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Abstract

The role of social media in shaping physical appearance perceptions, body dissatisfaction, and the drive for thinness has become a significant area of study in recent years. Social media platforms often promote unrealistic beauty standards among women. This quantitative research was conducted by using correlational research design. Survey was administered with the help of questionnaire as a method of data collection. Sample of 103 women (unmarried=44, married=59). were selected through convenient sampling. Findings of the study reveal that significant positive correlation was found between using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. In addition, using social media is a significant positive predictor of comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. Furthermore, unmarried females reported higher level of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness as compared to married. It is recommended that in future research addressed the need for awareness and interventions to mitigate the harmful effects of social media on body image and mental well-being.

Keywords: Social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness

1. Introduction

Body image is defined as one's perception, thoughts, and emotions revolving around one's own body. It is the depiction of one's body representation, including their mirror reflection, and it reflects social constructs, which depend on a society's culture and norms. This conception is created using body ideals, substantially communicated via media, family, and peers. For the last 30 years, media have been over-exposing people to thinness ideals, starting from a young age (Blowers et al., 2003; Shah & Kanwal, 2021), turning this ideal into a new reference standard (Anschutz et al., 2011; Zafar & Younis, 2020).

Young women, who are most sensitive to thinness ideals, tend to liken them to beauty and success. Thus, etiologic models incorporating environmental factors consider social pressure about physical appearance to be a determining factor in developing eating disorders (Gorwood et al., 2016; Karhan, 2019; ven Zanden, 2023). However, even though this social pressure is indisputable, not all people are vulnerable to it. It is the degree with which they will relate to these thinness standards, namely how they internalize this ideal that will help to predict the risk of developing an ED (Stormer & Thompson, 1996). Indeed, internalizing thinness standards can lead to an alteration in body image, resulting in body dissatisfaction and exaggerated concerns about body and weight (Stice & Shaw, 2002; Rasheed, 2020).

Body dissatisfaction is characterized by an inconsistency between one's real body and the idealized body. It is one of the most studied psychological constructs in body image disorders literature (Taylor et al., 2006). According to the literature, it is often linked to psychological distress (Ohring et al., 2002; Labeeque & Sanaullah, 2019; Saijo, 2022) and is a proven risk factor for developing an ED (Killen et al. 1996) through, in particular, the implementation of food restriction that can lead to anorexia nervosa (Ricciardelli et al., 2006) or to the onset of binge eating episodes (with or without compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain). According to several authors, body dissatisfaction found in AN patients differs from that of control subjects by a greater feeling of inconsistency between their actual body and the desired body. (Williamson et al., 1993). Indeed, in addition to overestimating the size of their actual shape, AN patients seek to resemble an ideal significantly thinner than subjects without EDs do. People with AN and bulimia nervosa share the same body image obsession, with the pervasive fear of gaining weight. Finally, subjects with binge eating disorders tend to be overweight, or even obese, which can reinforce body dissatisfaction (Wilfley et al., 2000; Radas, 2023)

Social comparison, combined with the internalization of ideals, is one of the main mechanisms participating in one's body image perception. These two mechanisms are instrumental in developing body dissatisfaction (Blowers et al., 2003). Several studies have shown that individuals who compare their physical appearance to that of others they considered to be more attractive than them, such as models or celebrities, had a higher chance of being dissatisfied with their body image and developing an ED (Tiggemann et al., 2009; McKee et al., 2013; Das, 2022; Nkegbe & Abor, 2023). Although historically speaking, body norms have been mainly conveyed through traditional media (TV, radio, newspaper, and magazines), the last few years have borne witness to the rise and expansion of social media use. The term "social media" refers to every website and online mobile app with user-generated content. They enable their users to participate in online exchanges, broadcast self-made content, and join virtual communities. They are mostly used by teenagers and young adults, and the most common ones are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Several studies have suggested that social media exposure could foster body dissatisfaction and result in risky eating behaviors by broadcasting thinness ideals individuals thus long for (Blowers et al., 2003; De Vries et al., 2016; Jerome, 2019; Fan & Iqbal, 2022; Clark, 2022). Among the identified mechanisms that explain this outcome, the most common ones are social comparison based on physical appearance and thinness ideals' internalization through daily exposure to idealized bodies. Indeed, physical appearance holds a central place in social media today (Fardouly et al., 2018; Audi & Yu, 2024; Situngkir, 2024).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

In recent years, social media has become an integral part of daily life in Pakistan, with millions of individuals actively engaging on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. This digital environment is highly visual, often promoting ideals of beauty

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and physical appearance that are heavily influenced by Western standards. The pervasive nature of these social media platforms contributes to the constant exposure of curated images, body types, and beauty standards that may not reflect reality, but rather an idealized or edited version of it. The problem lies in the growing influence of social media on individuals' perceptions of their own bodies, particularly among young people in Pakistan. These platforms often feature content that emphasizes thinness, flawless skin, and other beauty standards that can lead to body dissatisfaction. The constant comparison to these often unrealistic portrayals of physical appearance can cause individuals, especially women, to feel dissatisfaction with their own bodies, leading to a heightened desire to conform to these standards. This phenomenon has given rise to a drive for thinness — an intense pursuit of weight loss and body modification, driven by the belief that achieving a certain body type will lead to greater social acceptance and personal fulfillment. In the context of Pakistan, cultural expectations and the traditional emphasis on modesty and femininity further complicate this issue. The pressure to align with global beauty ideals, while simultaneously adhering to local cultural norms, creates a unique challenge for individuals. Thus, the statement of the problem is to investigate how social media influences body dissatisfaction and the drive for thinness in Pakistan, with a focus on the role of comparison in shaping individuals' perceptions of their physical appearance. The study aims to explore the psychological and social consequences of social media exposure, examine how it affects self-esteem and body image, and assess the implications for mental health, especially among young women. By understanding these dynamics, the research will contribute to the larger conversation about the intersection of social media, body image, and mental well-being in the context of Pakistan's evolving social landscape.

1.2. Rationale of the Study

With the rapid growth of social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, users are constantly exposed to curated images of idealized body types. This exposure has been shown to impact individuals' perceptions of their own bodies. Social media is particularly influential in shaping self-image and fostering comparisons, which is particularly relevant in a globalized society like Pakistan where Western beauty standards are often promoted. In Pakistan, beauty ideals are heavily influenced by both traditional and Western standards. In particular, there is often an emphasis on slimness as a beauty standard, which is evident in media portrayals, advertisements, and celebrity culture. Social media amplifies these ideals, creating pressure for individuals, especially young people, to conform to these beauty standards. This study can help understand how these standards are internalized and the impact they have on body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness among Pakistanis. Body dissatisfaction has been linked to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. By investigating the role social media plays in body image issues, the study will provide insights into how these platforms contribute to negative body image perceptions. In the context of Pakistan, where mental health is still a stigmatized topic, understanding how social media affects body image could be crucial for promoting mental well-being. The drive for thinness is a psychological desire to attain a specific body type, often driven by the portrayal of thinness as ideal or desirable. In Pakistan, this drive can be exacerbated by the juxtaposition of traditional ideals of beauty with Westernized notions, creating confusion and insecurity among individuals about their bodies. This study aims to explore how social media influences this drive, especially in comparison to the more traditional beauty standards. While research on body image issues and social media influence has been conducted globally, there is a lack of studies that specifically address this in Pakistan, particularly in the context of the intersection between culture, social media, and body image. This study will fill the gap in the existing literature by offering a localized perspective on the issue.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

- To measure the relationship of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness among women
- To compare the level of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness between unmarried and married women

2. Significance of the Study

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok provide a constant stream of images, videos, and narratives about beauty standards, body types, and personal appearances. This exposure can lead to unhealthy comparisons, as users often compare their own bodies to those presented online. In Pakistan, where global beauty standards are often adopted and promoted by media, understanding how these digital spaces affect local perceptions is crucial. A significant amount of research has linked body dissatisfaction to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. With social media providing unrealistic portrayals of beauty and thinness, the study is important in identifying how these platforms contribute to female body dissatisfaction, potentially leading to serious emotional and psychological distress. Given the increasing number of young women using social media in Pakistan, this connection is especially relevant. Social media often perpetuates the idea that thinness is synonymous with beauty, success, and happiness. This phenomenon is particularly concerning in a country like Pakistan, where traditional ideals of beauty have historically included fuller figures. The rise of social media-driven beauty standards has created a new narrative that encourages women to pursue an often unrealistic and unhealthy thin ideal. Exploring the drive for thinness in Pakistani women in this context helps understand how media influences these desires and pressures. Pakistan is a diverse country with varying cultural influences, but social media transcends local boundaries, exposing individuals to global trends. Investigating how social media affects body image within Pakistan's unique cultural and societal framework is essential. While Pakistan's culture may traditionally emphasize more curvaceous body types, the global proliferation of slim models and influencers is reshaping body ideals, which might clash with the local cultural standards, leading to confusion or internal conflict for women. In many societies, including Pakistan, women face greater scrutiny regarding their physical appearance compared to men. Social media exacerbates this by creating platforms where women are expected to conform to certain beauty standards. This study's significance lies in its focus on how these gendered expectations are reinforced or challenged by the pervasive presence of social media in daily life, influencing how women perceive their bodies and the pressure they feel to conform. The findings of such a study could be critical for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals in Pakistan. Understanding how social media affects body image could guide efforts to raise awareness,

promote positive body image, and develop policies or initiatives aimed at reducing body shaming and promoting healthier attitudes toward beauty. It could also provide insight into how media literacy programs might be designed to help young women critically evaluate social media content and reduce its harmful effects. The role of influencers, celebrities, and beauty gurus on social media cannot be understated. In Pakistan, these figures often set beauty standards, and their influence on young women is considerable. The study would contribute to the understanding of how these digital role models impact body image concerns and whether they contribute to an unhealthy obsession with thinness or promote more diverse and realistic body representations. This study holds significant value as it addresses the intersection of media influence, cultural perceptions, and body image, focusing on young Pakistani women navigating the pressures of an idealized physical appearance. By examining the role of social media in shaping body dissatisfaction and the drive for thinness, the research can provide insights into how digital platforms influence self-esteem, societal expectations, and mental health. Additionally, it can inform broader conversations on how to tackle body-related issues in the digital age and promote a healthier, more inclusive definition of beauty.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This quantitative research was conducted by using correlational research design. Survey was administered with the help of questionnaire as a method of data collection. Sample of 103 women (unmarried=44, married=59) were selected through convenient sampling.

3.2. Instrument

Social Media: Use The questionnaire’s second part interrogated the participants about their use of social media: platform, frequency (number of uses per day), time spent (hours per day), frequency of comparing one’s physical appearance to that of people followed on social media, and the frequency of posting “selfies” (a photograph that you take of yourself).

Body Image: The questionnaire’s third part evaluated body image perception, using the Eating Disorder Inventory-2 (EDI-2) scale, translated and adapted in French (Garner, 1991; Criquillion-Doublet et al., 1995). It is a self-rated questionnaire evaluating psychological characteristics and symptoms associated with ED, using 11 subscales. We used the “Drive for Thinness” subscale (EDI-DT), composed of 7 questions (score of 0 to 21), and “Body Dissatisfaction” subscale (EDI-BD), composed of 9 questions (score of 0 to 27).

ED Screening: The questionnaire’s last part aimed at screening ED, using the Sick-Control-One Stone-Fat-Food (SCOFF) self-questionnaire. It is a simple survey of 5 questions used to screen eating disorders in general population (Luck et al., 2002). The French validation depicted this questionnaire to be as efficient and relatable as the original, with a great sensitivity and specificity in diagnosing ED when a patient has a score of 2 or over (Garcia et al., 2011).

4. Results

Table 1: Correlation matrix of Use of Social Media, Comparing Physical Appearance, Body Dissatisfaction and Drive for Thinness (n=103)

Variables	Mean	Std.Deviation	USM	CPA	BD	DT
Using Social Media	13.9243	6.92341	1	.513**	.391**	.483**
Comparing Physical Appearance	11.0432	3.00311		1	.639**	.519**
Body Dissatisfaction	18.0931	9.58123			1	.457**
Drive for Thinness	24.3213	8.53212				1

Table 1 shows the significant positive correlation among using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness.

Table 2: Mean score difference of Use of Social Media, Comparing Physical Appearance, Body Dissatisfaction and Drive for Thinness (n=103)

Variable	Marital Status	N	M	Std.Deviation	df	t-test	p-value
Use of Social Media	Unmarried	44	36.2439	19.76320	101	3.092	<.001
	Married	59	27.9813	13.81023			
Comparing Physical Appearance	Unmarried	44	21.5724	9.71203	101	5.481	<.001
	Married	59	11.1308	3.06810			
Body Dissatisfaction	Unmarried	44	23.7109	7.56023	101	7.003	<.001
	Married	59	13.0912	5.17620			
Drive for Thinness	Unmarried	44	47.0541	15.03208	101	5.831	<.001
	Married	59	31.0690	10.82001			

Table 2 describes the mean score of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness between unmarried and married females. Unmarried female were found with frequent use of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness as compared to married.

5. Discussion

Using platforms such as Facebook and Instagram has been particularly associated with a higher body dissatisfaction and the appearance of ED symptoms (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Melioli et al., 2018). Leahey et al. (2011) found that, in addition to increasing body dissatisfaction, social comparisons have an influence on negative effects, guilt, as well as diets and physical-activity-centered thoughts. Findings of the current studies reveal that significant positive correlation of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness among females. Ridgway and Clayton (2016) conducted in 2018 a study on Instagram and posting selfies, which showed that a higher body image satisfaction was associated with an increase in posting selfies. This could explain the low percentage of self-promoting subjects found in this study. Our results are in accordance with those found in the literature, which identified a link between social media use and body image disorders (Fardouly et al., 2018). It has also been found that subjects who often compared their physical appearance to that of idealized images were more dissatisfied with their body and had a higher drive for thinness than those who compared themselves less often (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Self-assessment is a fundamental reflexive analysis tool (Festinger, 1954). It plays an essential part in self-positioning among others and oneself. This self-evaluation must resort to social comparisons, which have a direct link to self-esteem. Body image's sociocultural construct takes shape using body ideals that are broadcasted through, in particular, media, family, and peers and are thereafter internalized by individuals (Grogan, 2021). Reaching these body norms is usually perceived as proof of self-control and success, which leads one to stand out from the crowd in a positive way. Internalizing body ideals thus creates an authentic concern for one's physical appearance, which will be observed and judged by others. This can trigger body dissatisfaction, which usually involves feeling inadequate in one's body, estranged from the ideal one pursues (Grogan, 2021). Fear of gaining weight can be exacerbated when thinness is one of narcissism's only tools. It can lead to behaviors such as food restriction, excessive physical activity, with the aim of modifying one's appearance and thus fit into social standards. This excessive self-surveillance can bring about emotional and psychological consequences, including shame about one's own body, self-bashing, anxiety, and depression, up to ED (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Unmarried female were found with frequent use of using social media, comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness as compared to married.

6. Conclusion

Social media has a profound impact on physical appearance perceptions, leading to body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness in Pakistan, especially among women. Women in Pakistan are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and the drive for thinness due to the pressure to meet these social media beauty ideals. The constant exposure to these beauty ideals can lead to body dissatisfaction and even a drive for thinness. This dissatisfaction is linked to a range of mental health issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. In a society like Pakistan, where appearance can be linked to social status, the drive for thinness can be particularly pronounced. The conclusion suggests a need for awareness campaigns and the promotion of body positivity on social media. Encouraging diversity in body types, challenging the stereotypes of beauty, and promoting mental health awareness are important steps toward combating the negative effects of social media on body image in Pakistan. There is a clear need for interventions to create a healthier, more inclusive view of beauty to mitigate these effects.

7. Contributions of the Study

The practical contribution of a study on the role of social media in comparing physical appearance, body dissatisfaction, and drive for thinness in Pakistan can be significant in several ways:

Understanding Cultural Influence: The study would provide valuable insights into how social media platforms, which often promote idealized beauty standards, influence body image perceptions in a Pakistani context. Given the diversity of cultural influences, it can help understand how global trends blend with local norms and impact youth and adults in Pakistan.

Impact on Mental Health: Social media has been linked to increased body dissatisfaction and unhealthy body image ideals. This study could shed light on how these issues manifest in Pakistan, leading to a better understanding of the mental health challenges faced by individuals, especially young people, who are heavily exposed to digital media. This could inform mental health interventions and awareness programs.

Targeted Interventions and Policies: By identifying the specific role of social media in shaping body image concerns, the study can inform policymakers, educators, and healthcare professionals about the need for media literacy programs and body-positive campaigns. This could lead to creating better interventions for adolescents and young adults who may be at higher risk for eating disorders or other body image-related issues.

Gender-Specific Insights: Since body dissatisfaction and the drive for thinness are often gendered, the study could highlight how these issues affect men and women differently in Pakistan. This understanding would help in creating gender-specific educational and therapeutic approaches, ensuring that both male and female populations receive adequate support.

Influence on Consumer Behavior: The study can also contribute to the understanding of how social media shapes consumer behavior in Pakistan, especially in terms of beauty products, weight loss programs, and fashion. Brands and marketers can use these insights to develop more inclusive advertising strategies that avoid reinforcing harmful body ideals.

Promotion of Healthy Body Image: By revealing the negative consequences of social media's influence on body image, the study can inspire initiatives aimed at promoting a more realistic and healthy body image in the media. It could lead to collaborations with influencers, content creators, and media outlets to showcase diverse body types and challenge conventional beauty standards.

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