifestyle and professional perfectionism pressures discussed above as candidates for the residual direct pathway. A more comprehensive measure of social media-driven perfectionism, or a multi-component SMAP measure, would allow the direct and mediated pathways to be disaggregated more precisely. Third, the sample is urban, formally educated, and non-probabilistic, which limits generalizability to rural and informally employed women. Fourth, content-type and engagement mode were not measured; experimental studies manipulating passive versus active social media engagement in Pakistani working women samples would be a valuable next step.

Clinical and Organizational Implications

For clinical psychologists, the findings suggest that assessments of low distress tolerance in working women should include systematic inquiry into social media use patterns and body image concerns. DBT's distress tolerance module (Linehan, 2015) is an evidence-based starting point, and its skills — particularly radical acceptance and TIPP — can be supplemented with body image-specific cognitive restructuring and social media literacy psychoeducation. Group-based delivery formats may be particularly well-suited given that the social comparison processes driving SMAP effects are inherently relational. For organizations, especially in marketing, media, and education sectors, workplace wellness programs should incorporate digital well-being components that address appearance comparison directly. These are most effective when framed as responses to a structurally demanding environment rather than as remediation of individual psychological deficits.

CONCLUSION

This study provides cross-sectional evidence that social media appearance pressure is significantly associated with body image concerns and distress tolerance in working women in Pakistan, and that body image concerns partially account for the relationship between social media pressure and impaired distress tolerance. The findings extend the social media-body image literature into a clinically significant emotional functioning domain and into a cultural context that has been underrepresented in this research area. The identification of BIC as a factor associated with the SMAP-DT relationship, consistent with partial mediation, provides a theoretically coherent and clinically actionable target for intervention. Future longitudinal research is needed to establish causal directionality, and future measurement work should develop a validated, multi-dimensional social media perfectionism scale suitable for use in South Asian cultural contexts.

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