

# Effects of Beauty Micro-Trends on Body Image Among Young Adults

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## ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has transformed the nature of beauty standards, giving rise to short-lived and rapidly changing beauty micro-trends. These trends promote specific aesthetic ideals that often require constant adaptation and conformity. The present study aims to examine the relationship between exposure to beauty micro-trends and body image satisfaction among young adults aged 18–25 years. Using a quantitative correlational design, the study assesses the role of social media use, appearance comparison, and gender differences in shaping body image perceptions. Standardized measures of body image satisfaction, social media usage, and appearance comparison will be employed. It is expected that higher exposure to beauty micro-trends will be associated with greater body dissatisfaction and comparison behaviour, with females reporting higher vulnerability. The findings may contribute to mental health interventions, media literacy initiatives, and ethical discussions surrounding beauty culture on digital platforms.

**Keywords:** Beauty micro-trends, Body image, Social media, Young adults, Appearance comparison

## INTRODUCTION

Beauty standards or ideals can be defined as the individual or collective physical attributes that are glorified and aspired to within society (Yan and Bissell, 2014). These have existed for centuries and evolved throughout that time. The toned and athletic supermodel body of the 1980s, the emaciated Heroin chic look of the 1990s (Wallerstein, 1998), and the buff or yoga body of the 2000s all serve as examples of contemporary beauty ideals and these can also be observed as trends that have cycled out of popularity to be replaced with a new ideal. As social media users increasingly share and interact with beauty-related content, an online beauty culture and ecosystem have emerged, comprising visual, written and video-based content, new influential creators and consumers; all of whom are driving new beauty trends and standards in digital spaces.

The current study aims to examine the relationship

between exposure to beauty micro-trends and body image satisfaction. Social media are recognised for their profound impact on beauty and body ideals (Fadavi *et al.*, 2020; Ramphul and Mejias, 2018). The relationship between social media and beauty standards or definitions has attracted interest from researchers in the fields of fashion, business, marketing and psychology. Existing studies tend to explore this quite broadly, observing some of how social media have impacted perceptions and beauty ideals relating to the self (Henriques and Patnaik, 2020).

Young adults, particularly those between 18 and 25 years of age, represent one of the most active user groups on social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2022). This developmental period is also marked by heightened self-consciousness, identity exploration, and sensitivity to peer evaluation, making young adults especially vulnerable to appearance-related pressures (Arnett, 2015). Continuous exposure to shifting beauty ideals may contribute to body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem,

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and maladaptive appearance-focused behaviors. While extensive research has documented the impact of traditional media and general social media use on body image, the psychological consequences of fast-cycling beauty micro-trends remain underexplored.

Beauty micro-trends are not merely aesthetic preferences but are embedded within a system of performance and visibility. Individuals are encouraged to display conformity through posts, stories, and videos, often accompanied by public metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. This environment fosters frequent appearance comparison, self-monitoring, and pressure to modify one's appearance to remain socially relevant. Such pressures may be intensified by the widespread use of filters, photo-editing applications, and AI-generated enhancements, which create unrealistic and often unattainable standards of beauty (Vendemia and DeAndrea, 2018).

### Literature Review:

The majority of experimental research in the body image and appearance-related social comparison literature has investigated the influence of exposure to idealized bodies in traditional forms of media, such as magazines, television, and music videos on young women's body dissatisfaction (Myers and Crowther, 2009). This research has found that exposure to the thin ideal is associated with more negative body image among girls and women (Grabe *et al.*, 2008, Groesz *et al.*, 2002). However, more recent research suggests that the popularity of these media types is being overtaken by the popularity and availability of more interactive media such as the Internet, particularly among adolescents (Bell and Dittmar, 2011; Tiggemann and Miller, 2010).

With the advent of social media, the nature of media influence on body image has shifted significantly. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms promote constant engagement, self-presentation, and peer comparison. Perloff (2014) highlighted that social networking sites intensify appearance-related pressures because users are exposed to idealized images of peers rather than distant celebrities. Empirical studies have consistently shown that greater time spent on appearance-focused platforms such as Instagram is associated with higher body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016).

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) provides a key theoretical framework for understanding these effects. According to the theory, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their attributes with others.

Fardouly *et al.* (2015) found that appearance-based social comparison on social media mediates the relationship between social media use and body dissatisfaction. Beauty micro-trends may intensify this process by introducing constantly changing ideals, increasing the frequency and intensity of upward comparisons.

Another relevant framework is Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), which explains how cultural emphasis on appearance leads individuals to internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies. Research has shown that social media use is positively associated with self-objectification and body surveillance, particularly among women (Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). Beauty micro-trends that emphasize specific features, such as flawless skin or sculpted body shapes, may heighten self-monitoring and dissatisfaction.

Influencer culture also plays a significant role in the dissemination of beauty standards. Influencers are often perceived as relatable and authentic, which increases the likelihood of internalizing their appearance ideals (Abidin, 2016). Tiggemann and Anderberg (2020) reported that exposure to influencer content is associated with greater internalization of beauty ideals and poorer body image outcomes.

Additionally, the use of filters and photo-editing tools contributes to unrealistic beauty standards. McLean *et al.* (2015) found that exposure to digitally altered images increased body dissatisfaction and interest in cosmetic enhancement. Since many beauty micro-trends rely heavily on such digital modifications, they may further distort perceptions of normal appearance.

Overall, existing literature suggests that beauty micro-trends may amplify established risk factors for body image dissatisfaction, including social comparison, self-objectification, and internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals, highlighting the need for focused research on this emerging phenomenon.

### Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the relationship between exposure to beauty micro-trends and body image satisfaction among young adults.
2. To assess whether frequency of social media use influences this relationship.
3. To identify gender differences in the impact of beauty micro-trends on body image.
4. To explore appearance comparison as a psychological response associated with micro-

trend exposure.

### Hypotheses

- **H1:** Higher exposure to beauty micro-trends will be associated with lower body image satisfaction.
- **H2:** Female participants will report greater negative impact of beauty micro-trends on body image than male participants.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design:

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationship between exposure to beauty micro-trends and body image satisfaction among young adults. A correlational design was considered appropriate as the study aimed to assess the direction and strength of relationships between naturally occurring variables without manipulation. This design is commonly used in psychological research examining media exposure and body image, as it allows for ethical and practical investigation of psychological constructs (Creswell, 2014).

### Participants / Sample:

The sample consisted of 150-200 young adults aged 18 to 25 years, recruited using convenience sampling. Participants included both male and female individuals who were active users of at least one social media platform such as Instagram, or YouTube.

Inclusion criteria were:

- Age between 18 and 25 years
- Active use of social media
- Ability to understand and respond in English

### Exclusion criteria included:

- Individuals with a diagnosed eating disorder or severe psychiatric condition (self-reported)
- Individuals currently undergoing intensive psychological treatment for body image concerns.

The selected age group represents young adulthood, a developmental stage marked by heightened self-awareness, identity exploration, and susceptibility to peer influence (Arnett, 2015).

### Tools / Instruments:

The following standardized tools were used for data collection:

#### 1. *Body Image Satisfaction Scale:*

Developed by Bruchon-Schweitzer, this scale measures individuals' satisfaction with their physical appearance. It has demonstrated good internal consistency and construct validity in previous research. Higher scores indicate greater body image satisfaction.

#### 2. *Social Media Use Questionnaire (SMUQ):*

Developed by Xanidis and Brignell (2016), the SMUQ assesses frequency and intensity of social media use. The scale has shown acceptable reliability and has been widely used in studies examining psychological outcomes of social media engagement.

#### 3. *Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised (PACS-R):*

Developed by Thompson *et al.* (1991), this scale measures the tendency to compare one's physical appearance with others. The PACS-R has demonstrated strong reliability and validity and is commonly used in body image research.

### Procedure:

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant academic authority. Participants were approached online and in person and informed about the purpose of the study. Written informed consent was obtained before participation. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that participation was entirely voluntary.

The questionnaires were administered either through an online survey platform or in a paper-pencil format. Clear instructions were provided, and participants were encouraged to answer honestly. The total time required to complete the questionnaires was approximately 20–25 minutes.

Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. No identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity. After completion, participants were debriefed and provided with contact information for psychological support services if participation caused any discomfort.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Descriptive Statistics:

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the mean and standard deviation of Body Image Satisfaction,

Social Media Use, and Physical Appearance Comparison among participants (Table 1).

**Table 1 : Mean and Standard Deviation scores for all three variables**

Variable	M	SD
Body Image Satisfaction	3.84	0.93
Social Media Use	2.91	0.74
Physical Appearance Comparison	2.63	1.06

The results indicate that participants, on average, reported moderately high body image satisfaction, moderate levels of social media use, and relatively lower engagement in physical appearance comparison (Table 2).

**Table 2 : Internal Consistency Reliability of the Study Scales**

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Body Image Satisfaction Scale	11	0.96
Social Media Use Questionnaire	9	0.86
Physical Appearance Comparison Scale	15	0.97

Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha demonstrated that all three scales possessed excellent internal consistency, with values well above the acceptable threshold of .70, confirming that the instruments reliably measured their intended constructs.

**Correlation Analysis:**

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was computed to examine the relationship between:

1. Body Image Satisfaction and Social Media Use
2. Body Image Satisfaction and Physical Appearance Comparison.

**Table 3 : Correlation Between Study Variables**

Variables	r	p
Body Image Satisfaction and Social Media Use	?0.61	< .001
Body Image Satisfaction and Physical Appearance Comparison	?0.74	< .001

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a strong negative relationship between body image satisfaction and social media use, suggesting that increased engagement with social media is associated with poorer body image. A similarly strong negative association was observed between body image satisfaction and physical

appearance comparison, indicating that individuals who frequently compare their appearance with others tend to experience lower satisfaction with their bodies (Table 3).

**Independent Samples t-Test:**

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare Body Image Satisfaction between males and females (Table 4).

**Table 4 : t-Test Comparing Body Image Satisfaction Across Gender**

Gender	Mean	SD
Male	4.18	0.71
Female	3.63	0.97

The results of the independent sample t-test indicate a statically significant difference in the Body image Satisfaction scores between males and females.

Furthermore, the independent samples t-test showed a statistically significant gender difference in body image satisfaction,  $t= 2.91, p= .005$ , with males reporting significantly higher body image satisfaction than females (Table 4).

**Table 5 : Independent Samples t-Test Results for Body Image Satisfaction**

t	p
2.91	.005

The present study examined the relationship between beauty micro-trend exposure, social media use, appearance comparison, and body image satisfaction among young adults. The findings offer clear empirical support for the proposed hypotheses and align closely with existing theoretical frameworks and prior research on media influence and body image.

Descriptive results indicated that participants, on average, reported moderate to high levels of body image satisfaction, moderate social media use, and relatively lower appearance comparison. Despite this overall pattern, correlational analyses revealed that greater engagement with social media and higher appearance comparison were strongly associated with reduced body image satisfaction. The significant negative correlation between body image satisfaction and social media use ( $r = -.61, p < .001$ ) supports the growing body of literature demonstrating that appearance-focused social media environments contribute to negative self-perceptions (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016; Perloff, 2014).

These findings can be understood through the lens of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Social media platforms, particularly those driven by visual content and algorithmic reinforcement, create abundant opportunities for upward comparison. Beauty micro-trends intensify this process by introducing narrowly defined and rapidly shifting ideals. Individuals are repeatedly exposed to curated images that represent transient standards of attractiveness, increasing the likelihood of unfavorable self-evaluation. The strong negative association between body image satisfaction and physical appearance comparison ( $r = -.74, p < .001$ ) highlights comparison as a central psychological mechanism through which micro-trends may exert their influence. This pattern mirrors findings by Fardouly *et al.* (2015), who demonstrated that social comparison mediates the relationship between social media use and body dissatisfaction.

The significant gender difference in body image satisfaction further reinforces established trends in the literature. Female participants reported lower body image satisfaction than males, a result consistent with earlier studies indicating that women are more vulnerable to appearance-based pressures (Cash *et al.*, 2004; Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). Beauty micro-trends often emphasize thinness, flawlessness, and youthfulness ideals that disproportionately target women. However, the presence of strong associations across the entire sample suggests that micro-trend culture represents a broader societal pressure affecting all genders, though with differential intensity.

The excellent reliability of all measurement instruments strengthens confidence in these findings, indicating that the constructs were assessed with high internal consistency.

Collectively, the results suggest that it is not merely the quantity of social media use that matters, but the nature of engagement particularly exposure to trend-driven, appearance-focused content that predicts body image dissatisfaction.

These findings carry important implications for mental health practice and education. Interventions aimed at improving body image among young adults should explicitly address micro-trend culture, helping individuals recognize the constructed and transient nature of digital beauty ideals. Media literacy programs can reduce harmful comparison by fostering critical awareness of filters, editing practices, and algorithmic amplification. By

identifying appearance comparison as a key mechanism, the study highlights a tangible target for therapeutic and preventive efforts.

Overall, the results underscore beauty micro-trends as a distinct and potent influence on body image in contemporary digital culture, warranting focused attention in both research and applied psychological practice.

### Conclusion:

The study highlights that greater exposure to beauty micro-trends is significantly associated with lower body image satisfaction, primarily through increased appearance comparison.

These findings emphasize the need for targeted media literacy and mental health interventions to counter the psychological impact of rapidly shifting digital beauty ideals among young adults.

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