# SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION, BODY IMAGE, AND APPEARANCE ANXIETY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT**
*Emerging adulthood is a development phase, which is marked by increasing self-awareness and exploration of identity, and is more sensitive to social judgment, which makes undergraduate students highly susceptible to the psychological effects of digital media. The use of social media has been disproportionately coupled with body image and anxiety over their appearance. The current research involved the analysis of the impact of addiction to social media, body image and appearance anxiety among undergraduate Pakistani students. Convenience sampling was used to recruit a sample of N=327 students who were aged 18-25 years in different universities. The participants were asked to take the Social Media Addiction Scale-Student Form (SMAS-SF), the Body Image States Scale (BISS), and the Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI). Correlations showed that there were significant negative correlations between social media addiction and body image. Although, social media addiction had a significant positive correlation with appearance anxiety. However, the body image was found to be significantly negative correlation with appearance anxiety. The multiple regression analyses indicated that social media addiction and body images were significant predictors of appearance anxiety among undergraduate students. These data indicate the powerful role of problematic social media use in the occurrence of appearance-related psychological distress in young adults. The findings emphasize the necessity of university-based interventions, such as digital literacy education and mental health assistance, to alleviate the negative impact of social media on the well-being of students.*
*Keywords: Social media addiction, Body image, Appearance anxiety, Undergraduate students*

**Introduction**
Instagram, TikTok, and Snap chat are social media sites that have become entrenched in the lives of undergraduates. Such sites foster visual parallels and self-presentation, and this could lead to increased susceptibility to body-related issues. The recent researches indicate that increased use of appearance-centered social media practices is a contributing factor to negative body image and anxiety about being judged according to appearance (Casale et al., 2024; Vandenbosch and Fardouly, 2023).

An undergraduate level is the evolving phase of significant psychological, cognitive, and social change, at which people are highly sensitive to external factors, especially to digital factors (Arnett et al., 2022). It is a developmental stage that is marked by a higher level of self-awareness, exploration of self-identity, and amplified sensitivity to social judgment, thus making concerns

about appearance and social comparison even more prominent (Rosen et al., 2018). Since young adults face the challenges of studying and a quickly changing social environment, they become more dependent on digital communication systems and are more vulnerable to the dangers of overuse of social media (Haidt and Allen, 2020). As a result, the period has been considered an essential developmental window during which worries over body image, worries about appearance, and the appearance of addictive tendencies with respect to the use of technology are often developed (Marengo et al., 2022).

Social media addiction (SMA) is a compulsive and excessive tendency to use social media, which disrupts the normal functioning, emotional, and mental well-being (Andreassen, 2015; Noor et al., 2025). Among the typical symptoms are preoccupation with online activities, discomfort caused by withdrawal symptoms when it is impossible to access social media, and the inability to control the time spent on it (Billieux et al., 2022). Lifestyle and peer pressure, as well as the centrality of online platforms in both academic and social life, have been found to place undergraduate populations at a particularly high risk of SMA (Chen et al., 2023). Overuse has been associated with a deepened scope of mental challenges such as anxiety, depressive disorders, and obsessive social comparison (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021). The use of appearance-oriented and idealized images, which can be particularly problematic in visual-based apps, including Instagram, TikTok, and Snap chat, strengthens self-objectification and body image (Marengo et al., 2021).

The subjective perception, attitudes, and emotional assessment of physical appearance that people have about their physical appearance is what is referred to as body image (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). Online images of beauty, thinness, and muscularity promoted by the influencer and peers have gained more influence on body image in modern digital spaces (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Social media creates an unending comparison and feedback-like situations liking, commenting, sharing, and this influences self-perception and social perceived worth (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Many papers claim that repeated exposure to idealized images is linked to increased body image, negative self-assessment and internalization of unrealistic ideals of beauty among young adults (Ryding et al., 2020; Cingel et al., 2023). These effects seem particularly acute in people who dedicate more time to photo editing, finding validation, or having appearance-oriented comparison (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2020).

Another exemplary psychological condition with significant impacts of social media exposure is appearance anxiety which is defined as a state of excessive fear of being negatively judged about the physical appearance (Dignard & Joyal, 2021). It is characterized by chronic anxiety regarding being judged, scrutinized, or rejected because of physical characteristics and avoidance behaviours, distress, and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Weingarden et al., 2018). The possession of more significant social comparison tendencies or perfectionistic worries increases the chances of appearance anxiety in young adults, especially those who are regularly exposed to filtered, idealized, and highly edited images on the internet (Hogue & Mills, 2019). It has been shown that appearance-related social media use, which includes selfies, image editing, tracking appearance ratings, anticipates appearance anxiety and low self-esteem (Chen et al., 2022; Mills et al., 2021).

There is plenty of theoretical explanations as to why social media is the cause of increased body image issues and appearance anxiety. Social Comparison Theory is the theory that presupposes that people compare themselves with others to estimate their value, and upward comparisons on social media tend to lead to decreased body satisfaction and life satisfaction (Adeeb et al., 2020; Festinger, 1954; Fardouly et al., 2020). Objectification Theory states that viewing appearance-oriented media material makes people practice self-objectification and therefore, people,

especially young women, begin to view the world through the eyes of an observer and obsessively track their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Also, the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Body Image Disturbance pays attention to the importance of attentional biases and maladaptive beliefs in the perpetuation of body image and anxiety (Williamson and White, 2021). Most recent empirical research points to the fact that there is a close interrelation between the three variables. Indicatively, Balhara et al. (2023) established that greater social media dependence strongly forecasted the poor body image results in undergraduate students. On the same note, Hurley and McLean (2022) noted that excess participation in appearance-related activities on the web increased appearance anxiety and misjudgments. A study conducted by Iqbal and Javed (2024) also revealed that the group of young adults who reported on compulsive use of social media, also reported higher body image and increased anxiety about appearance. All these findings support the idea that there is a need to examine these variables in the context of undergraduate population where sense of digital engagement and pressure to look good is highest.

In this light, it is necessary to study the correlation between social media addiction, body image, and appearance anxiety in order to comprehend the psychological issues of modern undergraduate students more thoroughly. These insights may be used to inform mental health interventions and media literacy programs and may be used in university-based policies that can be used to encourage more health-enhancing online behaviors and to lessen appearance-related distress.

**Objectives of the Study**

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the connection between appearance anxiety, body image, and social media addiction in undergraduate students.
2. To ascertain whether undergraduate students' body image dissatisfaction and social media addiction are substantially correlated.
3. To evaluate the predictive role of social media addiction and body image in explaining appearance anxiety among undergraduate students.

**Hypotheses**

Based on the evidences, the present research hypothesizes that:

1. There would be significant relationship between social media addiction, body image, and appearance anxiety among undergraduate students.
2. Social media addiction and body image are significant predictors of appearance anxiety among undergraduate students.

**Rationale of the Study**

There has been a rapid growth of social networking sites, which has led to a transformation in the way young adults perceive themselves and relate to others, especially within the realm of emerging adulthood, a critical stage of development characterized by identity formation and greater sensitivity to social evaluation. Undergraduates are particularly vulnerable to the mental repercussions of excessive use of these sites since they have greater access to appearance-related content. Although social media use, body image dissatisfaction, and appearance anxiety have been studied in international research, there is still a significant dearth of empirical data in the Pakistani cultural and educational context. It is crucial to look at these factors regionally rather than depending only on Western research because Pakistani sociocultural norms, beauty standards, and gender expectations may have a particular influence on how students feel about appearance-related issues.

Furthermore, a large body of literature has lately focused on adolescents as subjects or on a wider category of youth, leaving a research gap for undergraduate students dealing with academic stress

simultaneously alongside extensive online engagement as a challenge. The current study investigates social media addiction as a leading risk factor and its link to body image and appearance anxiety, thereby adding to the understanding of psychological susceptibility in the digital era. The findings and results of this study will enlighten legislators, mental health professionals, and university administrators with regard to the importance of awareness campaigns, counseling, and online literacy. The ultimate goal of this research is to help undergraduate students develop better social media habits and enhance their psychological wellbeing.

**Conceptual Model**

Figure 1

*Conceptual Model of Research*
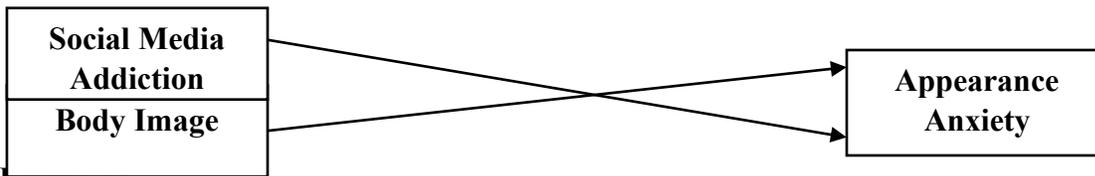


**METHODS**

**Sample**

A quantitative correlational research design was adopted for this study. The sample consisted of N=327 undergraduate students, aged 18-25 were recruited from various universities across Pakistan through convenience sampling.

**Instruments**

**Demographic sheet.** The demographic sheet was obtained from respondents with their age, gender, education, socioeconomic status and residence.

**Social Media Addiction Scale Student Version (Şahin, 2018)**

The Social Media Addiction Scale-Student Form (SMAS-SF) is a self-report measure that is popular (has 29 items) that was created to assess excessive, compulsive, and problematic usage of social networking sites in students. The scale measures six fundamental addictive behavior elements; salience, mood change, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale where the rating of 1 (never) to 5 (always) indicated increased levels of social media addiction. (Sahin, 2018; Arslan et al., 2022). Cronbach a is 0.91.

**Body Image States Scale (Cash et al., 2002)**

Body Image States Scale (BISS) is a short self-perception scale with six items structured to determine the momentary appraisal of physical appearance of the individuals. It assesses state body image in affective, cognitive and evaluative levels, which evaluate how people feel about their bodily state now. They will rate items on a 9 point semantic differential scale, and the overall scores will be greater, the more positive the body image is. The BISS was found to have a good internal consistency in the current study with Cronbach a of 0.84.

**Appearance Anxiety Inventory (Veale et al., 2014)**

Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) is a 10-item self-report scale that was created to determine cognitive symptoms and behavioral symptoms of appearance-related anxiety, especially avoidance behaviors, checking, comparing, and intrusive appearance-related thoughts. The items will be rated using five-point Likert scale (0 to 4) on the aspect 0 (not at all) to 4 (all the time) where the higher the score, the higher the appearance anxiety. Cronbach a is 0.89.

**Procedure**

Direct approach to undergraduate students in different universities and higher learning institutions was the means through which data were collected. Before the data collection process was conducted, permission was granted by way of an official authority letter by the Department of Psychology to request the approval of the respective academic administrators. The involvement in the study was not a compulsion and the respondents were made aware that the information they would provide would be utilized just in research. The Social Media Addiction Scale-Student Form (SMAS-SF), the Body Image States Scale (BISS) and the Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) were given to students aged 18-25 years with the institutional consent. All participants were informed of the consent procedure and signed them prior to filling in questionnaires. The researcher attended to any issue that was raised by respondents in the process and any respondent who wanted to access their findings was assured that he/she would send the findings to the respondent. The measures were given to each participant with about 15-20 minutes to finish them.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1**

*Demographics Profile*

| Respondent's Characteristics | | N | % | M (SD) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | | | 20.41 (1.89) |
| Gender | Male | 126 | 38.5 | |
| | Female | 201 | 61.5 | |
| University Type | Public | 168 | 51.4 | |
| | Private | 159 | 48.6 | |
| Daily Social Media Use | 1–2 hours | 74 | 22.6 | |
| | 3–4 hours | 112 | 34.3 | |
| | 5+ hours | 141 | 43.1 | |
| Residence | Rural | 224 | 68.5 | |
| | Urban | 103 | 31.5 | |

Table 1 indicates that the mean age of the participants was 20.41 years (SD=1.89). The female students (61.5) were slightly more than the male students (38.5). The sample sizes were nearly even with 51.4 percent in the public and 48.6 percent in the private universities. In terms of the use of social media every day 43.1% said they used social media 5 or more hours per day which suggests they are very active. The majority of the participants lived in cities (68.5% and rural areas (31.5%).

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis*

| Variables | M | SD | Social Media Addiction | Body Image | Appearance Anxiety |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social Media Addiction | 22.74 | 5.98 | - | | |
| Body Image | 28.63 | 7.21 | -0.46** | - | |
| Appearance Anxiety | 49.82 | 12.05 | 0.51** | -0.54** | - |

**p < .01

The Pearson correlation analysis is given in Table 2. The results of correlation found that social media addiction has significant negative relationship with body image (r = -0.46, p <.01) and

significantly positive relationship with body appearance anxiety (r = 0.51, p <.01). However body image has a significant negative relationship with appearance anxiety (r = -0.54, p <.01).

**Table 3**

*Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Appearance Anxiety among Undergraduate Students*

|  | B | SE | β | t | p | CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 27.12 | 4.95 |  | 5.48 | 0.00** | 17.38 – 36.87 |
| Social Media Addiction | 0.81 | 0.12 | 0.49 | 10.88 | 0.00** | 0.57 – 1.05 |
| Body Image | -0.61 | 0.10 | -0.38 | 7.10 | 0.00** | -0.81 – -0.40 |
| $R^2$ | 0.43** |  |  |  |  |  |
| $\Delta R^2$ | 0.42 |  |  |  |  |  |
| F | 56.42 |  |  |  |  |  |

**p <.01; CI for Confidence

Table 3 presents the findings of multiple regression as a predictor of appearance anxiety. The model with social media addiction and body image as predictors described 43 percent of appearance anxiety variance. While, social media addiction was a significant positive predictor of appearance anxiety (B = 0.81, b = 0.49, p <. 001), and body image was a significant negative predictor (B = -0.61, b = -0.38, p =. 001) of appearance anxiety. These findings indicate that social media addiction is a strong predictor of appearance anxiety than body image.

**DISCUSSION**

The social media addiction (SMA) is a relatively new phenomenon that affects body image and appearance anxiety in young adults (Andreassen, 2015). Problematic use of social media is usually viewed as a maladaptive coping mechanism to deal with social comparison, fear of missing out, and validation-seeking tendencies (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021). SMA is closely linked with a range of psychosocial challenges and is becoming one of the core points of focus regarding the modern behavior issues in undergraduate students (Billieux et al., 2022). The result of the current research, as per first hypothesis, indicated that SMA and body image had a significant negative relationship. This is in line with existing studies since several investigations have repeatedly found SMA to be a significant source of poor self-perception, internalizing beauty ideals, and with the body image (Marengo et al., 2021; Ryding & Kuss, 2020). Indicatively, Balhara et al. (2023) established a negative high association between unhealthy social media use and low body image among college students. Combined, these findings offer very strong support to the results of the current study as it evidences the acceptance of the first hypothesis.

The results of the current research on the second parts of our first hypothesis suggest that the correlation between SMA and appearance anxiety among undergraduate students is significantly positive. This finding is corroborated by the results of earlier studies, which have hypothesized that continuous exposure to appearance-related information and feedback (likes, comments), and peer comparisons on social media platforms may fuel concerns about physical attractiveness, and apprehension about negative judgment (Hogue & Mills, 2019; Chen et al., 2022). These findings agree with the current study thus confirming the acceptance of the hypothesis.

The results indicated for second hypotheses that social media addiction and body image were significant predictors of appearance anxiety. This result is supported by previous studies, where distorted body image concerns was repeatedly associated with augmented appearance-related fears and anxiety (Fardouly et al., 2020; Dignard & Joyal, 2021). Dissatisfied with their physical looks, these people are more likely to participate in an excessive level of monitoring, comparison, and avoidance, which make the individual more susceptible to appearance anxiety (Mills et al., 2021).

The results also align with what previous studies have found, where problematic social media use is a powerful predictor of maladaptive appearance-related consequences, such as fears of other people judging about them (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022). A number of aspects of the use of social media can be credited with the predictive nature of the SMA and these include exposure to images that are edited, comparisons with peers and influencers and the feeling of pressure to present oneself online. The studies indicate that social networking addiction increases negative affective moods, thereby exposing people to appearance dysphobia (Oberst et al., 2017). The present research gives further empirical evidence to the predictive impact of SMA on the appearance anxiety and body image discontent, and thus supports hypothesis.

Collectively, the results of this study support the high importance of social media addiction in determining the psychological outcomes in terms of body image and appearance in undergraduate students. These findings demonstrate the necessity of interventions aimed at introducing healthier and more conscious social media practices. To prevent the risk of maladaptive comparison tendencies, universities and mental health professionals may think about applying awareness programs on unrealistic beauty standards, digital literacy, and adaptive coping strategies. These would serve to counter the adverse psychological effects of excessive use of social media by young adults.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between social media addiction and the body image and appearance anxiety among undergraduate students. The results indicated that the increased scores of social media addiction were significantly connected with the increased of appearance anxiety and both these were inversely associated with body image. Regression analyses also validated that social media addiction and body image are an important predictors of appearance anxiety. These findings point to the high impact of the highly visual and comparison-based online space, which can contribute to self-assessment strength and the solidification of unrealistic beauty ideals in the context of developing adulthood. With the growing use of social media as a means to connect socially by undergraduate students, the threat of negative appearance-related outcomes can be seen as more evident. The research insists on the significance of awareness, media literacy, and psychological intervention that can make students develop more healthy online behaviors and more balanced views of themselves. Discussing these concerns in the university setting can lead to the alleviation of appearance-related distress and enhance positive emotional well-being in the ever-digitizing society.

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