



Unrealistic Media Standards and Social Comparison as Predictors of Body Image Satisfaction among Female Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The digital landscape promotes narrow beauty standards and unrealistic ideals for women, exacerbating social comparison and creating a filtered perception of reality. Digital platforms can reinforce unrealistic notions of beauty and encourage users to compare themselves to others through celebrities, influencers, and photoshopped images. The purpose of this study is to investigate unrealistic media standards and social comparison as predictors of body image satisfaction among female university students. In this study, the researcher used a quantitative approach with an exploration of the key variables among female students at the University. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire from 300 participants in a correlational study based on Social Gratification and Social Comparison theories. The results showed that unrealistic media standards and social comparison have a positive and significant correlation ($r=0.309$, $p < .01$), and unrealistic media standards also have a significant positive correlation with body image satisfaction ($r = 0.287$, $p < .01$). Social comparison and body image satisfaction have a statistically significant and strong association ($r = 0.702$, $p < .01$) among female students. The regression model showed that unrealistic media standards and social comparison significantly predicted body image satisfaction, jointly explaining 53.6% of its variance ($\beta = 0.637$, $R^2 = .536$). The results indicate that females who are more exposed to a digital environment and social comparison have a substantial effect on their self-perception, physical appearance, and body image satisfaction. This study demonstrates the urgent need to teach students to view digital beauty standards critically and to support realistic media content. Institutions must intervene with educational and mental health support because unrealistic media standards and ongoing social comparisons have a significant impact on how female college students perceive their bodies. There should be resources that support positive body image to assist young women in navigating digital environments without undermining their self-perception and physical appearance.

1. Introduction

People's perceptions of their bodies have been profoundly altered by digital media trends. This is particularly true for young girls who are figuring out who they are and coping with social pressures for social comparison. Because Instagram is so visual,

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influencers who publish flawless, idealized photographs have made it a key hub for the dissemination of unattainable beauty standards (Sharma et al., 2024). In the current digital age, social media has a big influence on how young adults, particularly female college students, view their bodies. Young girls' body image comparison is associated with spending a lot of time on digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, as well as viewing altered and idealized images in the media. Many young females compare themselves with these idealized images, which can make them feel unhappy with their physical appearance (Al Riyami et al., 2024).

Social comparison among females is very common in today's beauty standards. Females who compare their body weight and beauty looks with models and influencers online have lower self-esteem. They also compare their body appearance with friends and classmates, resulting in self-doubt, which negatively impacts their positive attitude about themselves and lowers their self-worth (Bergagna & Tartaglia, 2018).

Idealized, carefully manipulated photos focused on fitness, fashion, and beauty are often featured on popular social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. Frequent exposure to this well-chosen material encourages female students to participate in social comparison, which can reduce body satisfaction. Additionally, a study shows that appearance-focused media, such as "fitspiration" trends, exacerbate worries about physical appearance and perpetuate unattainable beauty standards, eventually diminishing female college students' pleasure with their bodies. (So & Kwon, 2023).

Globally, about 89% of social media users aged 18 to 24 years use social media networks. The total number of global social media users is estimated to be 3.29 billion by 2022, representing 42.3% of the world's population, who use social media platforms for different purposes (Baharuddin et al., 2024). Engagement with social media has seen an increase in lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs), reporting a significant increase of about 25% in social networking site usage among individuals (Navarro et al., 2020). In Pakistan, social media is widely used by young adults, especially university students, with over 71% on YouTube, 66% on Facebook, 54% on Instagram, and 52% on Twitter. The social media engagement frequency reaches 7.69% and peaks at 17.88% in January 2023 (Hamza et al., 2023b).

Since its 2010 launch, Instagram's massive growth has lined up with increasing worries over mental health and body image. With nearly two billion active users, the platform's focus on photo-sharing forces an environment of constant comparison, where people scroll through highly polished feeds that rarely show real life (Dixon, 2024). In fact, over 60% of all female university students in the world have reported body dissatisfaction as a result of social media exposure, with 45% saying that extended exposure to appearance-oriented content has led to a decrease in self-esteem, showing a growing concern around the world for these trends in social media (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019).

The young female life is deeply influenced by digital platforms basically the digital environment is mainly created for communication, content sharing but young females watch the tv shows and follow more beauty content such as filtered beauty, glass skin, slim-thick body trend, fitness healthy look, bold features, the common following of these trends among females increase the negative risk of self-perception about themselves, which may results in dissatisfaction and lack of emotional abilities of oneself, overthinking, loneliness, lack of freedom of expression (Nghaimesh & Alwan, 2024).

Nowadays, the tendency of body dissatisfaction among young females is very common, which means being unhappy with one's body figure or appearance. Most of the young females feel unhappy with their body image, which can influence their physical appearance and self-confidence. Young females feel that they are not valuable people among others. These feelings are greatly influenced by social media, peers, and societal beauty standards; unrealistic beauty images shape those feelings (Bornioli et al., 2021).

According to an integrated objectification-social comparison model evaluated on 338 Australian women, looking at appearance-related websites increased anxiety, body surveillance, and upward social comparisons (Seekis et al., 2020). While social media helps females show self-expression, such as expressing thoughts, emotions, behavior, and fashion, it also emphasizes the culture of social comparison, which increases beauty ideals and a filtered reality. Further studies indicate that females attribute their self-worth to external factors such as body appearance, social comparison, and dissatisfaction, which may negatively influence their abilities and make it difficult to cope with challenges (Crocker et al., 2006; Merino et al., 2024).

Excessive usage of Instagram trends related to health, fitness, beauty, makeup, and skincare is linked to poorer self-esteem, especially among young women. Body shaming and cyberbullying can negatively impact female self-esteem, as the increase in likes and feedback on social media can link female self-esteem with external approval. Young females who focus more on idealized images rather than realistic ones have more chances of fear, anxiety, stress, dissatisfaction, and negative social labeling (Kushwaha, 2024).

This research carries considerable Theoretical importance. The study focuses on investigating how frequent exposure to idealized media trends, social comparison, and selfie culture predict body image perceptions and influence self-perception

among females. By understanding the connection between how idealized media trends promote healthy body appearance content, which leads to social comparison, and positively influences females' body image perception, which increases self-acceptance about themselves in a social setting. The findings of this research may also be useful for teachers, counselors, and university staff, as well as for policy measures regarding media trends. It helps them to understand the influence of media exposure, which affects social comparison, self-perception regarding their image, and body image satisfaction among female university students.

2. Literature Review

In today's hyper-connected social media environment, this evaluative process is particularly important in forming body image, even though it affects many aspects of personal and societal identity. A solid framework for comprehending how people assess their own value and accomplishments in relation to those of their peers is provided by social comparison theory (Winn & Cornelius, 2020).

Social media's widespread use has significantly changed how people view their bodies. These platforms place a strong emphasis on limited, carefully chosen, and frequently unachievable physical requirements in order to promote a homogenized image of beauty (Hogue & Mills, 2019; Rounsefell et al., 2020).

Sociocultural indicators, such as media influence, cultural beauty standards, pressures, and peer influence, have increased over time, making young females more vulnerable to sociocultural pressure to conform to others' beauty standards, ignoring their own realistic beauty. Instead of improving females' self-confidence, it leads to a more negative effect on females' satisfaction with their own bodies (Mohd Termizi & Mohd Herwan, 2021).

According to previous studies, Alfonso-Fuertes, Alvarez-Mon, Del Hoyo, et al. (2023) found that young women regularly follow Instagram trends and follow social media influencers and models posted the idealized content. This trend promotes unattainable beauty standards and draws attention to the propensity to compare appearances. This research indicates that this type of comparison may have a negative effect on female university students' self-esteem and body image satisfaction.

The study conducted by Wang et al. (2020) explored how social comparison on digital platforms is shaping the level of self-esteem and body image among females. The results showed that the impacts of social comparison depend on whether it is downward or upward comparison. Downward comparison enhances self-esteem and body image satisfaction among females, while upward social comparison negatively influences self-esteem.

Veldhuis et al. (2020) indicated that young females who engaged for in those sites for self-improvement, following healthy content, have boosts their self-confidence which influenced positively on their body image and self-esteem and that young females who are more engaged in selfie behaviors, self-objectification less satisfied with their bodies and have lower self-esteem may be more likely to engage in selfie behaviors, while self-objectification is also a result of media, beauty trends, unrealistic image.

According to previous studies, Alfonso-Fuertes, Alvarez-Mon, Sanchez del Hoyo, et al. (2023) found that young women regularly follow Instagram trends and follow social media influencers and models posted the unrealistic content. This trend promotes unattainable beauty standards and draws attention to the propensity to compare appearances. This research indicates that this type of comparison may have a negative effect on female university students' self-esteem and body image satisfaction. Body image satisfaction and psychological well-being have a positive association, and men have higher body satisfaction than women (Dotse & Asumeng, 2015). When young females learn what the desirable ideal body is and try to attain those body ideals which causes body dissatisfaction. The biased perception about body appearance leads to body dissatisfaction and social anxiety among young females (Nishina et al., 2006; sonia et al., 2024)

Social comparison opportunities have been greatly increased by digital unrealistic trends, including beauty filters, manipulated photos, and appearance-focused material. Due to their frequent use of social networking sites and a developmental stage where identity and self-concept are still actively being created, females in higher education are especially susceptible to these digital influences (Qiu, 2024).

Exposure to idealized online content often encourages individuals to assess their appearance against unrealistic standards, which can affect their level of body image satisfaction. It is critical to recognize the relationship between social media content preference and body image issues like dissatisfaction with body image appearance among female university students (Hamza et al., 2023b).

Globally, social media trends are being normalized and are followed by millions of individuals, particularly influencing young women's perceptions of body appearance, frequently increasing body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight management

behaviors, and mood fluctuations. These unrealistic standards can reinforce negative self-esteem among young females, which poses hurdles when they socially interact with others and feel ashamed (Kang et al., 2026).

Mass media, encompassing both traditional and social media, shape young women's perceptions about their bodies. Traditional media frequently endorses slim body ideals, and females who can't fit those ideal standards start to feel less attractive, which results in low self-acceptance; they compare their body image with models and wish they could change their appearance, lose weight, and feel pressure that increases stress and negative body image (Mills et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the previous study by Di Gesto et al. (2022) found that young women are more likely to compare their appearance and feel dissatisfied with their bodies when they engage in Instagram activities that feature photographs of themselves and celebrities, which promote unrealistic beauty standards. The study highlights how female university students' body image and self-esteem might be negatively impacted by exposure to unrealistic photographs on Instagram.

2.1. Rationale of the Study

Research in developing countries has shown a relationship between unrealistic media trends and social comparison among young females, which highlights the impacts on body image satisfaction, such as societal expectations, body image issues, social comparison, Perfectionism, lack of autonomy/control, achievements, and validation. In Pakistan, limited research has been done on how unrealistic media trends helps females' students make their body image appear better and increase self-confidence among females (Hamza et al., 2023a). Most of the young females face stress and confusion about their body appearance in their surroundings, which influences their self-perception. This situation increases body image dissatisfaction, predicted by idealized media trends and social comparison among young females. When young female students are inspired by social media trends which focused on unrealistic beauty standards, which increase social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and reduced self-esteem among females, which increases social anxiety, fear of failure, low confidence, feel less capable than others among young females (Maliha et al., 2025). The study investigates the impact of idealization of media and social comparison on satisfaction with the body image of female university students. It highlights the challenges faced by these young ladies because of misaligned expectations of beauty and comparisons with others, which subsequently leads them to have low self-acceptance and negative self-perception that may affect their academic performance. However, the research also emphasizes the potential positive effects of idealized media trends and social comparison on body image satisfaction among female university students.

2.2. Objectives of the Study

- To measure the relationship between unrealistic media standards, social comparison, and body image satisfaction among female university students.
- To assess the impact of Unrealistic media standards on body image satisfaction among female university students.
- To assess the impact of social comparison on body image satisfaction among female university students.
- To examine Unrealistic media standards and social comparison as predictors of body image satisfaction among female university students.

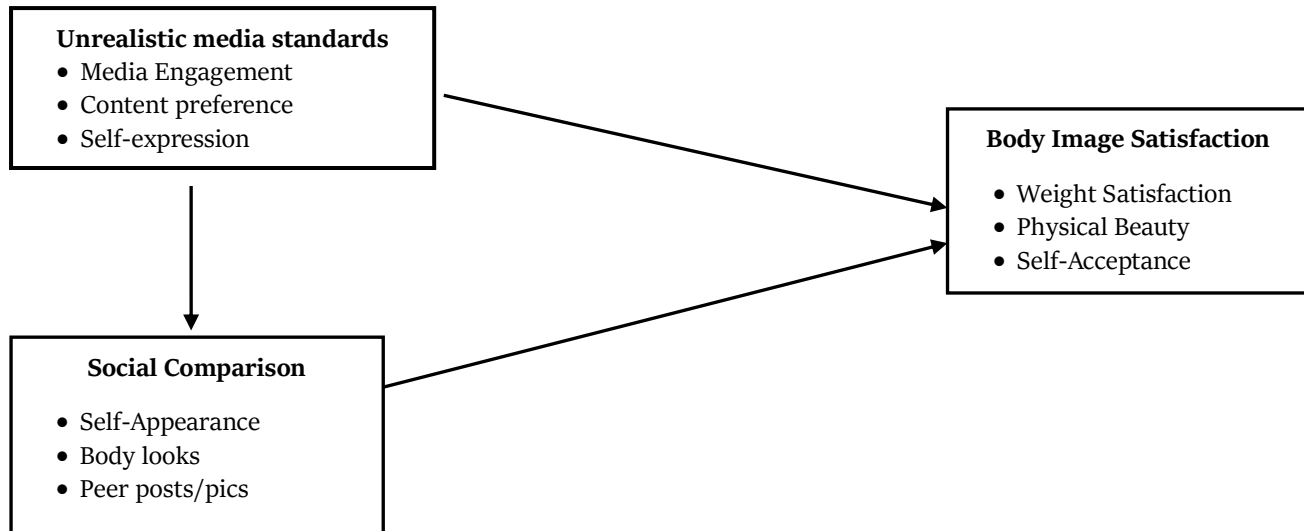
2.3. Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

Social comparison theory: Social comparison theory, proposed by Festinger, 1954 that explains how individuals evaluate their own opinions and desires by comparing themselves to others. People look to the images portrayed by others to be obtainable and realistic, and subsequently make comparisons among themselves, others, and the idealized image. The Social Comparison Theory explains how people assess their body image by comparing themselves with other people. Individuals frequently make judgments about their appearance based on what they see on social media or in their peers' groups. This theory is practically applied to the idea that explains how social media encourages comparison behavior. The perceptions of beauty and attractiveness are greatly influenced by the frequent comparison of their physical appearance with idealized images of influencers and celebrities. Most Young females compare their body image with idealized images to look perfect. The theory also explains how body image satisfaction is impacted by these comparisons. Young females who are constantly exposed to ideal body standards may become more dissatisfied with their looks and have a negative self-evaluation. Upward social comparisons frequently lead to body dissatisfaction. Those females may experience negative emotions, low self-esteem, and dissatisfaction with their own body image when they believe that others are more attractive or perfect.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT): UGT is an approach to understanding why and how individuals actively seek out and use specific media to satisfy specific needs (Dolan et al., 2016). This theory explains that individuals use social media according to their own will; they use it to fulfill any need/purpose, such as entertainment, communication with others, self-expression on social media, follow trends on social media. According to Uses and Gratifications Theory, people utilize social media according

to their personal needs and interests. They use it for a variety of purposes in addition to consuming content. According to the theory, users make active use of platforms by interacting with the content that interests them, such as fashion, beauty, and lifestyle trends. Through this encounter, people, especially young women, can express parts of themselves via posts, images, and thoughts in order to satisfy personal interests. Most of the young females use social media to follow beauty trends and to enhance their body image; on the other hand, these trends may lead to body dissatisfaction.

Theoretical model of the study variables



Based on the above-mentioned schematic diagram and assumptions, there is sufficient supporting logic to draw the following hypothesis:

2.4. Hypothesis

H 1: There is a relationship between unrealistic media standards, social comparison, and body image satisfaction among female university students.

H 2: Both unrealistic media standards and social comparison jointly predict body image satisfaction among female university students.

3. Material and Methods

This study adopted a quantitative correlational research design to investigate the relationships between unrealistic media standards, social comparison, and body image satisfaction among Female University Students. The unit of analysis comprised students from the University of Gujrat across various faculties, including social sciences, basic sciences, arts, and information technology. The study employed a sampling frame of BS students and aimed for an initial target of 323 participants, ultimately analyzing 300 valid responses. Data collection involved a structured questionnaire using a four-point Likert scale to assess digital idealized trends, social comparison, and body image satisfaction. The instrument was pretested for reliability, and the researcher administered the questionnaires, achieving a full response rate. Data were processed in SPSS, utilizing descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation, and multiple regression analyses to explore the relationships and predictive effects among the variables concerning female university students.

4. Results

This section presents a statistical perspective on the interrelationships among variables, using SPSS Version 27 for data analysis.

4.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=300)

Socio-demographic characteristics provide a breakdown of demographic data from respondents categorized by semester, discipline, age, family occupation, income, and residential area. The distribution of students shows that 18.3% are in the 2nd semester, 26.3% in the 4th, 24.0% in the 6th, and 31.3% in the 8th semester. In terms of disciplines, 26.3% study social sciences, 35.0% basic sciences, 19.0% administrative sciences, and 19.7% IT and computer science. The age distribution shows that 67.7% are aged 18-20, 27.0% aged 22-24, and 5.3% aged 25 and older. Family occupations include 20.0% government employees, 13.7% private employees, 29.7% in business, and 36.7% in other occupations. Regarding income, 46.0% are in the

50,001–100,000 range, 26.3% in the 50,000–50,001 range, and 22.0% in the 100,001–300,000 range, with 5.7% in the highest income category of 300,001–500,000. In terms of residence, 61.0% live in rural areas and 39.0% in urban areas.

Table 1: Correlation between Unrealistic Media Standards, Social Comparison, and Body Image Satisfaction among Female University Students (N=300).

Variables	Digital Idealized Trends	Social Comparison	Body Image Satisfaction
Unrealistic Media Standards	–		
Social Comparison	.309**	–	
Body Image Satisfaction	.287**	.702**	–

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation table shows that all study variables are statistically significant and positively correlated at the 0.01 level of significance. Digital idealized trends show a significant positive correlation with social comparison, with a coefficient of ($r=0.309$, $p < .01$), and body image satisfaction, with the coefficient of ($r=0.287$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, there is a strong and statistically significant correlation between social comparison and body image satisfaction with a coefficient of ($r=0.702$, $p < .01$). The findings anticipate that exposure to digital idealized trends increases the awareness about physical appearance, beauty standards in the digital world may boost females' self-perceptions, social comparison about their body image and overall self-acceptance in real world. This indicates that exposure to digital trends influence social comparison that shapes the perception of females to adopt beauty standards associated with being more satisfied with their body image.

Table 2: Coefficient results of digital idealized trends, social comparison, and body image satisfaction among female university students.

Predictor	(B)	SE	(β)	t	P	95% CI for B
Constant	16.245	1.710	-	9.502	.000	(1.279)(10.077)
Unrealistic Media Standards	.120	.038	.133	3.141	.002	(.045) (.195)
Social Comparison	1.376	.087	.673	15.839	.000	(1.205) (.1547)

Dependent Variable: Body Image Satisfaction

Table 3: Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	P	Std. Error of Estimate
.732a	.536	.533	171.590	.000b	4.732

Predictor: Unrealistic Media Standards, Social Comparison
Dependent: Body Image Satisfaction

The multiple regression model revealed that unrealistic media standards and social comparison are significant predictors of body image satisfaction among young females. Overall, findings of the model were statistically significant in predicting body image satisfaction. The results of Table 3 revealed that the regression model was statistically significant ($F = 171.590$, $p < .001$), demonstrating a positive relationship between digital idealized trends and social comparison ($R = .732a$). Unrealistic media standards and social comparison have significant predictive ability for 53.6% of the variance in body image satisfaction ($R^2 = .536$, Adjusted $R^2 = .533$). Table 2 indicates the coefficient results of the multiple regression model, social comparison performing as the strongest predictor of body image satisfaction, with a regression coefficient ($B = 1.376$, $\beta = .673$, $t = 15.839$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of social comparison correspond to increased body image satisfaction. Unrealistic media standards also have positive and statistically significant predictive ability for body image satisfaction, with a regression coefficient ($B = .120$, $\beta = .133$, $t = 3.141$, $p < .001$). Overall findings of the model showed that unrealistic media standards and social comparison jointly predict body image satisfaction significantly.

5. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship among unrealistic media standards, social comparison, and body image satisfaction among female university students and revealed significant positive correlations between the study variables. This study provides insights into how unrealistic media standards may influence physical appearance-based comparison and self-perception, which affects the overall perception of their body image among young female university students in society. The quantitative study was conducted on a sample of 300; the survey method was used to collect the data from female students of the University of Gujrat. Spearman's correlation and multiple regression analysis were performed using the SPSS software.

These findings are particularly important for understanding the challenges faced by students who are more concerned about body image in the context of unrealistic standards in the media that shape females' appearance-based comparisons in society.

The Findings of the present study revealed that a significant positive correlation exists between unrealistic media standards, social comparison, and body image satisfaction among female university students. Because participation in appearance-based comparison in appearance-related content, beauty trends, fashion inspiration, and self-care trends affects their body image satisfaction, female students who follow idealized trends in the media may feel more confident and satisfied with their physical appearance and reduce feelings of dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. The findings align with the social comparison theory proposed by Festinger (1957) that explains how individuals evaluate their own opinions and desires by comparing themselves to others. People look to the images portrayed by others as obtainable and realistic, and subsequently make comparisons among themselves, others, and the idealized image. The SCT explains how people assess their body image by comparing themselves with other people.

Female students who engaged in digital idealized trends experienced higher self-image and physical appearance-related concerns because of positive and motivational trends that include body positivity, self-care guidance, fashion inspiration, and information that increases confidence. They follow these trends, which boost their self-esteem and make them feel better about themselves. The findings are consistent with the results of Valkenburg et al. (2006) that showed, these trends encourage a healthier and more positive view of oneself and reduce unnecessary comparisons with others. This study examines how digital idealized trends and social comparison play a central role in determining body image perceptions about themselves. Furthermore, there is also content that promotes unrealistic beauty standards. Students' confidence and self-esteem may occasionally decline when they compare themselves to this idealized content. Overall findings suggest that digital idealized trends and social comparison can either positively or negatively impact young females' self-worth and appearance-based perception, depending on the type of content they are exposed to and how they understand it themselves (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

The multiple regression analysis clearly predicted the influence of digital idealized trends and social comparison on body image satisfaction among female university students. The findings indicate that digital idealized trends and social comparison have a jointly significant positive role in shaping body image perceptions. Overall, the findings indicate that social comparison is a significantly strong predictor of body image perception, and young females who compare themselves to the media are more likely to change their body image according to the digital trends. How they view themselves and evaluate their physical appearance. This exposure encourages them to adopt appearance-related content, which shapes their appearance-based comparison and their level of satisfaction with their own body image. According to studies conducted by Merino et al. (2024) and Veldhuis et al. (2020), social media helps females show self-expression, just like in expressing thoughts, emotions, behavior, and fashion, but also emphasizes the culture of social comparison, which increases beauty ideals and a filtered reality. Further studies indicate that females attribute their self-worth to external factors such as body appearance, social comparison, and dissatisfaction, which may negatively influence their abilities and make it difficult to cope with challenges.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that exposure to idealized digital trends and social comparison has a substantial impact on female university students' body image satisfaction. The findings show that the use of idealized digital culture influences people's perceptions of their appearance and promotes social comparison, both of which affect how they evaluate themselves. The study findings align with research conducted by Bergagna and Tartaglia (2018), who explained that body image satisfaction is important for female students to support their healthy lifestyle, enhance their self-image in the eyes of others, and prevent them from body shaming and social anxiety.

The results of this study also indicate that the kind of information people interact with online, such as body-positive, encouraging, and supportive content, may account for this beneficial impact since it can boost self-esteem and self-evaluation. These findings, consistent with the study conducted by Al Riyami et al. (2024), show that body image and self-perception are closely connected with how females behave on social media. Those young females who engaged in those sites for self-improvement, following healthy content, have boosted their self-confidence, which positively influenced their body image and self-esteem. Furthermore, social media feedback validation, likes, comments, and social support may help young females to feel more valuable. Overall, the findings indicate that positive online interactions in digital media can enhance young females' self-perception and social comparison. This is crucial for policymakers, educators, and parents, highlighting the impact of social media on self-esteem and body image. Consequently, there is a need for awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs to encourage healthy media usage among young females.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that social comparison and internet-idealized trends significantly affect body satisfaction among female university students. Findings indicate a positive correlation between exposure to unrealistic digital content and body image

satisfaction, with social comparison identified as the strongest predictor. Regression analysis revealed that both social comparison and digital idealized trends collectively explain a notable percentage of variance in body image satisfaction. The study emphasizes that to mitigate the detrimental effects of unattainable digital beauty standards, it is crucial to recognize the psychological impact of social media on young women's self-perceptions and advocate for media literacy, critical engagement with online content, and healthy perceptions of body image.

7. Recommendation

The study utilized a cross-sectional quantitative design, focusing solely on female students at one university, which may constrain the applicability of its findings. To address this limitation, future research should encompass participants from various universities and diverse backgrounds for broader insights. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, is suggested to provide a richer understanding of female students' experiences related to body image and self-esteem. Moreover, longitudinal research is recommended to examine the long-term impacts of social media trends. Institutions are encouraged to promote media literacy, foster self-acceptance, and raise awareness of unrealistic beauty standards, while enhancing counseling services to support students dealing with the psychological consequences of social media exposure.

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