

Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

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ABSTRACT

In a world where scrolling through perfectly curated images has become second nature, young adults are increasingly shaped by the digital lens through which they view themselves. This study examines how appearance-related social media consciousness influences the body-esteem of young adults, with a focus on gender differences in these variables. A total of 140 participants (70 males and 70 females) aged 18-25, residing in Delhi (NCR), were selected for this study, based on the high rate of social media usage among youth. The two measures were administered to collect that data: "Appearance-related social media consciousness scale (ASMC)" and "Body-esteem scale for adolescents and adults (BESAA)". Data was analysed using SPSS-16, and correlation was computed to investigate the association of appearance-related social media consciousness with body-esteem. Furthermore, to investigate gender differences, a t-test was performed. The findings revealed a significant correlation between appearance-related social media consciousness and body-esteem. Also, it was found that males and females differ significantly on the administered variables.

Keywords: *Appearance-Related Social-Media Consciousness, Social Media, Body-Image, Body-Esteem, Young-Adults*

In today's digital era, with millions of social media users in India and billions worldwide, it has become an integral part of the lives of a large number of people. Using advanced technology, social media allows people to create their profiles and interact with other users. Interaction through social media is not limited to texting, but it also provides a platform where people can share their pictures, videos, reels, and show their original skills and talents to their followers all around the world. With the rapid expansion in the production of smartphones and better connectivity of the internet, these social networking sites have become easily accessible to the general population. Furthermore, it was found that 92 percent of youth aged 18-29 own a smartphone, and most young people now have 24-hour access to social media, allowing social media to be more present in their everyday experiences than ever before (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2018). India, too, has embraced the

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Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

internet with wide arms, as Indians are reported to spend around 2.36 hours on average on social media. The country's digital population has also exploded in the last decade, with over 690 million active internet users (Varghese & Waraich, 2023).

Photo-based social networking sites are the most preferred among the others. Since photo-based social media platforms focus heavily on physical appearance, social interactions through such platforms are likely to draw the attention of people towards their physical appearance as well as the appearance of others, and therefore encourage the process of social comparison based on looks (Manago et al., 2015).

These platforms are saturated with idealised images, promoting unattainable beauty standards, that widen the gap between an individual's perceived and ideal selves. As proposed by **the Self-discrepancy theory**, people who have contrasting internal representations of themselves may experience a high negative emotional state and decreased levels of self-esteem. (Higgins, 1987).

Social Media and Social Comparison

Humans have a fundamental need to compare themselves to others, fulfilling various functions such as self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954), decision-making (Camerer & Lovallo, 1999), and emotional regulation (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1982). Social psychological theories suggest that one's sense of self is socially constructed, shaped by how others perceive them (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Social comparison theory, given by Festinger (1954), states that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others in two ways: upward comparison, which can lead to negative emotions, and downward comparison, which enhances self-worth (Wood, 1989; Wills, 1981).

The consistent use of social media, which provides access to others' daily updates, is often driven by the process of social comparison (Chang, 2019). Being repeatedly exposed to body types that their culture has deemed "ideal" provides ample opportunities for people to indulge in appearance comparison, and this process of comparison leads to several negative consequences. It often leads to body disappointment, which happens mostly when people view their body as less attractive when compared with an ideal body.

A study investigated the extent to which appearance-focused accounts on Instagram negatively influence the moods and anxiety levels of people. The results suggested that those who engaged in comparison with online idealized body types are more likely to have higher anxiety and decreased positive affect (Kohler et al., 2020).

Social media allows people to carefully manage their images by creating and selecting images depicting them as the most attractive version of themselves, and then manipulating those photos to make them even more attractive, for e.g., using filters to reduce blemishes, to look thinner, and so on (Fox & Vendemia, 2016; McLean, et al., 2015). Therefore, they know how to portray themselves more attractively while clicking pictures, and they prefer to have control over the photo that will be posted on social media beforehand. Concisely, people tend to indulge in body surveillance more (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2018). Even during their offline moments, young people may find themselves processing a social event through the lens of whether they will look attractive in the resulting picture, i.e., they become very appearance-conscious, and this leads young people to engage in an elevated process of self-monitoring and surveillance of their bodies (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019).

Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

Appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC)

As a term, "consciousness" refers to the awareness of one's own thoughts, sensations, and surroundings. The concept of "Appearance-related social media consciousness" is a related construct, which is defined as the individual's ongoing cognitive and behavioral intensity about their appearance and attractiveness on social media (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2018). It's the degree to which people's ideas and actions show a constant awareness of whether or not they'll be engaging and appealing to a social media audience. ASMC is a result of the features of social media and the societal obsession with physical attractiveness (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). Viewing different desired body types online is associated with more negative body image (Arrington, 2021), and it is relatively more prevalent in adolescents and young adults, especially among girls and women. A pilot study, which employed four preliminary items to assess ASMC in a group of college women, found that ASMC was a common experience among the students and that greater levels of ASMC were connected to lower body esteem and higher depressive symptoms (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2018).

Body-esteem

Body-esteem is commonly understood as the body-related self-esteem. That is, it is an important dimension of self-esteem that refers to self-evaluations of one's body. Body esteem has traditionally been regarded as a global construct that can be measured by self-report surveys, open-ended interviews, or reactions to body-related terms. (Mendelson et al., 2001). It is regarded as the "self-evaluation and self-esteem of one's outer appearance". A person's body esteem has three major dimensions: BE appearance ("feelings about one's general appearance"), BE-weight ("feelings about one's weight"), and BE attribution ("evaluations attributed to others about one's body and appearance") (Mendelson et al., 2001). The person's position on these three dimensions determines one's body esteem.

Exposure to media and advertising images presenting unattainable body types can be harmful to body esteem for both women and men (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Objectification theory claims that women have become significantly conscious of their bodies as objects of beauty and desirability to be judged by others, particularly potential mates, as a result of media depictions (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). As media-driven male ideal body types have also become more available, it's conceivable that men have become more receptive to considering their bodies as objects to be appraised, too (Schuster et al., 2013). Although negative body image has been connected to low self-esteem, programmes aimed at improving body-esteem in adolescent and young adult women have been shown to enhance overall self-esteem as well.

Present study

While much of the existing literature has explored body image in a broad context, this study specifically delves into "body esteem," which refers to an individual's overall assessment of their body and physical appearance. This focus allows for a nuanced understanding of how body esteem, as a holistic attitudinal evaluation, is conceptually and empirically linked to body image.

Furthermore, previous research has predominantly centered on adolescents; however, this study shifts its attention to young adults, a demographic that constitutes a large proportion of social media users. Understanding how appearance-related social media consciousness affects young adults' body esteem is especially pertinent given the substantial impact that social media has on self-perception.

Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

Lastly, this study adds to our understanding of body esteem and its implications by looking at gender variations in relation to these characteristics. This method guarantees that the results are not only relevant but also add insightful information to the continuing discussion on body esteem in relation to social media.

Objectives

1. To investigate the gender difference in appearance-related social media consciousness and body esteem.
2. To investigate the association between appearance-related social media consciousness and body-esteem.

Hypotheses

- 1.1 Males and females will differ significantly in appearance-related social media consciousness.
- 1.2 Males and females will differ significantly in body-esteem.
2. Appearance-related social media consciousness and body-esteem will be significantly associated with each other.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of the present study consists of 140 participants, comprising 70 males and 70 females. The young adults, in the age range of 18-25 and residing in Delhi (NCR), were chosen for the study. The sampling approach employed a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods.

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study,

1. **Appearance-related social media consciousness scale (ASMC):** Choukas-Bradley et al. (2020) developed the Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale (ASMC) to assess teenage social media awareness about appearance. It is a “one-dimensional instrument” and employs a 7-point Likert scale. It has 13 items. The scale accounts for 63% of the overall variance. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient is 0.95, with .83 test-retest reliability. A high score on the scale suggests a high amount of appearance-related social media consciousness.
2. **Body-Esteem scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA):** Mendelson et al., 1997, developed the “Body-Esteem scale for Adolescents and Adults”. There are three subscales totalling 23 items on the scale, with response possibilities ranging from 'Never' (0) to 'Always' (4). The first subscale, 'BE-Appearance', contains four positively formulated and six negatively formulated items that deal with a person's overall sentiments about his or her appearance. This subscale has a score range of 0 to 40 points. The 'BE-Weight' subscale, which consists of three negatively and five positively phrased items, assesses a person's contentment with his or her weight. Scores ranging from 0 to 32 are possible. The 'BE-Attribution' subscale has 5 positively phrased items concerning a person's own body and appearance-related evaluations in relation to other people's perceptions. The nine questions containing negations must be recorded by reversing the scale to obtain the scores of the individual subscales and the total body-esteem score. Summing up the findings yields the respective subscale scores as well as the total score.

Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

Data Analysis: The data was analysed using SPSS-16. To investigate the gender differences between males and females based on appearance-related social media consciousness and body-esteem, an independent sample t-test was performed. Further, to investigate the association of appearance-related social media consciousness with body-esteem, correlational analysis (Pearson's product-moment correlation) was performed.

RESULTS

Table No. 1: Mean, SD, and t-value on ASMC and Body esteem

Variables	Males (N=70)		Females (N=70)		df	t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
ASMC	41.74	13.95	50.78	10.96	138	4.26***
Body-esteem	80.70	14.03	75.48	14.12	138	2.19*

***p<.01, *p<.05

The results of an independent sample t-test showed that there is a statistically significant difference between males and females with respect to appearance-related social media consciousness, as well as body-esteem. Table 1 represents the difference in the mean scores, SD, and t-value of males and females. It concludes that the scores obtained by males and females differ significantly with respect to appearance-related social media consciousness ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, males and females also were found to differ significantly with respect to body-esteem ($p < 0.05$).

Table No. 2: Correlation between ASMC and Body esteem in male participants

	ASMC	Body-Esteem
ASMC	1	-.61**
Body-Esteem	-.61**	1

**p<.01

Pearson correlational analysis was performed for ASMC and Body-esteem of male and female participants, respectively. Table 2 represents the values of correlation between ASMC and Body-esteem of male participants, which shows a significant negative correlation between them, at a significance level of 0.01 ($p < .01$).

Table 3: Correlation between ASMC and Body esteem in female participants.

	ASMC	Body-Esteem
ASMC	1	-.56**
Body-Esteem	-.56**	1

**p<.01

Table 3 represents the values of correlation between ASMC and Body-esteem of female participants, which shows a significant negative correlation between them at a significance level of 0.01 ($p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Amid the rapid digital transformation, there are numerous studies that have highlighted the concerns related to the addictive nature of social media, the overall time spent on social media, and the repercussions linked to it. However, the present study emphasised the explicit appearance-related online behaviours and specifically focused on concerns of youth

Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

with their physical appearances on social media. These subjective social media experiences of people were expected to be more relevant and produce more prominent results of how social media influences the mental and behavioural well-being of people. (Cohen, Newton John, & Slater, 2017, 2018; Lamp et al., 2019).

The present study attempted to investigate the influence of appearance-related social media consciousness on body-esteem of young adults. The study also investigated the gender difference in appearance-related social media consciousness and body-esteem.

Appearance-related consciousness is the extent to which people's ideas and actions reflect a continuous awareness of whether or not they'll appeal to the social media audience. On the basis of theories and empirical studies demonstrating that females are more susceptible to physical appearance concerns than males, and that females invest more time and engage more actively in social media than males (Burke, 2010), it was hypothesised in the present study that males and females would differ significantly in terms of appearance-related social media consciousness. The findings of the present study indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in appearance-related social media consciousness between males and females. The results reflect that females are more conscious of how they appear on social media and have a greater obsession with their physical attractiveness. Previous studies have also reported similar findings. According to one of the studies, adolescent girls reported greater mean levels of ASMC than boys. (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020)

There are various psychological implications of using social media which may exacerbate appearance concerns, and evidence suggests that females are found to be more conscious and concerned about their appearance, mostly due to the cultural frameworks that posits repeated objectification experiences to females' which often results in increased self-objectification (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018) and body surveillance (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

This, in turn, is found to be associated with decreased levels of body-esteem and self-esteem in females. To explore further in this area, the present study also hypothesised that males and females would differ significantly in body-esteem. The results confirmed the hypothesis and revealed that females have decreased levels of body-esteem as compared to males. This shows that females evaluate their bodies in a more negative manner as compared to males. Previous studies have confirmed that women experience more body surveillance, body shame, actual/ideal weight disparity, and lower body-esteem than men. (McKinley, 1998) Identical results were found in a study among undergraduate students, which discovered that men scored higher on the Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA) than women, implying that men are more confident in their bodies. (Brennan et al., 2010)

The present study also hypothesised that “appearance-related social media consciousness and body-esteem would be significantly associated with each other”. The results confirmed the hypothesis and produced a negative and significant correlation between ASMC and body-esteem. A previous study revealed that entertaining oneself more with the pictures on Facebook (e.g., posting, viewing, and commenting on images) was linked to greater weight dissatisfaction, drive for slenderness, thin ideal internalisation, and self-objectification among female high school students, and that online social grooming behaviours (e.g., viewing and commenting on peer's Facebook profiles) were significantly correlated with drive for thinness among both male and female high school students. (Meier and Gray,

Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences

2014) In another study, students who were shown photographs of attractive same-sex strangers in mock social media profiles had a lower body image and a lower positive mood than those who were shown images of unattractive same-sex strangers (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011). Similarly, female undergraduate students who were exposed to "fitspiration" images (images designed to inspire people to exercise and eat healthy in order to achieve an attractive fit body) on Instagram had a more negative mood and body dissatisfaction than those who were exposed to appearance-neutral control images (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

The results of this study and inferences from previous studies therefore confirm that with the increase in the levels of appearance-related social media consciousness, body-esteem decreases, i.e., people who are more conscious of their appearance on social media, evaluate their bodies more negatively and vice-versa.

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**Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media
Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences**

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**Beyond the Filter: Exploring the Association Between Appearance-Related Social Media
Consciousness and Body Esteem with Insights on Gender Differences**

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Conflict of Interest

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