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Understanding How Instagram Usage Influences Self-Image: A Case of Pakistan

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Abstract

Instagram has emerged as a leading social networking platform, particularly favored by young audience due to its free entertainment, ease of use, and opportunities for social interaction. Therefore, this study explores users' attitudes toward beauty trends, social media influencers, and the impact of Instagram on university students' self-perception, especially in terms of comparing themselves to others. The research is conducted with a sample of 50 university students from Lahore, Pakistan, using Structural Equation Modeling. Based on the Self-Perception theory, findings showed that Instagram users usually compared themselves with others, leading to negative feelings about their own lives and self-worth. Moreover, the content related to beauty standards on Instagram tends to make users feel dissatisfied with their appearances. Some users even idolize Instagram celebrities, viewing them as models to emulate, while others regard them as ordinary people. This admiration drives interest in beauty and weight loss products aimed at achieving a celebrity-like appearance. However, the weight loss photos are not particularly motivating, but the images related to workouts tend to inspire users more. The results affirmed that the ideals influence users promoted on Instagram and experience pressure from these ideals, leading to the conclusions drawn in our research.

Keywords: beauty standards, instagram, Pakistan, self-perception, social media usage, structural equation modelling

Introduction

Instagram is a popular and widely preferred social networking website with more than 300 million users worldwide and approximately eighty-one million photos and videos are shared daily. In 2018, Instagram also introduced its blog services and today GTV is another major feature on the

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relevant digital platform. However, today Instagram has reached to 400 million registered account from all over the world, indicating that it is among the top three most preferred social networking sites (Statista, 2024). Besides, more than 76.0% of Instagram users are from different countries and the rest of 24.0% are from the United States.

According to a recent report represented by Statista (2024) revealed that, in 2016 more than 2.6 trillion photos and videos were shared on Instagram. Almost 90.0% of photos and videos were captured and shared through smartphones. It is also notable that Instagram is mainly popular among young generation as the report by Statista (2024) indicated that majority of Instagram users are between 18 to 29 years of age. However, a majority of them appeared to be females. These users like to send and receive videos and photos from their friends and followers by using private or open accounts. The online posted content not only reflects their personal lives, but also their views and opinions regarding the social occurrings, especially about different celebrities, including (Kim & Sin, 2015). Such Instagram-based posts are shared, which sometimes become viral through different techniques, such as hashtags (#) that appear as keywords on Google algorithms and provide access to maximum people. These hashtags are added with the captions on the photo and video (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Hashtags were first used in 2011 along with captions to provide a detailed description about the posts and make them more accessible to the users worldwide. However, the impact of the videos and images posted online is profound having both positive and negative influences on the users (Naqvi et al., 2020).

Similarly, it has been assumed that the young Instagram usage is mainly focused at entertainment, gaining information, and also communicating with the other users. For example, a survey conducted by StatCounter (2020) revealed that there are around 6,786,000 active Instagram users in Pakistani, who mainly use this platform for the communication and entertainment purposes. These potential users are more likely to check and follow the Instagram accounts of popular people and stay updated with their postings. Moreover, the users frequently comment on their posts and follow them regularly (Ting, 2014). This increased usage and curiosity to stay updated raise two major concerns about Instagram usage in Pakistan. First, an increased addiction of social media usage among young generation, and second, these users compare their lives with others that further lead to

several psychological and social consequences (Lockhart, 2019). According to Levine and Murnen (2009), exposure, discussion, and further influence of certain Instagram posts are lethal as several individuals feel self-dissatisfaction and discontent from their personal lifestyles. On the other hand, popular figures or celebrities regularly share their personal photos and videos to keep people updated about their everyday activities. They mainly post about gyms, touring, restaurants, and others avtivities that are sometimes unaffordable for many of the. Notably, existing literature (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Baker et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015) revealed self-expression, self-representation, and vanity are few major purposes behind Instagram usage.

Thus, by keeping in view the growing Instagram usage in Pakistan, this research examined the reasons behind Instagram usage and its impact on the young generation as also investigated by Baker et al. (2019). The primary objective of this research is to examine the relationship among Instagram usage, beauty trends, and the influence of social media influencer on the self-perception of university students in Pakistan.

However, yet no study has examined the phenomenon in Pakistani context that indicated a major study gap in this area. In this regard, the study is formally divided into several different parts as per the research requirements to systematically and empirically analyze the designated study problem. It is particularly crucial to examine how users' attitudes towards beauty trends and social media influencers affect university students' self-perception, especially after comparing themselves with the others. Therefore, the effect of social media on individuals' perceptions of their physical appearance continues to be a significant public health issue in contemporary society (Woodley, 2018).

Literature Review

According to Statista (2024), the proportion of monthly Instagram users have reached to nearly one billion and approximately 500 million daily users across the globe. Today, Instagram is among those social networking platforms that have fastest growing rate of users especially, students at undergraduate, graduate, and post graduate levels are comparatively more into using this platform. In this regard, current reports show that approximately 60.0% of Instagram users are youngsters that are 18 to 29 years old (Hurd, 2019).

Motives behind Instagram Usage

The 2022 Digital Global Overview Report revealed that social networks are predominantly used by individuals aged between 16 to 24, with females averaging 3 hours and 13 minutes daily and males 2 hours and 43 minutes (Zhou et al., 2024). The report highlighted Instagram as the fourth most popular social network worldwide, particularly favored by youngsters. Instagram's success, since its launch in October 2010, can be attributed to its user-friendly features for creating and editing content directly within the app, mainly photographs (Menon, 2022). This data emphasized that young people are the most active demographic on social media, with Instagram being a central part of their daily lives. Also, it indicated that younger users are highly focused on posting photos and seeking feedback on them. Besides understanding why young people are drawn to sharing content on Instagram, it is also essential to explore their behaviour on the platform and the effects of seeking approval and validation from other users (Park & Kim, 2023).

Several studies have highlight different motives behind Instagram usage. As noted by Tarakcı and Yeniçıktı (2017), self-representation and self-expression are two most notable reasons behind Instagram usage among youngsters. Huang and Su (2018) found other different motives including self-representation, social escape, interaction, diversion, social interaction, and staying updated about others life. However, recent literature supported self-representation as the most witnessed motive. Besides, engaging the users with idealistic image of beauty standards also remained as the most prominent motives (Andersson & Swillo, 2018; Baker et al., 2019; Huang & Su, 2018; Sheldon & Newman, 2019).

It is also notable that curiosity is a part of human nature that leads us to stay connected with others, especially through social networking platforms. In this context, Instagram is considered as an ideal place to keep an eye on others life and staying connected without any notable barriers (Koutamanis et al., 2015). Nonetheless, many Instagram users alter their self-perception after comparing themselves with others. Users that frequently use Instagram have comparatively more negative self-perceptions, particularly concerning to their physical appearance, academic performance, and social life (Trifiro, 2018). A study by Lee et al. (2015) examined the impacts of feedback on Instagram posts. Results indicated that the comments and likes strongly affect one's psychological health. It was then concluded that comparisons

and self-perceptions are unhealthy activities, as they may cause body dissatisfaction and even adverse impacts on one's psychological health.

Feedbacks and Self-Perception

It has been observed that videos and other content on Instagram adversely affect the body image of the users, especially women (Lockhart, 2019). The images and videos having fitness and inspiration messages, mainly known as "fitspiration" portray both men and women as thinner and skinny. These images and videos widely spread body image impressions that are mostly unachievable for the spectators (Hurd, 2019). Various studies also witnessed that idealized body images on Instagram have strong negative impact on the psychological health of the individuals. Positing selfies and small videos is a common practice and comparing oneself with the relevant content causes dissatisfaction regarding appearance and decreases self-worth (Mohebi & Bailey, 2020). It is mainly assumed that Instagram is one of those virtual platforms that targets our attention towards self-image, compares us with celebrities, and also indirectly emphasizes us to adopt an ideal lifestyle accordingly. As a result, being Instagram users, we compare ourselves and feel psychological support and confidence when our personal photos and videos are liked and appraised (Lockhart, 2019).

We can also consider Instagram as a cyberspace, which offers options to upload and showcase for self-promotion purposes. As a result, users satisfy their sharing instinct that further brings relevant outcomes (Hassim et al., 2020).

Conceptual Framework

Self-perception theory of communication has provided a strong conceptual support to this study. This theory describes whether and to what extent communication messages help to decode and interpret the social reality. It primarily defines the way people perceived themselves as strongly reliant on the way other people see or perceive them (Bem, 1972; Mohebi & Bailey, 2020). It also assumes that people actively choose the type of media (television, magazines, radio, newspapers, books, and others) and their content to make the social identity. In this regard, self-perception starts to formulate with the beginning of the very first stage of selecting the media. Individuals notice only those things that are different, having a unique identity, and are also consistent with their interests. When they find the strongly consistent ones, they like them. For instance, the selective exposure

is also based on the emotional bond or affinity level of the individuals. Besides, mood is another behavioral aspect that affects their attention giving behavior. As a result, people perceive the world having compatibility with their life, experiences, and choices (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

In addition to the widespread popularity of Instagram, its algorithm plays a critical role in reinforcing beauty standards by promoting content and receives higher engagement, such as post featuring influencer with idealized appearances (Gallinari, 2017). This constant exposure to curated lifestyles and edited images can contribute to body dissatisfaction, especially among young adults who are more susceptible to social comparison. Moreover, the platform's interactive nature allows user to engage with the content through links, shares, and comments, further embedding the beauty ideals into everyday experiences (Woosnam et al., 2018). This visual culture of Instagram, where users show edited and open unrealistic versions of themselves, has a profound impact on how individual perceives their own physical appearance. This phenomenon is particularly concerning among university students, who are in the formative stages of identity development and are highly influenced by peer validation. And beauty trends continue to evolve on Instagram, driven by influencers and celebrities, the pressure to comply with these ideals become more prevalent that further lead to negative effects on mental health and self-esteem (Galante, 2019). Therefore, this study not only emphasizes instagram's role to promote self- expression but also as a potential tool that shapes users' perception regarding beauty and self- representation. It will provide understanding concerning the complex nature of this influence address the broader implication of digital media on mental health and identity in the digital age. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of current research.

Following are the hypotheses of the current research.

H1: Users are affected by beauty standards and Instagram celebrities, experiencing pressure.

H2: A heightened focus on self-promotion results in more artificial self-representation on Instagram.

H3: There are significant differences between gender usage of Instagram and dissatisfaction levels.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Current Research
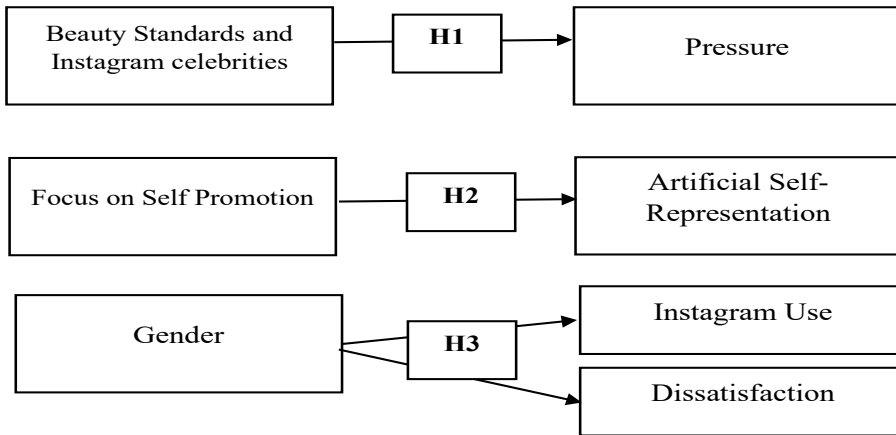
Research Methodology

The current study is exploratory in nature and involves cross-sectional research design as suggested by Ali et al. (2021). The response from the respondents were attained by using close-ended survey questionnaires. As noted by Krosnick (1999), survey method provides real-time, face to face data from the participants that tend to share their relevant experiences. Table 1provides details of the sources of the research items. Furthermore, SPSS was used for the data coding, manipulation, and calculation purposes. Besides,Structural Equation Modelling was used for the in-depth analysis process as suggested by Al-Skaf et al. (2021).

Table 1

Sources of Research Items

S/R	Themes	Source
1.	Response to Beauty Ideals	(Baker et al., 2019)
2.	Comparing Self with Others	(Baker et al., 2019)
3.	Celebrity Worship	(Morgan et al., 2024)
4.	Selfie Feedback Investment	(Hurd, 2019).
5.	Pseudo Self Presentation	(Seehafer, 2017)

Sampling Process

The data was gathered from both graduate and undergraduate university students aged between 18 to 29 years. According to Sedgwick (2015), multi-stage sampling involves random sampling method which is divided into different stages where population is in clusters. Thus, at the first stage of sampling, a sample of 4 institutions was drawn from the universities of Lahore. At second stage, the departments were chosen using stratified sampling techniques as suggested by Taherdoost (2018). The four departments from each selected university were randomly chosen. At third stage, stratified sampling was used to choose the respondents, dividing them into two groups (males and females). Ultimately, a sample of n= 320 respondents was obtained.

Data Analysis

Students' Demographical Data

The response rate of survey remained 93.0% as n = 17 or 7.0% of surveys were wrongly filled or incomplete. Majority of the respondents were males (n =146, 48.2%) and the rest were females (n= 157, 51.8%). In terms of ages, the majority of respondents (n = 118 or 38.9%) were 21 to 23 years old, n = 109 or 36.0% were 18 to 20 years old, n= 50 or 16.5% were 26 to 29 years old, and n = 26 or 8.6% of participants were 24 to 26 years of age. Table 2 summarizes the results of demographic calculations.

Table 2

Students' Demographic Calculations

Variables	Constructs	N	$\%$
Gender	Male	157	51.8%
	Female	146	48.2%
Age	18-20 years	109	36.0%
	21-23 years	118	38.9%
	24-26 years	26	8.6%
	27-29 years	50	16.5%

Response to Beauty Ideals

About 37% of the participants revealed that they frequently watch photos and videos posted by celebrities and social media influencers promoting their looks and lifestyles. Female beauty ideals mainly involve

thin bodies, clear skin, thousands of followers, and attractive looks. While, male ideal standards were projected through masculine bodies, high standard lifestyle, and good height by celebrities on the Instagram. Subsequently, 52.8% of participants also revealed that they give attention to their ownselves when comparing themselves with others. Around 79.0% of the participantsagreed with the fact that they can also become beauty ideals by putting a little effort on their looks. Lastly, 67.9% of respondents agreed that they feel pressurized to acquire the similar physical looks as the celebrities have, 4.0% remained neutral, and 28.1% of participants disagreed with the relevant statement.

Self-Comparison

Instagram users often compare different aspects of their appearance, such as body shape, skin tone, facial features, makeup and styling, clothing, and engagement metrics (likes and comments) with others. Regarding body shape comparisons, 8% of users find it rarely true, 4% usually do not, 25% occasionally do, 48% usually do, and 16% almost always do. Regarding skin tone, 7% say it rarely happens, 7% usually do not, 22% occasionally do, 50% usually do, and 13% almost always do. For facial features, 6% report it almost never happens, 9% usually do not, 25% occasionally do, 45% usually do, and 16% almost always do. Regarding makeup and styling, 8% find it almost never true, 10% usually do not, 23% occasionally do, 38% usually do, and 21% almost always do. Concerning clothing, 5% say it almost never happens, 10% usually do not, 22% occasionally do, 40% usually do, and 22% almost always do. For likes and comments, 8% find it almost never true, 11% usually do not, 24% occasionally do, 39% usually do, and 19% almost always do.

Most users experience anxiety from these comparisons, with 36% feeling highly stressed, 18% feeling bothered, and 24% frequently reflecting on these comparisons. Also, 40% of users report stress related to their body image, leading to dissatisfaction and discontent.

A majority (61.2%) of individuals consented that they find celebrities better than them regarding their looks and lifestyles. However, 24.4% remained neutral and only 14.9% of participants disagreed. Similarly, 74.0% of participants also agreed that the Instagram celebrities are not perfect in their real lives and they only give their best content to stay

superior than others, 18.2% remained neutral, and only 7.9% of respondents disagreed with the relevant statement.

Selfie Feedback Investment

About 82.5% of the participants agreed that they are concerned about getting likes and comments on their photos from their followers, while 12.9% disagreed, and 21.1% of respondents remained neutral about the relevant concern. Moreover, 70.1% of respondents agreed that they feel confident after getting positive comments on their photos, 17.5% remained neutral, and 7.9% of them disagreed.

Pseudo Self-Presentation

Most of the respondents (46%) revealed that they often get exposed to pseudo photos on the Instagram. About 5.0% of participants also revealed that they never prefer using filters to look perfect, 8% rarely used them, 20.0% often use, and 24.4% of respondents always use filters.

Hypotheses Testing

This section is based on testing the study hypotheses. For the hypotheses testing, structural equation modleling is employed and results in following tables for a better understanding and representation. As noted by Asparouhov et al. (2015), a suitable Structural Equation Modelling should have Comparative Fit Index (CFI) value lower than the threshold value of 0.95 and probability value smaller than 0.05. Whereas, the Standardized Root Mean Square Value (RMSEA) should be greater than the 0.09 to further affirmed the goodness of fit.

Table 3

Regression Analysis

	Instagram users give attention to beauty trends and Instagram celebrities and feel pressurised			
	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p
Feel pressure <… Attention towards beauty ideals	-0.437	0.054	8.027	***
Feel pressure <… Considering celebrities as ideal	0.017	0.055	0.319	0.750

	Instagram users give attention to beauty trends and Instagram celebrities and feel pressurised			
	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p
Standardized Regression				
Feel pressure <… Attention toward beauty ideals	0.455			
Feel pressure <… Considering celebrities as ideal	0.018			

The chi-square statistic for absolute fit was 0.000, indicating a highly significant result at the 0.05 level. The unstandardized regression estimates associated with the null hypothesis are -0.437 for the relationship between attention to beauty ideals (independent variable) and the feeling of pressure (dependent variable). Similarly, 0.017 for the relationship between viewing celebrities as ideals (independent variable) and the feeling of pressure (dependent variable). The model demonstrates a positive relationship between these variables, suggesting that it aligns well with the data. The regression weights confirmed that the model fits the data satisfactorily and the CR values indicated the standard error. Thus, the hypothesis is supported, showing that Instagram users who focus on beauty trends and Instagram celebrities experience pressure, with a significance level of $p >$ 0.000. Table 3 summarizes the regression estimates of Instagram users' attention to beauty trends and celebrities and the resulting pressure.

Table 4

Regression Estimates

	More intereste in self-promotion leads to increased pseudo self-presentation on Instagram			
	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p
Pseudo Presentation < Motive of self-promotion	-0.045	0.116	-0.391	0.696
Pseudo Presentation < Willingness to show off	0.409	0.046	8.873	***

	More intereste in self-promotion leads to increased pseudo self-presentation on Instagram			
	Estimate	*S.E.*	*C.R.*	*p*
Standardized Regression				
Pseudo Presentation < Motive of self-promotion	-0.020			
Pseudo Presentation < Willingness to show off	0.458			

The chi-square value of absolute fit remained as 0.000 that is strongly significant at the level of 0.05. Further, it shows the unstandardized value for regression estimate (*CFI = 1.000*, *SRMR* = 0.00, *RMSEA* = 0.000) associated with null hypothesis is -0.045 regarding self-promotion as a motive (independent variable), pseudo presentation (dependent variable), and 0.409 for willingness to show off (independent variable) and pseudo presentation as the dependent variable. Here the standardized estimates are -0.020 and 0.458, respectively.

The regression estimates show significant and positive relationship between willingness to show off and pseudo self-presentation. It also explains that model fits satisfactorily for the data and CR values show the standard error. Thus, the hypothesis is supported with the willingness to show off is support with the significance level at *p > 0.000*, affirmed that users' increased interest in self-promotion means more pseudo self-presentation on Instagram. Table 4 summarizes the results of regression estimates for an increased interest in self-promotion leading to more pseudo self-presentation on Instagram (**H3**).

Table 5

Independent t-test to Analyze the Gender Differences based on Instagram Usage and Dissatisfaction

	The level of dissatisfaction varies among males and females			
	N	Mean	*SD*	Sign
Female	146	3.83	0.985	0.605
Male	157	3.77	0.967	

Independent samples t-test was conducted to analyze any potential differences among the satisfaction level between males and female respondents. Analysis showed a small difference among the satisfaction level as the mean value for the females remained $M = 3.83$ and for the males remained $M = 3.77$. Besides, the significance level at $p < 0.6605$, that is higher than the threshold value of 0.05, also showed an insignificance difference among the two relevant gender groups. Thus, the hypothesis postulating a significant difference between males and females regarding their satisfaction level remained insignificant. Hence, it is concluded that there is no significant discrepancies among both gender and are equally dissatisfied about themselves.

Discussion

The current research is conducted due to the concerns raised by the existing literature, especially regarding the body image, self-perceptions, comparisons, and personal dissatisfaction among the young generation. As noted by Woodley (2018), people compare themselves with the celebrities and feel an utmost desire to imitate the same body and looks. This study first affirmed the findings of Statista indicating that a majority of Instagram users are males. The average age of the Instagram users was 21 to 23 years old, indicating that Instagram is comparatively more popular among the youngsters. However, globally, twenty to twenty-five years of aged people mostly like to use and post on Instagram as their most preferred social networking platform (Statista, 2024). Findings demonstrated that a majority of participants often get exposed to celebrities' images and videos on the Instagram and feel an urge to attain the same personality and lifestyle. Thus, it is validating that the Instagram usage leads to envying the ideal body image among the young generation (Lockhart, 2019).

Similarly, it was also found that a majority of the respondents revealed that they follow their beauty ideals as their photos and video attract them the most. In this regard, most of them also believed that the displayed beauty standards are achievable and due to this they are willing to work on themselves. However, some also argued that these beauty standards are ideal yet not compulsory for them to achieve (Butkowski et al., 2019). Moreover, both male and female respondents also expressed psychological pressure after watching the perfect pictures of the celebrities as consequently they also want to achieve such thin and ideal bodies. Also,

they compared themselves with the celebrities and are greatly influenced by their body images (Tarakcı & Yeniçıktı, 2017)

Furthermore, the respondents indicated their utmost concern about the feedback, such as comments and likes they received on their own photos and videos from other followers. According to them, positive comments help to boost their morale and confidence. On the other hand, participants also agreed with the fact that ideal body images psychologically stress them as sometimes such body images are not possible to achieve (Treitel, 2020).

Accordingly, when Instagram celebrities endorse beauty products and represent themselves as beyond perfection, it makes the users feel underconfident and dissatisfied with their looks. However, some of the respondents also considered celebrities self-obsessed and representing themselves merely to get public appraisal and attention (Lockhart, 2019).

Finally, the selected Instagram users revealed that they feel incomplete and misfit in the society when they cannot achieve the idealized beauty standards. They feel themselves as inferior and less than others that further leads to unwanted stress, depression, and social isolation. The analysis of the gathered data indicated that males and females equally compare themselves with Instagram beautify ideals and celebrities. The findings also validated the notion behind self-perception theory of communication that assumes self-comparison as a result of exposure to beauty ideals (Bem, 1972). As noted by Tsfati and Cohen (2012), comparing oneself with others creates several psychological and social issues as also highlighted and addressed by social comparison theory. Comparing themselves with Instagram-based celebrities is more like changing one's thinking pattern to accept not less than perfect that lead them to hide their faces and bodies behind fillers and achieving a long-term feeling of self-dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016).

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the respondents not only follow Instagram celebrities but also get influenced by their physical appearances. As a result, they feel motivated to achieve the similar ideal body images. Yet, they also feel pressured and stressed about the beauty standards they want to achieve. Instagram–based beauty standards make them dissatisfied about their personal appearances as despite these standards are possible to achieve, they are false enough to create

psychological stress among young generation. In this content, the major conclusion is that exposure to extreme beauty ideals is causing an inferiority complex among the followers from general audiences. The Structural Equation Modelling and descriptive statistics; hence, validated the study's propositions.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study is of greater significance yet contains some limitations. First, this study is conducted only in one main city of Pakistan, that questions the generalizability of findings in other cities. Second, the respondents mainly involved university level studies. However, the results could be extended by obtaining data from the teenagers studying in secondary and higher secondary levels. Finally, the third limitation involves Instagram as the main study variable whereas there are other many other digital platforms that can be relevant to the current study problem. Thus, it is recommended to future researchers to conduct more studies especially concerning the use of different social networking platforms and self-perceptions. Future researchers can attain generalizable results from studies that may examine the relevant projects in different geographical regions worldwide.

Despite perception theory provides a strong foundation for understanding how individuals influence their self-image based on external cues, it primarily focuses on cognitive processes that are not always easily quantifiable. This limits the studies ability to highlight the full complexity of self-perception, especially in a rapidly evolving digital environment, and it could have been more multifaceted and dynamic than the theory traditionally accounts for. For instance, combining Self-Perception Theory with Social Comparison Theory could provide a more robust understanding of how users engage in constant comparison with influencers and peers, which significantly impacts their self-image. Additionally, incorporating theories, such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory could help explore the motivations behind Instagram usage, shedding light on why individuals selectively expose themselves to certain content that reinforces specific beauty standards. This theoretical expansion would allow future research to more effectively address the evolving nature of self-perception in the context of social media.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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