

Appearance Related Social Media Consciousness and Emotional Regulation: A Pathway to Psychological Distress among Young Adults of Tripura

Ms. Ringkey Soraisam^{1*}, Dr. Amrita Banerjee²

ABSTRACT

Increased use of social media platforms has contributed to subjective evaluation of one's own appearance, which often results in negative psychological outcomes. This study investigates the mediating role of emotional regulation in the relationship between appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC) and psychological distress among young adults of Tripura. A cross-sectional research design was employed, with a sample of 103 participants (Male = 42, Female = 61) age ranging from 18–25 years, recruited through convenience sampling. Standardized tools were administered to measure ASMC, emotional regulation, and psychological distress. Independent t test finding showed gender differences across all the variables. Correlational analyses revealed that higher ASMC was significantly associated with increased psychological distress ($r = 0.529$, $p < 0.001$) and inversely associated with emotional regulation ($r = -0.245$, $p < 0.005$). Regression-based mediation analysis was conducted to assess whether emotional regulation acts as a mediator. The results indicated a significant direct effect of ASMC on psychological distress ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < 0.001$), while the indirect effect via emotional regulation was not statistically significant ($t = 1.809$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, the findings suggest that emotional regulation does not act as a mediator in between ASMC and psychological distress.

Keywords: Social-Media, Appearance Consciousness, Emotional Regulation, Psychological Distress, Young Adults, Tripura

Social media has become an inevitable part of young people's in India, due to the rapid growth in easy accessibility of smartphones with various unlimited internet plans, which provides an array of advantages, notably greater connection, availability of sources, and chances for individual expression (Taddi et al., 2024). India had over 491 million active social media users in early 2025 and expected to raise billions by 2029, surpassing China (Hafuta, 2025). Among all the sites Facebook, Instagram, YouTube were most popularly used by Indian youth (Kemp, 2025). With the information updated by Social Media Statistics for India (2025), 80.8% Indian utilized WhatsApp, leading to the most prevalent chatting software, followed by Instagram with 77.9%, offers a plethora of entertainment and visual content, Facebook continues to be a significant platform for community engagement, connectivity and accessing information with 67.8% users (Howe, 2025). It has become a

¹Research Scholar, ICFAI University Tripura, India

²Assistant Professor, ICFAI University Tripura, India

*Corresponding Author

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medium for self-expression relying on visual content such as image, videos, vlogs and memes to build networks and share thoughts (Vora,2025).

Appearance related social media consciousness (ASMC) characterized the mindset and actions of individuals demonstrating persistent consciousness concerning how they might seem or look to others on social media (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020). Frequently exhibiting action and thoughts on how one appears on social media-based photo site platforms can also impact on one's emotional and mental well-being (Choukas-Bradley et al.,2019). Studies on ASMC have suggested that social media's emphasis on beauty and high visual content increases susceptibility to appearance issues, contributing to the rise of depressive symptoms (Mahuex et al., 2022). Having a negative thoughts and unsatisfied view of one's own image on social media have also shown high relation with appearance consciousness resulting in elevated body dysmorphic disorder and a lower sense of self-esteem (Waqar et al., 2022). Sarman & Ciftci (2024) claims that the time invested on utilizing social media predicts the appearance consciousness and social media addiction. Males tend to have less concern about their appearance in social media and they use more proactive ways of confronting problems compared to female executed (Mahon & Hevey, 2021).

Emotional regulation refers to one's ability to monitor, assess, and regulate their emotions in order to either support or inhibit effective functioning (Thompson,1991). Emotional regulations strategies can process in two ways: Cognitive reappraisal-entails reframing of thoughts or situation that may impact the emotions & Expressive suppression- which try to suppress or conceal the emotions that have already surfaced or which is ongoing (Gross et al., 2006; Cutuli,2014;). Adaptive ER strategies are found to be less associated with anxiety and depression while a profound link has been identified between maladaptive ER strategies (Schafer,2017). Young people who usually struggle to control their emotions are often inclined to exhibit problematic internet use behaviour (Gioia et al., 2021). The usage of social media can impact mental wellbeing either negatively or positively. Active users tend to show more adaptive emotional regulation strategies leading to easy emotional recovery and resilience while passive users often entangle themselves with feeling of distress, isolation effecting their mental health (Escobar-Viera,2018).

Psychological distress is a subjective emotional experience leading to unpleasant feelings which often result from traumatic events, prolonged stress and challenges impacting one's daily life (Drapeau et al.,2012; Cromby et al., 2017). Anxiety and depression symptoms are its defining characteristics and can exist simultaneously with numerous chronic illnesses and disorders (Arvidsdotter et al.,2016). Studies show that young adults have high rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions, making psychological distress a serious concern for this demographic (Rinder,2004; Jackson& Finney,2002). A substantial number of youths in India are dealt with psychological distress, which is exacerbated by academic strain, self- doubt, social media influence and expectations. Using social media excessively could affect emotional regulation and trigger psychological distress.

Theoretical framework

Social Comparison theory claims that people have innate tendency to evaluate their own worth, quality and capabilities by comparing themselves with others, particularly when objectives mean are absent and uncertain to understand their own abilities by themselves (Festinger,1954).In the era of digital world where numerous social media platforms plays a significant source of communication and interaction with one another had boost comparison

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regardless of active/passive users, leading to feeling inadequacy and depressed (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Browsing and scrolling on social feed increases the evaluation of self by observing others consciously or unconsciously setting a standard of self-evaluation (Vogel et al., 2014). In the context of social media, many studies point out how it contributed towards upward social comparison- evaluating oneself with someone who has better look, style, appearance and downward social comparison - individuals evaluate by looking or comparing someone worse than oneself (Lian et al., 2017, Feinstein et al., 2013). Upward comparison tends to be found more in frequent users, which increased the skeptical inadequacy, undermined self-esteem and elevated unpleasant sensations on themselves (Johnson, 2021). While a study also found that downward comparison can raise one's esteem also foster complacency generally comparing with someone unflattering posts or images (Taylor & Armes, 2024).

The modal model of emotional regulation comprehends how individuals govern their emotions as well as how they progress with time. It outlines the five phases that contribute to the formation as well as regulations of emotions (Gross, 1998). Situation selection-involves deciding whether to proceed or stay out of certain circumstances depending on how they might affect one's emotions. Situation modification-emphasizes an effort to alter a certain physical, external environment in order to change a desired emotional impact. Attentional deployment-outlines direction of one's attention towards or shifting away from the emotional aspects of a certain context of circumstances. Cognitive change-describes how individuals appraise the current situations so as to modify its emotional interpretation, either by altering one's perspective on the circumstances or ability to handle the situation it places on. Response modulation-refers to the alteration of emotion dimensions or vitality after it has already been generated. It attempts to repress, amplify, or control emotional expression or physiological arousal (Gillespie & Beech, 2016). Furthermore, emotion regulation strategies have been distinguished in two techniques: the antecedent-focused emotion regulation technique one can control emotions before they completely manifest and cause behavioural and physiological changes; Response-focused emotion management is a technique used once feelings have surfaced. While expressive suppression is employed in the response-focused approach, reappraisal is one of the strategies employed in the antecedent-focused approach (Gross & John, 2003)

Cognitive theory posits that psychological distress arises largely from distorted or dysfunctional patterns of thinking. Negative schemas shape automatic thoughts and interpretation of daily events, which fuel emotions like anxiety and depression (Beck, 1996). This theory primarily focuses on how an individual's thoughts influence their emotions and behaviours. Several studies have highlighted how stressful situations link with cognitive schemas, which firmly grasped beliefs developed throughout one's life's causes distorted thoughts and emotions (Ingram et al., 1998). The cognitive model emphasized that excessive emotions and dysfunctional actions of a person result from exaggerated interpretation of their experiences leading to negative evaluation of themselves, others and surroundings (Nurius & Macy, 2012). Distress, anxiety, and depression can result when people internalize self-defeating views about their looks.

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METHODOLOGY

Objectives:

1. To examine gender differences in appearance related social media consciousness, emotional regulation and psychological distress.
2. To assess the relationship between appearance related social media consciousness, emotional regulation and psychological distress among young adults of Tripura
3. To investigate the role of emotional regulation in mediating the relation between appearance related social media consciousness and psychological distress

Hypothesis:

- **H₀₁:** There will be no significant gender difference in appearance related social media consciousness, emotional regulation and psychological distress.
- **H₀₂:** There will be no significant relation between appearance related social media consciousness, emotional regulation and psychological distress among young adults of Tripura.
- **H₀₃:** There will be no mediating role of emotional regulation in relation between appearance related social media consciousness and psychological distress.

Research Design

A descriptive cross-sectional research study has been opted for the study, which focuses on quantifying an outcome at a specific point of time. This quantitative research aims to understand the link between the variables and its mediating effect.

Sample Size: A total sample of 103 young adults between the age group 18 -25 years were recruited from different districts of Tripura, through convenience sampling technique, which allows to easily access the subject and gather the required information effectively within the lesser time (Simkus,2023).

Tools

- **Basic information schedule:** This consists of general information details about the participants such as gender, age, districts, economic strata, educational qualification and some information pertaining to social networking site usage and purpose.
- **Appearance Related Social Media Consciousness Scale (ASMCS):** ASMCS consists of 13 items assessing people's ongoing consciousness and preoccupied thoughts concerning how attractive they appear on social media. Each item was rated on 7-point Likert scale (1- Never to 7-Always, with total score ranging from 13 to 91. Based on the internal consistency reliability, the ASMC was determined as a reliable tool with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95 (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020). The Turkish adaptation studies on adolescents have shown good psychometric properties with $\alpha=0.93$ (Cetinkaya et al., 2022).
- **Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ):** This questionnaire was developed by Gross & John (2003). It comprises 10 items and assess the ways how individual control and manage their emotions in two subscales i.e., Cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and Expressive Suppression (4 items). The items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 7= Strongly Agree to 1= Strongly Disagree. Higher score indicates higher levels of emotional regulation. ERQ shows good internal consistency ($\alpha=0.71 - 0.83$ for cognitive reappraisal & expressive suppression) and test- retest reliability ($r= 0.69$).

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- Kessler Psychological Distress Scale(K10):** The Kessler Psychological Distress scale is a 10-item self-report questionnaire scored on 5- point Likert scale from 1= none of the time to 5 =always, which assess the level of distress experienced by individual (Kessler & Mroczek ,1992). This study was found to have a good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha 0.84 in South Africa populations (Hoffman et al., 2022). Some others studies tend to have higher reliability of $\alpha= 0.90$ (Manish et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025).

Analysis of the data: The IBM SPSS version 20 was used to analyze the findings. For every variable, descriptive statistics were performed. Gender difference was measured for all the variables using independent t test, Pearson correlation approach was then utilized to explore the association within the variables. Then, Multiple Regression analysis was done to verify if emotional regulation mediates the relationship between ASMC and psychological distress (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The indirect influence of the ASMC upon Psychological distress through Emotional regulation was examined using Sobel test statistics.

Procedure

Data was gathered through online survey via Google form. The participants were elaborated with the study purpose, followed by detailed instruction and are assured with confidentiality of the data. Additionally, an informed consent was obtained from the participants to respect their choice and honor their autonomy. Based on the objective, the Appearance related Social Media Consciousness Scale (ASMCS), Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (EQR) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) will be administered to the subject. The gathered data will be analyzed utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences for descriptive and inferential statistics, while for the indirect effect study the Sobel test calculator will be used.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Demographical variables

Variables	Frequency	%
Two commonly used social media Platforms		
Facebook & Instagram	8	7.8%
Facebook & YouTube	5	4.8%
Facebook & WhatsApp	12	11.7%
Instagram & WhatsApp	45	43.7%
Instagram & YouTube	13	12.6%
Instagram & Twitter	2	1.9%
WhatsApp & YouTube	16	15.5%
WhatsApp & Twitter	1	1%
Twitter & Telegram	1	1%
Daily Average Screen Time		
0-2 hours.	15	14.6%
2-4 hours.	31	30 %
4-6 hours.	36	35%
More than 6 hours	21	20.4%
Purpose of Engagement		
Academic	22	21.4%
Social Networking	24	23.3%
Entertainment & Leisure	45	43.7%
Other	12	11.7%

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This table highlights the frequency statistics of total 103 participants from different district of Tripura, with majority of participant age group ranged between 21-23. The sample consist of 40.9% male (n=42) and 59.2% females (n=61). In term of education qualification, 56.3% of the participant are Undergraduate, 21.4% are graduate, 19.4% were Postgraduate and 2.9% found to be Ph.D. Scholar. Majority of the participants belong to Above poverty line (N=65, 63.1%) and 36.9% are from the Below poverty line economic strata. Among all the social media platforms the most commonly used to two platforms are Instagram & WhatsApp (n=45, 43.7 %), WhatsApp & Youtube (n=16, 15.5%), Instagram & Youtube (n=13, 12.6%), Facebook & WhatsApp (n=12, 11.7%), Facebook & Instagram (n=8, 7.8%), Facebook and Youtube (n=5, 4.8%) and Instagram & Twitter (n=2, 1.9%). Average screen time of the participants are found majorly with 4-6 hrs (n=36, 35%), 2-4hrs (n=31, 30%), more than 6hrs (n=21, 20.4%) and 0-2 hrs (n=15, 14.6%). Most of the participants used the social media platform for entertainment and leisure (n=45, 43.7%), some for social networking and interaction (n=24, 23.3%), few for academic purposes (n=22, 21.4%) and remaining participants for some other activities (n=12, 11.7%).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and Test of Normality for variables under study

Variable s	Mea n	S.D.	d.f.	Skewnes s	Kurtosi s	Kolmogorov - Smirnov	Shapiro - Wilk
ASMC	45.57	15.87	103	.065	-.404	.165	.426
ERQ	46.46	12.36	103	.030	-.398	.20	.615
K10	27.59	7.97	103	.096	.075	.053	.195

This table reveals the mean value of ASMC (M=45.57, S.D.= 15.87), ERQ (M=46.46, S.D.= 12.36), K10 (M=27.59, S.D.=7.97). The statistical analysis of each variable appears to be normally distributed as all the values lie between -2 and +2. Also, data from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that ASMC (p=0.16), ERQ (p=0.20) and K10 (p=0.053) were all normally distributed. Furthermore, normality distributions were demonstrated by the Shapiro-Wilk test, which determined the p value of ASMC (p=0.426), ERQ (p=0.615) and K10 (p=0.195) greater than 0.05.

Table 3: Gender difference in the levels of ASMC, ERQ and K10.

Variables	Male (N=42)		Female(N=61)		T	d.f.	P
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.			
ASMC	41.29	16.05	48.61	15.12	2.36	101	0.02
ERQ	47.25	12.58	42.43	11.48	2.01	101	0.04
K10	25.98	8.46	28.74	8.22	1.67	101	0.10

Table 3 indicated the independent t test for the variables ASMC, EQR and K10. The results analysed found a significant gender difference (t (2.36) =0.02, p<0.05) in appearance related social media consciousness (ASMC) between male (M=41.29, S.D.=16.05) and female (M=48.61, S.D.=15.12). Furthermore, the findings showed that emotional regulation is found to be significantly varied (t (2.01) = 0.04, p<0.05) between male (M=47.25, S.D. = 12.58) and

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female (M=42.43, S.D.=11.48). Lastly, K10 showed statistically no significant difference ($t(1.67) = 0.10, p < 0.05$) with male (M=25.98, S.D.=8.46) and female (M=28.74, S.D.=8.22).

Table 4: Pearson Correlation between ASMC, ERQ and K10

	Variables	1	2	3
1	ASMC	1	-	-
2	ERQ	-.245*	1	-
3	K10	.529**	-.337**	1

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Table 4 displays the Pearson Correlation study findings that show the interdependence between variables under study. Results indicated a significant correlation within all variables, ASMC had significant negative correlation with emotional regulation ($r = -.245, p = 0.05$) and positive relation to psychological distress ($r = .529, p = 0.01$). Additionally, the obtained correlation between emotional regulation and psychological distress was $r = -.337, p = 0.01$ and revealed a satisfactory negative relation.

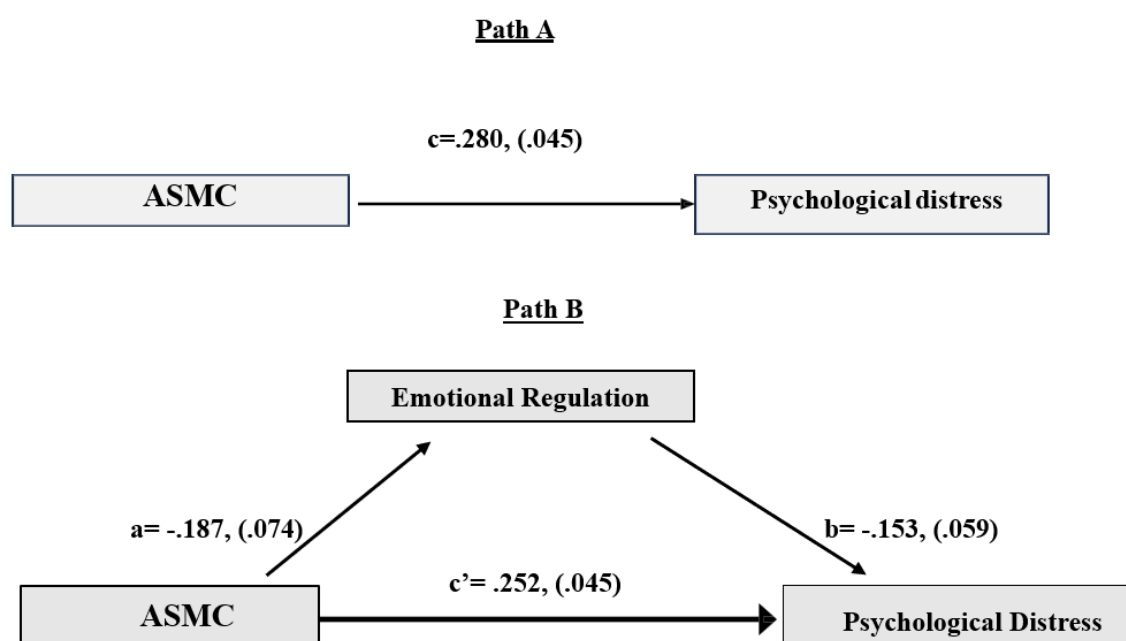


Fig 1 Mediation analysis: Path A: the direct effect of ASMC on Psychological distress.

Path B: the mediating effect of emotional regulation in the relation between ASMC and psychological distress.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis for determining mediating effect of Emotional regulation on Appearance related social media Consciousness and Psychological distress.

Variables	B	SE	B	T
ASMC	0.28	0.045	0.529	6.27
(c)b				
R(R ²)		0.529(.280)		
F		39.314		

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Variables	B	SE	B	T
Emotional Regulation	-0.187	0.074	-0.245	-2.539
(a)b				
R(R²)		0.245(.060)		
F		6.446		
Emotional Regulation	-0.153	0.059	-0.221	-2.608
(b)				
ASMC	0.252	0.045	0.475	5.612
(c')				
R(R²)		0.571(0.326)		
F		24.188		

Dependent variables: psychological distress

Table 5 reveals the multiple regression analysis findings, appearance related social media consciousness (ASMC), had been found to be significantly predicting direct positive effect on psychological distress, ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < .001$), with R^2 value of 0.529 indicating that 52.9% variance in outcome variables is brought by the predictor variables and also, ASMC significantly predict emotional regulation negatively, ($\beta = -.245$ $p < .001$), with R^2 value of 0.60 depicting 60% of variance in emotional regulation. Moreover, the finding further revealed that appearance related social media consciousness and emotional regulation explained 32.6% variance in psychological distress with $F = 24.188$, $p < .001$, in which appearance related social media consciousness positively predicting psychological distress ($\beta = .475$, $p < .001$) and emotional regulation negatively predicting psychological distress ($\beta = -0.221$, $p < .001$).

Table 6: Indirect effect of Appearance related social media Consciousness on Psychological distress through Emotional Regulation.

			Mediating effect	Indirect effect	Standard Error	Test statistic	P
			B	S _b	effect (a X b)		
ASMC	a	-0.187	-0.153	0.059	0.028	1.809	0.07
	S _a	0.074					

The significance of the indirect effect was determined by using Sobel test statistics. From the table 6, it is evident that the indirect effect of Appearance related Social Media Consciousness on Psychological Distress ($t[\text{indirect}] = 0.028$, $S.E. = 0.0158$, $t\text{-statistics} = 1.809$, $p = 0.07$) through Emotional Regulation is insignificant as the p value $> .005$.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the present research was to understand whether emotional regulation mediates the associations between appearance related social media consciousness and psychological distress of young adults in Tripura ($N = 103$). This study was aimed to investigate the inter-relatedness between the variables, along with a motive of understanding the gender differences.

1. Gender Differences in Appearance Related Social Media Consciousness, Emotional Regulation & Psychological Distress.

The study discovered a statistically significant difference in the dimension of ASMC and emotional regulation while insignificant disparity was found in psychological distress. Males showed comparatively greater abilities in regulating emotions, while females scored higher on ASMC. These findings are consistent with earlier research that indicates women are more vulnerable to appearance-based appraisals because they are subjected to more social media and the constraints of society to meet idealized beauty standards (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). As on social media, women tend to focus more on beauty, it has worse their emotional control skills, and experience higher psychological suffering (López-Montón et al., 2024; Merino et al., 2024). The social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) also contends that women are more likely to compare their looks in upwardly, which causes them to feel unhappy and distressed. Men, on the other hand, expressed less distress and ASMC. According to some researchers, males are subject to physical ideals such as muscularity, although the societal algorithms for masculinity place more emphasis on accomplishments and competence than on looks (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009). However, men might be less expressive of their emotions and have a greater tendency to use avoidance-based coping mechanisms, which could help them cope with emotional dysregulation or distress (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013).

2. The Relation of Appearance Related Social Media Consciousness, Emotional Regulation and Psychological Distress of Youth in Tripura.

The study revealed a significant positive correlation has been found across ASMC and psychological distress which indicated that individuals having higher appearance consciousness will tend to have greater amounts of psychological distress. These findings advocate the outcomes of previous studies on ASMC, which showed that more distress is correlated with higher levels of social media appearance standard (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). According to Choukas-Bradley et al., (2020) people with high ASMC are extremely conscious of how others view their looks on social media and frequently engage in self-surveillance, comparison, and validation-seeking behaviours.

The study also found a strong negative correlation between emotional regulation and ASMC. Higher degrees of social media concern about appearance were associated with a tendency for people to report more emotional dysregulation. This association highlights the negative effects of excessive exposure to appearance-focused content on an individual's capacity to successfully regulate their internal emotional experiences. This is consistent with theoretical frameworks that posit that a fixation with external validation diminishes the ability to process and regulate emotions in an adaptive way (Gross & John, 2003).

Lastly, the study discovered a negative link between psychological distress and emotional regulation, i.e., lower levels of distress were linked to improved emotional control abilities. This confirms decades of research on emotional regulation that shows how adaptive techniques like problem-solving, reappraisal, and mindfulness can protect people from stress and anxiety (Gross, 2015; Aldao et al., 2010). People who are able to control their emotions are typically better able to cope with stress, make more logical interpretations of social media content, and keep a healthy self-image when confronted with carefully maintained online presentations (Schafer, 2017). This connection emphasizes how crucial emotional intelligence is as a safeguard against anxiety and maladjustment in digital space.

3. Mediating Role of Emotional Regulation Between Appearance Related Social Media Consciousness and Psychological Distress

Based on findings of the mediation analysis, emotional regulation does not act as mediator in between ASMC and psychological distress. As a result, the final hypothesis was accepted. Despite the fact that emotional regulation was adversely correlated with distress and ASMC, the indirect relationship was not statistically significant. This suggests that presence or absence of emotional regulation strategies does not significantly alter the impact of ASMC on psychological distress. Consistent with the result from the study, emotional regulation is shown to predict body image dissatisfaction however it does act as a pathway through which body image dissatisfaction influences eating disorders (Fahmin, 2005). For instance, Marengo et al., (2018) discovered that although using social media was associated with depressed symptoms, emotion regulation techniques however explained little amount of the variation, indicating the existence of other mediators. Indeed, regardless of emotion control techniques, Fardouly et al., (2015) discovered that the degree to which women internalized thin norms strongly impacted the relationship between Facebook use and body dissatisfaction. Echa et al., (2025) demonstrated cognitive appraisal and expressive suppressive as a mediator in relation between body shape concerns and depressive symptoms in Nigerian undergraduates' students.

CONCLUSION

The study's aimed to examine how emotional regulation functions as a mediator between appearance-related social media consciousness, psychological distress as well as to evaluate gender disparities in these domains. The findings revealed a notable significant gender disparities with regard to ASMC & emotional regulation in which women exhibited greater susceptibility to ASMC, while male showed higher level of emotion regulation and insignificant differences in psychological distress. In correlational study, appearance related social media consciousness is found to be moderately linked with psychological distress, exposing constantly to social media content, evaluating one's own appearance and greed for social satisfaction heightened the feeling of anxious, stress and other psychosocial effects. It is reported that emotional regulation is inversely related with psychological distress. Individual who are able to regulate their emotions adaptively are more likely to control their negative emotions and sustain their emotional equilibrium in the face of any stressful situations, however for those with lower emotional control abilities may be at the risk of developing emotional and psychological distress.

Additionally, appearance related social media consciousness has been proven to be negatively related with emotional regulation. Higher appearance related social media consciousness can decrease the emotional regulation ability, indicating that peoples' ability in handling their emotions effectively might be hampered by monitoring and internalizing the social platform standard. Lastly, in mediation analysis, emotional regulation was found to have no significant influence on relation between appearance related social media consciousness and psychological distress in the youth of Tripura, despite strong prediction of direct link among the variables. This implies that the effect of ASMC on psychological distress is not substantially changed by the presence or lack of emotional control techniques. There are several limitations in this study. First, the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal inferences. Furthermore, the limited sample size, tools, and specific focus on particular regions may restrict the generalizability.

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