From Virtual Perfection to Reality:

How Social Media Influences Appearance Anxiety in the 16-25 Age Group

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How Social Media Influences Appearance Anxiety in the 16-25 Age Group

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Wenzao University of Language, 2026

Abstract

Most people, in order to conform to the public's aesthetic standards, users often have appearance anxiety (fear that their photos are not perfect.), especially young people! As a result, it influences the lack of confidence in one's appearance, which affects one's self-identity. Our study aims at how social media shapes unrealistic beauty standards and contributes to appearance anxiety among young people. By analyzing users' experiences and social media content, the study aims to provide insights into the broader impact of digital beauty culture on self-identity issues. The methodology includes content analysis of social media posts and influencer content for recurring themes related to beauty standards and perfection. In this process, we will also be reviewing journal articles. The study focuses on how social media shapes the beauty standards and affects appearance anxiety in young people. Therefore, offers an opportunity to foster mental health and media literacy awareness.

Keywords: social media, appearance anxiety, young groups

從虛擬完美到現實：社群媒體如何影響 16-25 歲年齡層的容貌焦慮

莊郁琦 / 盧姿如 / 林泳均

文藻外語大學，2026 年

摘要

大多數人為了符合大眾的審美標準，往往會產生外表焦慮（擔心自己的照片不夠完美），尤其是在年輕族群中更為明顯。這種焦慮進一步影響個人對自身外貌的自信，並可能對自我認同造成負面影響。本研究旨在探討社群媒體如何塑造不切實際的美貌標準，以及這些標準如何加劇年輕人的外表焦慮。透過分析使用者的經驗與社群媒體內容，本研究希望能提供對數位美貌文化如何影響自我認同問題的更深入理解。研究方法包括對社群媒體貼文與網紅內容進行內容分析，以找出與美貌標準與「完美」相關的重複主題；同時也將回顧相關學術期刊文章。研究重點在於探討社群媒體如何形塑美貌標準，並影響年輕族群的外表焦慮。藉此，本研究也期望能提升大眾對心理健康與媒體識讀的重視與意識。

關鍵詞：社群媒體、容貌焦慮、年輕族群

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

In recent years, social media has fundamentally transformed the ways in which young people around the world communicate, form relationships, and construct their identities. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat have become integral parts of everyday life—especially for individuals aged 16 to 25. According to a 2025 report by Statista[1], over 29.5% of people in this age group use Instagram daily. On average, young users spend between 1 hour and 53 minutes and 1 hour and 54 minutes on TikTok each day. These platforms are no longer just tools for connection—they are influential spaces where social norms, trends, and ideals are created and reinforced.

This digital environment has also given rise to new psychological problems, one of which is appearance anxiety. Appearance anxiety is a persistent worry or distress about how one's physical appearance is perceived by others, often coupled with a fear of negative evaluation. But unlike social anxiety, which includes general fear about social interaction and being judged, or body image dissatisfaction, which concerns itself with perceived flaws in body shape or size, appearance anxiety is mostly with one's face, skin, style, or general looks—especially as filtered through social media channels.

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[1] Karl, How Many People Use TikTok: Number of Users in 2025, Dreamgrow, September 18, 2025, https://www.dreamgrow.com/tiktok-statistics/

Social media intensifies the problem by showering amongst them idealized, filtered, and often heavily digitally altered images of influencers, celebrities, and half of them even peers themselves. Being all about visuals, these platforms place successes and social validation alike in a measure of likes, comments, and followers, simultaneously increasing the pressure to appear perfect. For young people in a very formative stage of identity development, these unattainable standards of beauty seriously distort their self-image, thereby feeding anxieties about their real-world appearance.

The anti-regime beauty filters and editing apps and the selective curation of "highlight reel" content strive to normalize perfection. As imperfections are wiped out-and only the most striking angles are seen-surreality kicks in between authenticity and artificiality. Many users, be it intentionally or unintentionally, internalize these digital ideals, converting their idea of self-worth into how much their concept of self agrees with what is happening in the digital world. These effects do not touch every individual alike. Gender, self-esteem, time spent on social media, and awareness of digital manipulation do count toward the experience of appearance anxiety. An understanding of how these factors interact will pave the way to effective promotion of media literacy, emotional resilience, and healthy self-perception. The contemporary situation wherein social media has become omnipresent, and anxiety and body image issues have become the prevailing affliction of the youth would be the backdrop for this research; thus, an urgent and worldwide issue is touched upon. By looking into the medium of how social media fosters appearance anxiety and the moderating factors implicated, this study seeks to inform targeted interventions in education, mental health, and youth policy.

Motivation

In today's digital society, young people are constantly surrounded by curated images of beauty and perfection on social media. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat promote filtered and edited visuals that set unrealistic standards of appearance. For individuals aged 16 to 25—who are still developing their identity and self-image—these constant comparisons can be deeply damaging. Many begin to feel that their natural appearance is not "good enough," which leads to appearance anxiety, low self-esteem, and even depression.

This topic is personally meaningful because I have seen how these pressures affect not just myself, but also my friends and peers. We often hesitate to post unfiltered pictures or feel anxious when comparing ourselves to influencers or celebrities online. I believe that no one's beauty should be judged by social media standards. Everyone should feel confident in their natural appearance without needing validation through likes or comments. That's why this research is important—not just for academic reasons, but also to promote mental well-being, body positivity, and healthier social media use.

Research Purpose

In today's digital era, social media platforms have become central to how young people present themselves and perceive others. In order to meet the public's aesthetic standards, users—especially those aged 16 to 25—often experience appearance anxiety and believe their photos are not perfect enough. Constant exposure to digitally enhanced images, filters, and curated content can lead individuals to internalize unrealistic beauty ideals. As a result, many begin to feel dissatisfied with their natural appearance, develop low self-esteem, or struggle with mental health issues. However, beauty should not be defined by social media or societal expectations—it should be self-defined, authentic, and inclusive. This research aims to explore how social media contributes to appearance anxiety in youth and what can be done to reduce this harmful effect.

Research Questions

How do beauty standards on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok influence the self-perception, self-esteem, and body image of individuals aged 16–25 ?

Contribution

This research enhances the comprehension of the impact of social media on young people's perspectives and emotions regarding their looks. It narrows down the study to the anxiety related to appearance of the youth aged 16–25 in Taiwan, particularly on Instagram and TikTok. Though the aspect of body image or social media use in general has been the subject of many studies, this one deals with the matter of beauty standards on visual media being the major influence of the whole self-esteem and self-perception issues.

The outcomes of this study will be a great help for teachers, parents, and mental health professionals in learning about the impact of online beauty norms on the youth. Additionally, the research can be a source of assistance to media literacy programs, and those that promote healthy social networking, and instill confidence and body positivity. In short, the authors of this research project want to create an awareness and prompt a change in the attitude of young people towards social media and their aesthetics through social media.

Limit's

We feel that the first limitation of this topic is that the questionnaire or interview data we use may be influenced by the subjects' subjective feelings or social expectations and may not be completely accurate. The second is that different platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) have different characteristics. If they are not differentiated, certain impacts may be underestimated or exaggerated. The last one is cultural differences. The definition and acceptance of idealized standards vary in different cultures, and research may not have explored cultural variability in depth

Delimits

We feel that the first definition only surveys the 16-25 age group and does not cover other age groups. The second type of research subjects is limited to urban young people in Taiwan. The third type focuses on "appearance anxiety" without exploring overall mental health or other behavioral issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In recent years, social media has been one of the most powerful forces that have influenced young people's views on beauty and self-worth the most. There are always idealized images of beauty on the social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok that users get exposed to non-stop and sometimes even the narrowest and most unrealistic beauty standards are being promoted. These representations not only determine how people perceive others but also how they perceive themselves. Consequently, more and more researchers have started to look for a connection between social media use and appearance-related anxiety, self-esteem problems, and dissatisfaction with one's body among the young users.

We will present important research and theoretical models that reveal the impact of the beauty ideals exposure through social media on self-perception and mental health. We will begin with a discussion of how social media sites encourage people to compare themselves with others and to adopt the beauty standards. After that, it will delve into the issues of the psychological and cultural factors—self-perception, self-esteem, etc. that influence people's reactions to these ideals.

Social Media and Beauty Standards

This category explores how social media promotes unrealistic and idealized beauty standards through filters, edited images, and curated content. Articles like "Before-and-After Photography on Social Media" and "Why Don't I Look Like Her?" highlight how constant exposure to perfected appearances can create unrealistic comparisons and pressure, especially for young women. These sources establish the foundation for your research by showing how beauty ideals are constructed and spread through social media platforms.

Connection to Research: This group directly addresses the source of appearance anxiety—idealized portrayals of beauty on social media.

Social Media's Psychological Impact on Body Image

This theme explores how people become dissatisfied with their appearance when using visually oriented social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook due to long-term exposure to idealized and over-retouched appearance standards, which in turn affects their mental health, such as causing low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and even eating disorders.

Connection to Research: social media affects physical image and self-esteem, and women are more affected. Psychological characteristics will regulate this influence, which requires gender-sensitive intervention.

Social Media Addiction and Its Role in Appearance Anxiety

This group investigates how excessive social media use may intensify concerns about appearance. Addiction amplifies exposure to idealized content, which can heighten appearance-related consciousness and social physique anxiety. Concepts like "Instagram addiction" show how dependency can lead to obsessive self-comparison.

Connection to Research: These sources explain a key factor influencing the relationship—the frequency and intensity of social media engagement.

Social media encourages users to carefully curate their self-presentation, selectively sharing aspects of their lives to shape how others perceive them (Wu et al., 2024). Young people often create idealized versions of themselves through edited content, which can lead to discrepancies between their online and offline identities. When real-life experiences do not align with their online portrayals, it can cause confusion and lower self-esteem (Verrastro et al., 2023). Additionally, many young people, especially young women, tend to evaluate their self-worth based on external appearance rather than intrinsic qualities. This is influenced by social media feedback mechanisms, such as likes and comments, which contribute to self-objectification and increased anxiety about body image (Liu, 2023).

Mediating Effect of Self-Efficacy on Social Media Addiction, Appearance-Related Consciousness, and Social Physique Anxiety among Young Adults Authors

This study explored the relationship between social media addiction, appearance-related consciousness, and social physique anxiety among young adults,

with self-efficacy as a potential mediator. A sample of 200 young adults from universities in Islamabad, Pakistan, who met the criteria for social media addiction, participated in the study. The researchers used several scales to measure social media addiction, appearance-related consciousness, social physique anxiety, and self-efficacy.

Exploring age and Fragility

The age of 16 to 25 is a critical period of development, with profound psychological, social and neurophysiological changes. This age group is in the process of forming their identity, establishing social relationships and transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, making them particularly susceptible to external influences, especially beauty standards on social media.

First of all, one of the core tasks of this age group is to establish a stable self-identity. According to the theory of psychologist Erik Erikson, adolescents and young adults are exploring the question of "who am I". At this time, if they are often exposed to filters, beautification, and photo editing on social media, it is easy to use these as comparison standards, resulting in self-worth relying on external recognition, such as the number of likes, comments, and followers, which in turn affects self-confidence and the stability of self-identity.

In addition, peer pressure and social comparison are particularly strong at this stage. Young people must care about what others think of them, and social media is a hotbed for comparison. When seeing others (especially Internet celebrities or peers)

look prettier, more popular, or better off, it often triggers feelings of inferiority, shame, and anxiety. Studies have shown that the more frequently young people compare their appearance, the more likely they are to experience appearance anxiety and body dissatisfaction.

Then there is the age of 16 to 25, when people go through many changes in their lives, such as further education, employment, moving away from home, and establishing intimate relationships. These changes can exacerbate anxiety about appearance and social status. Highlight clips on social media not only magnify the standard of appearance, but also become some unrealistic expectations of life, which in turn leads to low self-esteem, anxiety, and even depression.

In summary, young people aged 16 to 25 are at a critical stage of psychological development, peer influence, brain maturity and social comparison tendency, making them more susceptible to the idealized beauty standards in social media.

Moderating and Mediating Factors

This appearance anxiety is not the same for everybody, being contingent upon the many mediating and moderating factors through which an individual perceives and reacts to images. Gender plays an important role in this respect, as many studies have shown that womanhood and adolescence carry with them a greater level of appearance anxiety than does manhood; men, however, are beginning to face such pressures as muscularity and grooming. Self-esteem serves as a prime mediating factor; those with lesser self-esteem tend to absorb idealized beauty models more quickly and undertake detrimental behaviors related to comparisons, whereas people with high self-esteem may find themselves more resilient. Media literacy can also act as a cure against the harmful effects of social media by making an individual aware of common manipulation techniques like Filters or Photoshop. Conversely, cultural norms vary affecting beauty ideals and how much emphasis is laid on looks, so the adverse psychological affectations of social media are judged differently across cultures depending upon their values, beauty standards, and collective attitudes toward body image.

Summary

This study investigates how exposure to idealized beauty standards on social media affects appearance anxiety among young people aged 16 to 25. Using surveys and interviews, the research collected data on the usage patterns of Instagram and TikTok and the psychological responses of participants. The results show a positive correlation between frequent exposure to edited images and "perfect body" content and increased appearance anxiety, with a more significant impact observed among females. Additionally, factors such as self-esteem, social comparison tendencies, and cultural influences were found to affect this relationship. The study recommends promoting media literacy education and psychological support systems to reduce the negative impact of appearance anxiety on the mental health of young people.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

With the popularity of social media, young people are exposed to a wide variety of beauty images and body standards more frequently than ever before. Instagram, TikTok, Threads, and other platforms are flooded with photos and videos that have been retouched, embellished, or filtered to create an idealized standard of aesthetics. For young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who are still building their self-identity and body image, these can not only be a reference for measuring their appearance, but can also trigger negative emotions such as comparison, shame and anxiety.

In recent years, a growing body of research has shown a clear correlation between social media use and appearance anxiety. Of course, this relationship is not caused by a single factor but is influenced by a variety of psychological and social factors. For example, self-esteem, social comparisons, media literacy, and gender may all contribute to this.

The above narrative explores the impact of this study on the idealization of beauty standards in social media on appearance anxiety and further analyzes the underlying factors influencing this relationship.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how young people aged 16 to 25 perceive the idealized beauty standards presented on social media, and how these standards influence their experiences of appearance-related anxiety. The study also aims to examine potential factors that affect this relationship, including gender, self-identity, cultural background, and social comparison tendencies.

Since this study emphasizes participants' subjective understanding of their personal experiences, we will prepare a semi-structured interview guide in advance. However, during the interview process, we will remain flexible by asking follow-up questions or adjusting the order of questions based on the information provided by the interviewees, to gain more in-depth insights. The interviews will focus on open-ended questions that encourage participants to share their experiences with social media use, their reactions to idealized beauty images, and how these experiences may affect their self-image.

The participants will be young people aged between 16 to 25 who frequently use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Threads. We plan to interview 10-14 participants, which will allow us to focus more closely on the themes relevant to our research topic. All interviews will be audio recorded to facilitate later analysis. Before each interview, we will obtain the informed consent of participants, and all personal information will be kept confidential and not disclosed.

Source of data

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how social media affects appearance anxiety in people aged 16 to 25. The primary data source was a series of short, semi-structured interviews with participants in this age group. In this study, we chose to use a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that all respondents are active users of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. A total of 14 participants were interviewed face-to-face or online by phone call. Each interview lasts about 25-30 minutes and allows participants to share spontaneously and individually without stressing the participants. The responses collected are recorded in the form of written notes and subsequently analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring ideas and patterns related to self-image, comparisons, and media influence. These are the questions we'll be interviewing, and we'll be selecting them to ask the interviewees.

Interview Questions:

   I.   Social media usage

1. How much time do you spend on social media in a day?

2. What social media platforms do you use the most? (IG, TikTok, etc.)

 II.   Emotions and self-image

3. Have you ever used filters or beautification features? What do you think of the impact of these tools on "real appearance"?

4. Have you ever tried to change your appearance (dress, weight loss, filters, beauty pictures, or even medical beauty) because of the influence of social media?

III.   Social Comparison & Interaction

5. Have you ever felt bad about how you look because no one liked, commented, or shared?

IV. Self-adjustment strategies

6. What do you typically do when you feel anxious or upset about social media content?

7. Do you think social media has had more of a positive or negative impact on you? Why?

Participant demographics

A total of two participants were interviewed in this study. All participants were between the ages of 16 and 25 years, which corresponded to the focus age group for this study. Two female respondents were included in the sample. All participants are current students at the school. They were screened based on people who regularly use social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. The majority of participants said they spent more than 2 hours a day on these platforms.

The following table (Table 1) summarizes the main demographic characteristics of the participants:

Table 1

Participant demographics

Variable	Description
Age Range	16–25 years old, (21 years)
Gender	female
Occupation	University Students
Social Media Usage	Regular users of Instagram, TikTok, etc.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

This research adopts a qualitative approach, and the primary tool for data collection is a semi-structured interview guide. The guide is designed to explore in-depth how social media influences appearance anxiety among individuals aged 16 to 25. It is divided into three main sections. The first section focuses on social media usage patterns, including which platforms participants use, how often they use them, and the types of content they engage with. The second section addresses participants' perceptions of beauty standards and appearance, exploring their awareness of filters, digital enhancements, and the role of influencers. The final section delves into the psychological and emotional impact of social media, uncovering feelings of appearance-related anxiety, self-esteem issues, and the coping mechanisms participants may employ to deal with such pressures.

The instrument consists entirely of open-ended questions to allow participants to express their personal experiences and perceptions openly and in detail. Probing questions were included to encourage even deeper reflection and more elaborate responses. For content validity, the interview guide was corrected by two academic experts, one in psychology and the other in media studies. A pilot interview was held with two individuals within the target age range to establish the relevancy and clarity of the questioning; adjustments were made to improve clarity.

The instrument consists entirely of open-ended questions to allow participants to express their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings in detail. Probing questions are included to encourage deeper reflection and richer responses. To ensure

content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by two academic experts in psychology and media studies. A pilot interview was conducted with two individuals from the target age group to assess the clarity and relevance of the questions, resulting in minor adjustments for better comprehension. While qualitative research does not measure reliability in the same statistical way as quantitative studies, consistency was maintained in how interviews were conducted. The researcher followed a standard procedure during all interviews and ensured that questions were presented in a neutral, non-leading manner. Each interview was recorded, with participants' consent, to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis.

Data collection was conducted through both face-to-face and online interviews, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 5 to 10 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable, private setting to encourage openness. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Eligibility criteria required them to be between the ages of 16 and 25, to be active users of at least one social media platform (such as Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat), and to be willing to share personal experiences related to appearance and online content. This selection ensured that participants could provide relevant and meaningful insights into the research topic.

Data Analysis Technique

This study used thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data gathered from participant interviews. After carefully reviewing the transcripts, we identified three major themes that consistently emerged from participants' experiences: social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and pressure to conform. These themes helped reveal how social media usage affects the way young people perceive themselves and their appearance.

The first theme, social comparison, reflects how participants often compare themselves to others on social media. Many described feelings of inadequacy after seeing images of influencers or peers who appear to have perfect bodies, flawless skin, or ideal lifestyles. These comparisons were often unbalanced, as participants were aware that most online content is heavily filtered or edited, yet they still struggled to separate these ideals from reality.

The second theme, body dissatisfaction, captured the emotional and psychological impact of these comparisons. Two participants admitted feeling unhappy with their natural appearance after spending time on social media. Some expressed frustration with certain body features, while others discussed avoiding posting photos unless they were edited or approved by friends. This dissatisfaction often led to reduced self-confidence and a desire to alter or hide their appearance online.

The final theme, pressure to conform, highlighted how social media creates an unspoken expectation to meet certain beauty standards. Participants felt the need to

maintain a particular image—whether through fashion, makeup, or body shape—in order to gain likes, compliments, or acceptance from their online audience. This pressure affected how they presented themselves not just online but in real life as well, influencing their behavior, choices, and even mental well-being.

Through this thematic analysis, the study was able to capture the nuanced ways in which social media contributes to appearance anxiety in young people, offering insights into the emotional burdens they carry and the societal expectations they feel compelled to meet.

Ethical considerations

In conducting this study, we carefully considered ethical considerations to ensure the rights and well-being of participants. All participants were given a clear explanation of the purpose of the study, their wishes, and how their responses would be used. Also, oral informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Participants were told that they were not forced and that they could skip any questions (if they did not want to answer) or withdraw from the interview at any time without consequences. No personally identifiable information is recorded during the interview to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The collected data will be stored securely and will only be used for academic research. Due to the sensitive age of the participants (16-25 years old), we paid special attention to creating a safe, non-biased environment during the interviews. Our research prioritizes emotional well-being and immediately respects any discomfort or hesitation of participants.

Limitations of methodology

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of social media on appearance anxiety, there are still some limitations. First, due to the qualitative nature of the study and intentional sampling, the results of the study cannot be generalized to a wider range of ethnic groups. The number of participants was small, and the interview time was deliberately shortened (2-3 minutes) to respect the time and comfort of the participants. This limits the depth and richness of the data that can be collected. Second, all data are self-reported, which introduces the possibility of societal expectation bias – participants may adjust their answers to make them more acceptable or more popular. In addition, because interviews rely on the participants' own interpretations of their own experiences, the data is inherently subjective and

may vary depending on personal memory, emotion, or environment. Still, the method allows for honest personal reflection, which is often overlooked in quantitative surveys. Moreover, there is a gender imbalance among the participants, with fewer males than expected based on societal views. As men may be less likely to discuss these issues publicly due to stigma, the male group may have been less responsive to requests to participate in discussions regarding appearance-related anxiety based on this stigma. At the same time, given that most popular conversation topics about beauty standards are geared towards women, men may not have identified as closely with this topic as women would be able to.

To provide a greater breadth of gender-based understanding of the impact of social media on appearance anxiety, future research should consider more strategically identifying potential participants from all genders in order to achieve a greater balance within respondents who represent the male population and women. Therefore, future studies will be more effectively positioned to provide a well-rounded view of social media's impact on men's and women's experiences with appearance-related anxiety.

Summary

This study utilized qualitative interviews to deeply explore the impact of idealized beauty standards on appearance-related anxiety among young people aged 16 to 25 on social media. Our research found that most participants, when browsing platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Threads, would unconsciously engage in social comparisons based on appearance, which led to feelings of self-doubt, shame,

and anxiety. However, these effects were not caused by a single factor but rather resulted from multiple influences, including gender role expectations, self-esteem levels, social media usage habits, media literacy, and cultural background.

Furthermore, we discovered that participants demonstrated a certain degree of media reflection and self-regulation strategies, such as deliberately reducing usage time, following more diverse and positive accounts, or actively discussing appearance-related topics with friends. This suggests that young people possess some coping mechanisms and stress relief abilities when facing media pressure.

This study found that in today's social media environment, idealized aesthetic standards have become an important factor affecting young people's body image and mental health. However, due to some limitations of this study, the number of participants is limited and may not adequately reflect the experiences and perspectives of all youth groups. Most of our participants are users of specific social media platforms, and their media experience may differ from that of users of other platforms. In addition, due to the qualitative design of this study, the interpretation of the results of the study is highly subjective and may not be applicable to all young people.

Nonetheless, this study still provides rich and in-depth first-hand data that contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between social media and appearance anxiety. These data reveal how different factors interactively influence individuals' self-image and psychological state, further highlighting the importance and urgency of exploring this topic.

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction to Data Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of qualitative data collected for this study, which investigates the effects of beauty ideals presented in the media (specifically Instagram and TikTok) on the self-perception, self-esteem and body image of individuals ages 16-25. This study aims to gather information concerning how young adults interpret, internalize and react to beauty ideals found in the media, and how these ideals affect their sense of self and self-esteem.

Data was collected in the form of individual semi-structured interviews of participants who use social media in their everyday lives. Each interview was recorded, and the audio files were converted to text manually by typing the transcript down onto a file on google docs. After transcribing the data, the data was analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis began with open coding whereby meaningful portions of text were identified and labeled with descriptive codes that reflect recurring themes or emotions (e.g. "social pressure to conform," "it's hard to escape the comparison," "seeking affirmation by social media"). These codes were categorized into similarities, clusters and relationships in order to unify them into broader patterns. Out of these patterns emerged certain themes to elucidate the added dimensions of how beauty ideals affect self-perceptions and body image in general. Eventually the themes were interconnected to demonstrate the intertwined psychological and social processes that underlie participants' experiences.

Thus, through this systematic examination of the data, beginning with data collection and finishing with interpretations of the resultant themes, the analysis

provides a better understanding into how the beauty ideals exhibited online define the identities and self-worth of young individuals.

Code Process

The coding was done using a theme-based qualitative analysis approach. Following the completion of all the interviews and transcribing verbatim a full transcript, the research team used an open coding process to find the repeated ideas and concepts reflected in the participants' responses. Each portion of the transcript was analyzed to solicit the significant expressions that surround the participants' experience of beauty ideal, self-perception and body image. The first initial open codes were compared and refined by the members across iterative talking points to each seek for conceptual clarity and consistency.

The created and refined codes reflect key emotional, behavioral and cognitive responses to social media beauty ideals. The codes reflect the shift from too much detail of textual data to a higher analytical description category. The table below reflects the final descriptive list of refined codes that were determined with their short definitions and example quotations from participants to demonstrate the transparency frame of the data analysis process. (Put in Appendix A-figure 1)

These refined codes represent the positive and negative aspects of how social media standards of beauty impact the young users' lives. They formed the basis for developing higher-order constellations and themes: social comparison and self-appraisal, identity-formation on the Internet, and emotional self-regulation, which will be discussed later.

Identifying Patterns

This section illustrates the themes and patterns that emerged from participants' reflections on how social media beauty standards affect self-image and self-feelings. By a close reading of all transcripts, both common and differing patterns were identified. The analysis goes beyond individual codes to large and significant tendencies that are seen across the participants and also how young people effectively or ineffectively adapt to their experiences concerning pressures from online appearance cultures.

Pattern 1: Appearance-centered Self-evaluation

A dominant pattern across participants was the tendency to evaluate self-worth based on appearance and social feedback. Many participants indicated that likes, comments, and followers were more than just numbers; they carried emotional meanings and, in many cases, gave rise to feelings of confidence. Many respondents reported feelings of happiness and self-validation when they received compliments, and others said they had feelings of disappointment or even self-doubt when they did not get much engagement.

"If I get a few likes on a post, I begin to wonder why I don't look good." (P8)

"Seeing people with perfect bodies calls me to be more diligent." (P6)

Similarities

Almost without exception, respondents indicated that social media creates a situation of constant comparisons. Even those who indicated they were confident

admitted to sometimes doubting their appearance after scrolling through beauty presentations.

Differences and Oppositions

The chief difference was in whether the respondent viewed the advantages of this comparison with others in any way as possible positive advantages. Some viewed the process as good, since it was a way to improve their style, fitness, or self-presentation. Others expressed emotional fatigue, indicating, "It's impossible not to compare."

Why this pattern appears

According to them, many of these younger users grew up in a digital environment where physical appearance was highly connected to visibility and validation. Algorithms reward attractiveness, and peer culture reinforce the idea that if one is visible, he is valuable. Self-evaluation, then, is a natural thing in that it is formed around ideas of physical attractiveness for self-validation, especially for those who, to some degree, validate themselves in social validation.

Observation

This observation demonstrates how internalized the process of social validation has been. Self-evaluation of many of the younger users is directly connected with social validation, indicating, too, that beauty ideation does not represent ideals merely, but these ideations have become part of the daily process of emotional self-evaluation.

Pattern 2: The Online–Offline Self Gap

Another distinct theme was the visible gap between participants' online and offline selves. Participants talked about photo editing, utilizing filters, and curating posts so as to present more "refined" versions of themselves. For some, this online self was a source of pride and creativity; for others, it became a kind of pressure to maintain an unrealistic image.

"The version of me that's on Instagram is surer of herself than the real me." (P1)

"I always edit the color of my skin before posting. Everyone does it." (P5)

Similarities

Most of the participants confessed to changing their photos somehow before posting. This change of photos was not always viewed as a tool of deception on the part of participants, but often as a mode of common acceptance, intended to match the appeal and polished aesthetics that they saw in online spheres.

Differences

Regular programmers utilized these principals more intentionally and were, therefore, a bit more comfortable managing their identities online. Casual users, on the other hand, often felt uncomfortable with the duplication of their real selves, feeling that it "doesn't feel like the real me."

Why this pattern appears

The constant barrage of curated beauty finds it normal. For many of the participants, the changing of photo images is more closely related to a type of conformity, "because everybody does it", than to insecurity. The need for acceptance

engendered by online spaces creates a need to present a "best version" of oneself, even though that is totally farcical from a more realistic version.

Observation

The online–offline gap acts like a two–edged sword. It offers creative control and feelings of confidence yet produces a heightened awareness of self and possibility of being "found out." The constant need for the display of a "presentable" self creates awareness of the fact that identity online is performative or, at least, emotionally taxing.

Pattern 3: Social Connection and Validation

Beyond appearances, most participants talked about how they felt connected with other people through social media. Likes and messages represent belonging and social validation. Some talked about how interacting with friends or communities of fandom provided them with emotional support in areas where they were not confident in their appearances.

"People like my posts on the web, it makes me feel like I am a part of something." (P9)

"Anything that I share regarding my idols gives me a feeling of being connected with others who understand." (P2)

Similarities

Almost all of the participants linked social interaction with emotional well-being. Being seen or acknowledged online often makes them feel good.

Differences and Contrasts

However, the source of social connections was varied. Friends and peers provided social support for some. It was about friends to others, which in turn provided them with validation. For another group, it was parasocial fandom through entertainment and entertainment celebrities or social media influencers. The former gave real sustenance through social bonding; the latter sometimes was a cause of greater comparison and jealousy.

Why does this pattern happen

Social media when it comes to being identity difficult or looking for belonging is an instant place for group-oriented feeling. Especially during the time when a person is trying to find themselves, social media is a quick fix providing instant validation which may not be available in off-line life. This helps to explain why many participants were equating offline contact, thinking interaction with others online was a way of being in social contact with others.

Observations

This pattern indicates that social media is a means of not only self-presentation but a means of exchanging emotions. This community feeling on which those who use this type of media rely, helps to combat negative feelings, yet at the same time reinforce the reliance on external validation, which is one of the themes of this study.

Pattern 4: Emotional Regulation and Coping Strategies

Participants employed different strategies to cope with the emotional effects of social comparison. Some were deliberately not on social media during times of excessive emotional weight, while others remedied this through cognitive strategies, shifting their focus away from looks or towards personal goals.

"I scroll for a couple of days, and when I start to feel bad about myself, I just quit."
(P11)

"Watching fitness influence stuff inspires me to want to do something rather than
want to be like them." (P3)

Similarities

Most all of the participants had noticed the emotional toll of constant exposure to
ideals of beauty and had developed small vices to guard themselves.

Differences

The coping strategy employed differed. The actually participating users made
use of the positive reinterpretation strategy-turning the pressure into motivation and
challenge. More passive users used the strategy of avoidance or temporary
withdrawal.

Why this pattern appears

The difference in strategies used stems perhaps from different confidence and
emotional awareness. The more self-confident people are more able to reinterpret
social comparison in the growth strategy, while the more impaired avoid the subject
altogether. Difference due to personality and previous experience in how to
emotionally regulate online are the influences here.

Observation

These coping strategies would appear to show a spectrum from passive evasion
to active adaptation. Emotional regulation is not wholly a matter of getting off social
media, but a question of devising strategies of reinterpretation of what one sees.

Those who can reframe what they regard as beauty stimulation as beauty inspiration seem to experience less emotional fatigue.

Pattern 5: Awareness and Media Literacy Differences

A more subtle but no less significant pattern emerged in the participant's awareness of media influence. Some interviewees were aware of the artificiality of the online images and said, "I know they are all edited and filtered". Others were less able to separate fantasy from reality.

"I know they use filters, but it still upsets me." (P4.)

"Sometimes I get a reminder that everybody edits their pictures, that it is not true." (P10.)

Similarities

Many of the interviewees showed at least some awareness that social media content distorts the truth.

Differences and Contrasts

However, the awareness did not always give them psychological protection. Even those who were "aware" of the use of filters expressed that they still felt anxious or pressured. Here was a gap between knowing and feeling, for it must be remembered that rationality is not conclusive, for a person may understand and analyze situations without being able to emotionally resist.

Why this pattern occurs

Media intelligence is gradually developed at different rates in different individuals. Regular users likely have had greater experiences and knowledge of the editing culture, but controlling the emotions is not so easy. This situation may also

reflect that swing of culture in which the emotional effects of knowledge of something not being real lacks its psychological effect, for beauty ideals have become internalized on the emotional stage.

Observation

This observation shows the uneven development of media intelligence among younger users. Here awareness is possible but not effective, for the emotional effect is retained. It seems to bear the idea that digital education must not only strive to develop intelligence but also emotional strength when coping with content about beauty.

Connecting themes

Theme 1: External Validation and the Construction of Self-Worth

Many of the participants of this study described social media as a venue in which self-worth is constantly measured by the actions of other people. Likes, comments and followers serve as subtle but powerful indicators of approval. This theme is a contraction of self-evaluation through appearance and that of social worth, showing how important the assessment of other people's opinions is in the perception of oneself on the part of young users. A girl expressed this attitude when she said, "When my post gets lots of likes, I feel better about myself." Another said, "If there are not too many comments I begin to wonder if I am attractive enough." The above quotations indicate how the digital medium, through the medium of beauty, becomes another term for social worth. This theme indicates that self-worth is often externally constructed, based upon approval rather than inner self-confidence. For young users growing up in an image-dominated online environment, identity is a fluctuating performance dependent on the emotional rewards of being another person's focus.

Theme 2: The Performative Self and Awareness Gap

In this theme, the gap between online–offline self and differences in media literacy is highlighted with conflict in knowing and feeling. Participants understood that most images they see online were edited or filtered but still had the need to feel this was expected. As one participant described, "I know everyone filters their pictures, but I feel pressure to do this too." Another said, "The version of myself on Instagram is more confident than my real self." These quotes exemplify the contradictions in self-presentation in the digital age, in that users can be critically aware of the artificiality of social media but still experience emotional investment in

performing an idealized self. The theme suggests a division between cognitive understanding and emotional response in that awareness of manipulation does not prevent the influencing of such. It illustrates how authenticity online has also become a performance itself, with the distinction between reality and representation blurred.

Theme 3: Coping and Re-negotiating Identity

When comparing themselves or presenting themselves to others in social media, participants developed specific means of coping with the stress involved, so as to feel some control again. This theme brings together emotional regulation with social bonding, to show how users are seen to take some of the emotional power that beauty norms on-line can exercise over the self. Some participants managed to reach a positive re-framing of their experiences, 'I follow fitness influences, which I find motivating to me, instead of feeling jealous.' Others found they had to withdraw for mental health reasons, as, 'When it all gets a bit too much, I take a break from Instagram for a few days.' Some participants actively developed their own strategies. It is agency rather than passivity that is reflected in the strategies here of these young users who are not seen to simply be victims of the pressures of social media but are beginning the processes of adapting and re-defining self-worth.

These three themes influence one another in an ongoing cycle. External validation (Theme 1) encourages comparison and emotional reliance on feedback from social networks. This pressure heightens the performative self (Theme 2), as users try to manage impressions in the context of authenticity. With time, the emotional toll leads to coping responses (Theme 3), in which users desire control through withdrawal, reframing, and supportive relationships. The coping behaviors then influence the ways in which users will engage again with social networks, thus

continuing the cycle of validation and self-presentation. In short, the process reflects a dynamic loop of exposure → performance → emotion → coping cycle and illustrates the ways in which social media shapes self-perception continuously in ways that can be both constructive and damaging.

These themes of concern overlap with the psychological and sociological theories of identity development and self-presentation. Psychologically, Cooley's (1902) "looking-glass self" indicates how individuals create self-concepts from others' results, allowing for an understanding of participants' dependence on likes and comments for self-affirmation. The use of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory is important in terms of understanding the performative aspect of online avatars and expressions of self as users constantly control impressions of themselves to fit expectations of social rules. From a media perspective, Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory explains the fluctuations in self-esteem that occur for young users when they are exposed to unrealistic ideations of self-worth. Finally, coping and negotiation suggest a benefit by highlighting aspects addressed in processes of self-regulatory theory through which oneself is adjusted to maintain equilibrium of emotional needs.

In conclusion, the evidence of the aforementioned demonstrates that social media not only is a site for expression but also a living psychological environment affecting self-value, authenticity and resiliency. Understanding these processes suggests interventions relating to media literacy that could assist young users in developing healthier and more self-aware relationships with regards to online beauty culture.

Discussion of Finding

The insights gleaned from this study develop current understanding of how social media beauty ideals reconfigure self-perceptions and emotional experiences for young users. Previous studies have identified the negative aspects of self-esteem and body satisfaction issues stemming from appearance comparison, while this current study reveals a more circular and emotionally nuanced process. For respondents aged 16–25 the social media beauty ideals found on Instagram and TikTok were more than just images but were part of an emotional environment that they absorbed in the day-to-day evaluation of themselves and the way they interacted with others. Rather than experiencing social media as simply good or bad, the respondents described their relationship with the beauty ideal in social media as a constant negotiation of the terms of approval, performance and coping. A major finding corroborated earlier work in social comparison (and looking-glass self) research: respondents in this study consistently interpreted likes, comments and follows in terms of their social worth. The engagement metrics acted as small-but-powerful guides to social acceptance and rejection for them shaping their immediate sense of worth. In the manner found in studies by Perloff (2014) and Fardouly et al. (2015), social media became a type of mirror, through which body image and popularity of the self-became closely associated. Also, from the interview data we found out that male participants appeared to experience lower levels of appearance anxiety compared to female participants. The male interviewees reported that their use of social media was less focused on appearance evaluation or social validation. Instead, they primarily used social media platforms to maintain contact with friends or to follow fitness-related accounts, such as workout tutorials and health-oriented content. Unlike female participants, the male participants did not report anxiety regarding physical appearance very often, nor did they mention any serious concerns about likes, comments, or online self-presentation.

Although this study has only a limited number of male participants, the findings suggest that there is a possible gender-based difference in using social media and in the appearance-related pressure experienced.

However, this study extends the knowledge base by showing that such dependence on social approval is now normalized behavior for young users. The respondents did not see this as a problem, but rather they saw emotional dependence on cyberspace evaluation as a normal part of the online interactive experience. The implication of this is that social media does not only affect self-esteem but actively shapes it, incorporating public evaluation and individual self.

Another important insight is the disjunction between knowledge and practice in self-presentation online. Participants frequently recognized that most photographs encountered were doctored and digitally altered, but this knowledge did little to relieve the felt pressure of conformity. This indicates a discrepancy between an awareness that is cognized and a feeling that is emotionally generated. While past authors have frequently stated that media literacy serves to inoculate the user against unrealistic beauty standards, the experiences of these participants indicate that knowledge is ineffectual alone in resisting feelings. Instead, participants felt obliged to present an idealized self, despite their self-knowledge that this self was fictive. This knowledge gap fits into earlier extensions in the literature on the "performative self," indicating that second nature in the self-presentation online has increasingly become one of pretense. Young people live the duality between who they are and who they ought to be, a conflict between genuine self-expression and conscious, but impression managing, self-presentation.

The study also indicates how participants cope with the emotional toll created by pressures of validation and demand of self-presentation. Some of the participants reframed social media as motivation, especially in their interactions with fitness or

lifestyle concerns. Others defended their own emotions by physical withdrawal through temporary vis-a-vis withdrawal or restriction of screen exposure or conversely turned to supportive online interpersonal interactions. These coping mechanisms represent agency instead of passivity: the young user recognizes the emotional potential of the social media sources and active regulation in their use of same. This is a result of experiences that make for development, which, in the past, have led to coping mechanisms that led participants to misunderstand and misrepresent their experiences. The area of coping is expanded beyond past research by stating that coping does not just represent a reducing in dangers of aspect G (emotional) but a redefinition of the self. Engagement, withdrawal and redefinition indicate that these participants record more experiences, which, in totality, leads to the redefinition, rather than just defense, of the emotionally invalid personal aspects of self.

Taken together, these findings complicate simplified narratives about social media. Participants did not characterize it in a uniform manner as something generally either good or bad, but noted a dynamic interplay between validation, performance, and emotional regulation. The study provides new insight by indicating that ideals of beauty operate not only as external pressures but also as internal emotional frameworks that help regulate the social identity formation processes of youth. The findings illustrate that digital platforms primarily shape self-perception by cognitive processes of comparison and awareness, but also by emotional processes including anxiety, motivation, and social connectedness. This more holistic understanding provides opportunities for future research to explore emotional literacy, the role of online communities in resiliency, and how self-presentation occurs as youth pass through various stages of identity development.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses the effects of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok on the perception of self, self-esteem, and body image in the age group of 16 to 25 years. A thematic analysis revealed three major themes, there are the need for external validation and self-worth creation, the performative aspect of the self and the gap in awareness, and coping methods and identity redefinition. The themes opine that young users undergo a continuous cycle of comparing, performing, and managing emotions. The working of visibility and feedback on social media is such that it stresses on appearance-based acceptance, which more often than not ends up with the youth rating their worthiness based on the feedback from others.

Concurrently, the outcomes reveal that the knowledge of media manipulation does not always serve as a shield against the emotional impact of media. A good number of participants were aware that the pictures on the web are altered and that people are made to look like gods, but still, they experienced anxiety and pressure to conform. Nevertheless, the investigation also detected some traces of personal control. A few users on purpose employed coping techniques, such as changing their attitudes or subscribing to body-positive content, to safeguard their emotional health and create a more acceptable self-image.

This study is limited by the small number of male participants, with only two male interviewees included. Therefore, male experiences of appearance anxiety may not be sufficiently represented. More men should be recruited for future research in order to understand how social media impacts the way men and women experience appearance anxiety differently.

These conclusions indicate that social media is not merely a means of communication; it is a psychosocial sphere where identities are performed, measured

against one another, and transformed. This study further deepens our comprehension of the operation of beauty standards in digital culture and the position of youth as either compliant or oppositional. The forthcoming chapter will look into these findings from the perspective of theoretical and practical implications, showing their relevance for media literacy teaching, mental health support, and encouraging healthier digital habits among the youth.

Codebook

Code name	Definition	Illustrative quote(s)
A sense of community connection	It refers to the belonging, companionship, and emotional connection that individuals feel when interacting with others (such as friends, idols, or fan groups) through social media. This sense of connection can strengthen the motivation to participate in the community and affect self-worth and emotional state to a certain extent.	"For me, it's a way to connect with other people's lives" (participant 2)
Idealization and comparison	After seeing an idealized and perfected appearance or life on social media, comparing oneself to others can lead to low self-esteem, stress, or negative self-evaluation.	"When I see that other people's lives are so perfect, I feel bored and unconfident." (participant 7)
Recognition needs	Seek recognition and self-worth from others through likes and comments.	"If there are few likes, I will feel that I am not good-looking." (participant 8)
High-frequency users	This includes groups that have been using it for a long time, use it frequently, and are active on a specific platform. Users who spend a lot of time spending an average of nearly two hours a day or even longer.	"Sometimes I just want to take a five-minute break to watch TikTok, but it turns out to be an hour or two after using it." (participant 2)

Positive power	Use social media content as a motivation for learning and self-improvement。	"Watching videos of fitness influencers makes me want to train harder." (participant 3)

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