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From Scroll to Self-Doubt: A Conceptual Framework Linking Beauty Influencer Exposure to Self-Esteem Erosion Among Young Women

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Abstract: Social media has changed the way beauty brands communicate with consumers, with influence now coming not only from brand advertising but also from peers, micro-influencers, and everyday users. The psychological consequences of such influencer content for young women particularly the internalisation of narrow beauty standards and the erosion of self-esteem remain theoretically underexplored within an integrated conceptual framework.

This paper presents a conceptual model that synthesises three complementary theoretical perspectives: the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the findings of existing papers. Drawing on these frameworks, the paper argues that beauty brand influencer content functions activate upward appearance-based social comparisons that progressively normalise narrow beauty ideals among young women. Social comparison is proposed as the primary mediating mechanism through which exposure to influencer content shapes beauty standard internalisation.

The conceptual model advances three theoretically grounded propositions addressing psychological outcomes of influencer content exposure, the mediating role of social comparison. By integrating these dimensions within a single framework, this paper addresses a significant gap in existing literature, which has largely examined beauty standards, and self-esteem as independent phenomena. The paper concludes with theoretical contributions, proposed conceptual framework, practical implications for marketers, policymakers, and mental health professionals, and a research agenda for empirical validation.

Keywords: influencer content, beauty standards, self-esteem, social comparison, social media.

Introduction - Over the past two decades, the way young women come across and absorb ideas about appearance has changed considerably (Naeem&Ozuem 2021). On Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, beauty norms are no longer simply reflected back at audiences; they are built and passed around largely through content that influencers produce. Traditional advertising was easy to spot, since it was clearly framed and openly commercial (Cheong & Morrison 2008). Influencer content works differently. It draws its force from a sense of authenticity, from creators who seem relatable yet aspirational, and from the one-sided closeness that followers develop with them (Abidin 2016). For this reason, it is a particularly persuasive and hard-to-avoid source of appearance-related exposure (Duffy & Hund 2015).

Women aged 18 to 24 are among the most affected in this environment (Ameen et al. 2022). At this age, many are still working out who they are. They tend to be self-conscious and care a great deal about what their friends think (Rosenberg 1965). Their feeds are full of filtered, carefully edited images of how a woman should look, and they see these images every day. Beauty influencers keep this going (Hafeez & Zulfiqar 2023), whether they are big celebrities or micro-influencers with small but loyal followings. Over time, they shape what people come to see as beautiful and normal (Jung et al. 2022). How this constant exposure affects young women's self-esteem, and how readily they take on these beauty standards as their own, is a real concern (Nene & Olayemi 2023). Consumer psychology and media studies have not explained it well enough.

Previous work has tended to look at these issues sepa-

rately. Studies of social comparison show that viewing idealised images prompts upward comparisons of one's own appearance (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014). A different body of work shows how media imagery shapes what people believe appearance should look like (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013 ,(Jung et al. 2022), while research on self-esteem finds that repeated contact with unattainable ideals gradually wears down young women's sense of self-worth (Fardouly& Vartanian, 2015). These lines of research have mostly progressed on their own, however, and none has brought them together in a single framework focused on beauty influencer content.

This paper tries to fill that gap through a conceptual model built on three frameworks. The Stimulus-Organism-Response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) treats influencer content as an environmental stimulus that sets off internal psychological states. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) accounts for the cognitive and emotional processes that appearance-based comparison triggers. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) helps explain how such content may weaken autonomous self-perception and intrinsic self-worth. Taken together, they offer a workable way of tracing how exposure to influencer content moves from a social media stimulus to psychological harm that can be measured.

The paper puts forward three propositions that follow this pathway, with social comparison as the main mediating mechanism linking exposure to two outcomes: internalisation of beauty standards and erosion of self-esteem. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature, Section 3 presents the model and propositions, Section 4 considers theoretical contributions and practical implications, and Section 5 sets out an agenda for empirical testing.

Literature Review

Influencer-Generated Content in the Beauty Space

Nature and Characteristics of Influencer Content: Influencer-generated content in the beauty domain includes makeup tutorials, skincare stories, transformation videos and personal testimonials about appearance. It is created by micro-influencers, macro-influencers and aspirational peers, and shared mainly on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. What sets it apart from brand advertising is that it seems independent and personal. Because it comes from an individual who feels relatable rather than from a company, audiences tend to find it more honest and more emotionally engaging (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Followers come to feel they know and trust the creator, a form of parasocial closeness, and this makes such content an especially powerful source of appearance-related exposure, most of all for young women who are still at a formative stage of development (Mahlakaarto & Suanse 2024).

The platforms themselves add to the problem. Their algorithms favour visually attractive content that fits mainstream beauty ideals, so filtered, curated and digitally enhanced images are seen far more often than ordinary, unedited ones (Hafeez & Zulfiqar 2023). Duffy and Hund (2015) describe this as pseudo-authenticity, meaning content that looks like genuine personal expression but has been carefully edited to perform well on the platform. Many young women know perfectly well that what they see has been altered, and yet they are still affected by it emotionally. This gap between knowing and feeling matters a great deal for the psychological mechanisms examined in this paper.

Psychological Consequences of Beauty Influencer Content Among Young Women

Internalisation of Narrow Beauty Standards: When young women keep seeing beauty-related influencer content, especially content that platform algorithms push to the top of their feeds, their view of their own appearance can shift gradually (Fardouly&Vartanian, 2016). With repeated exposure to idealised images, many begin to treat narrow beauty standards as personal expectations they must meet, rather than as images to look at and admire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The problem is made worse by the fact that much of this content does not show real life. Images are often filtered or digitally enhanced before posting, yet they are shared as if they were ordinary personal experience, which Hafeez and Zulfiqar (2023) describe as systematically misleading. As this exposure builds up, young women start measuring themselves against these altered images. They become less satisfied with how they naturally look and develop expectations of beauty that are hard to reach (Jung et al. 2022).

Body Image Dissatisfaction and Appearance-Related Distress: Studies repeatedly link frequent exposure to appearance-focused social media content with poorer body image among young women (Grabe et al., 2008). After viewing such content, many report feeling more dissatisfied with their looks and wanting to change them. Safitri et al. (2025) found that heavy social media use went along with markedly higher symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder among adolescents, with body image explaining 40.4% of the variance in BDD tendency scores. This effect appears to work mainly through appearance-based social comparison, in which people judge their own physical features against the idealised images they come across online (Kennedy et al., 2023). Upward comparison, where a person measures herself against someone, she sees as better looking, is especially troublesome, as it has been tied to anxiety, depression and disordered eating (Bonfanti et al. 2025). A systematic review and meta-analysis by Bonfanti et al. (2025) reached a similar conclusion, finding that social comparison on social media is significantly associated with body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms. This gives strong evidence across studies for the mechanism that the present framework proposes.

Self-Esteem and Psychological Wellbeing: The link between beauty-focused social media use and self-esteem among young women has been documented in several strands of research. Self-esteem may operate in both direc-

tions in this processSelf-esteem may work in both directions here. Perloff (2014) argues that young women with lower self-esteem are more likely to look for appearance-focused content because they want reassurance and approval. This means they see even more idealised images. Studies that follow people over time have not clearly confirmed a full two-way cycle (Appel et al., 2016). Still, self-esteem seems to be both something that exposure can lower and something that makes some women more open to its effects.Vogel et al. (2014) found that upward social comparison on social media directly predicted lower self-evaluations, and Appel et al. (2016) identified envy as another emotional route through which social media use lowers wellbeing. This paper also separates two ideas. The first is global self-esteem, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The second is cosmetic-contingent self-esteem, meaning self-worth that depends on being able to meet beauty standards. The distinction matters for both theory and clinical practice, and Section 3 develops it further.

Social Comparison as the Core Mediating Mechanism

Social Comparison Theory was first put forward by Festinger (1954). It says that people judge their own opinions, abilities and traits by comparing themselves with others, especially when there is no clear objective standard to use. On beauty platforms this happens all the time, and the platforms make it stronger. Likes, comments and follower counts keep reminding users how they measure up, and algorithms keep showing content that fits narrow ideals of appearance (Kennedy et al., 2023). Hafeez and Zulfiqar (2023) argued that beauty platforms make upward comparison the normal case rather than the exception. Bonfanti et al. (2025) combined findings from many studies and showed that social comparison on social media is clearly linked to body image concerns and disordered eating.

In this framework, social comparison is the main route through which influencer content leads to the internalisation of beauty standards. Influencer content does not simply plant narrow ideals in a viewer's mind. It first makes upward comparisons about appearance more frequent and more intense. Over time, those comparisons turn narrow standards into the viewer's own point of reference. Li et al. (2025) found that social media use raised women's envy of other people's bodies and was linked to cosmetic surgery, even when they were critical of idealised beauty norms. This suggests that comparison works through feelings and not only through conscious thought.

Table 1 (see in last page)

Research Gaps :

1. **Contextual gap:**The evidence base is predominantly Western, and the Indian context is under-examined (Lang & Ye 2024).
2. **Conceptual gap:**Beauty ideals and self-esteem contingency are treated as culturally universal. Fairness-based ideals and family-approval-driven self-worth are not captured.
3. **Mechanism gap:**The role of social comparison as a mediator for beauty influencer content among young Indian women is not explained (Nene & Olayemi 2023)

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Integration: This paper uses three theories to explain how beauty influencer content affects the wellbeing of young women aged 18 to 24. Each theory covers a different part of the model. Together they follow one clear order, starting with what the woman sees, then what happens inside her, and finally what it does to her.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) gives the framework its basic structure. Beauty influencer content is the stimulus. It sets off certain thoughts and feelings in the viewer, such as aspiration, worry about her appearance and upward social comparison, and these make up the organism layer. The responses are the internalisation of beauty standards and the erosion of self-esteem. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) explains how influencer content leads women to take on narrow beauty standards, and comparison is the main process that links the two. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains why this internalisation lowers self-esteem and wellbeing. It argues that people need autonomy, competence and relatedness, and that internalised beauty standards work against these needs. This gives the theoretical basis for Proposition 3.

Table 2 (see in last page)

The Stimulus-Organism-Response Model: The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model was developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) within environmental psychology. It explains how external stimuli can influence a person's internal psychological state and, subsequently, their attitudes or behaviour. The model has also been used in consumer behaviour and digital media research to understand how online environments can shape people's perceptions and responses (Schivinski&Dabrowski, 2016).

For the present framework, beauty influencer content represents the stimulus. Features such as perceived authenticity, visual appeal, relatability, and emotional connection may influence how young women respond to the content they encounter. These responses can affect the psychology of young women where they compare one's own appearance with that of the influencer, or feeling concerned about not meeting a particular beauty ideal. Such experiences may contribute to the internalisation of narrow beauty standards and may also affect appearance-related self-esteem.

The S-O-R model therefore provides the overall structure for the framework, while Social Comparison Theory and Self-Determination Theory help explain the psychological processes that may occur between exposure to influencer content and its effects on beauty standards and self-esteem.

Social Comparison Theory: Social Comparison Theory, introduced by Festinger (1954), explains how people evaluate themselves by comparing their opinions, abilities, and

personal characteristics with those of others, especially when there is no clear objective standard. Festinger identified two broad forms of comparison: upward comparison, in which people compare themselves with someone they consider better or more successful, and downward comparison, in which the comparison is made with someone perceived as less successful. In beauty-related social media settings, upward comparison appears particularly relevant because users are frequently exposed to carefully presented and idealised appearances. Such comparisons have been linked with negative self-evaluation, body dissatisfaction, and the internalisation of narrow beauty ideals (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2023).

Social media also creates pressure for appearance comparison. Likes, comments, follower numbers, and personalised content recommendations can draw attention to how others look and how their content is received (Kennedy et al., 2023). Hafeez and Zulfiqar (2023) suggested that beauty-focused platforms can further encourage upward comparison by repeatedly presenting users with content that reflects idealised standards of appearance. Similarly, Bonfanti et al. (2025), through a systematic review and meta-analysis, found a consistent association between social comparison on social media and body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms.

In the present framework, social comparison is proposed as an important pathway between influencer content exposure and beauty standard internalisation. The assumption is that repeated exposure creates more opportunities for young women to compare their appearance with that of influencers and other users. When these comparisons occur repeatedly, the beauty ideals presented online may gradually become reference points for judging one's own appearance. This relationship is further developed in Proposition 3**.**

Self-Determination Theory: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), suggests that psychological wellbeing is supported by three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy concerns having a sense of choice in one's actions, competence refers to feeling capable and effective, and relatedness involves feeling connected to and valued by others. SDT also distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which comes from personal interest or satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is influenced by external expectations or pressures.

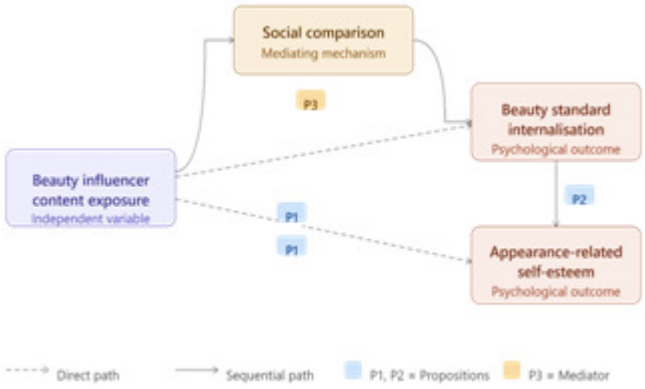
These ideas are relevant to beauty influencer content because such content can provide both social connection and pressure. Following and engaging with beauty content may give young women a sense of belonging and shared experience. At the same time, repeated exposure to narrow beauty ideals may create pressure to look a certain way. When appearance becomes something that needs to be maintained to gain approval or feel accepted, personal choice can become closely tied to external expectations. Women who feel unable to meet these standards may also question their competence or attractiveness. Over time, this may affect their broader sense of self-worth and make confidence increasingly dependent on appearance.

This perspective supports the framework's distinction between global self-esteem and what is termed **cosmetic-contingent self-esteem**. The latter refers to self-worth that depends largely on feeling able to meet expected beauty standards through appearance, cosmetics, or grooming. Future research could therefore examine this form of self-worth separately from general self-esteem measures such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

Proposed Conceptual Model: Drawing on the three theoretical perspectives above, this paper proposes an integrated conceptual model that maps how beauty influencer content shapes two distinct psychological outcomes among young women aged 18 to 24: the internalisation of narrow beauty standards and the erosion of appearance-related self-esteem. The model specifies two direct pathways, P1 (influencer content exposure → beauty standard internalisation) and P2 (beauty standard internalisation → appearance-related self-esteem erosion) alongside one mediating pathway, social comparison mediating the influencer content–beauty standard internalisation relationship (P3).

The model reflects a sequential psychological process in which beauty influencer content functions as a potent environmental stimulus that activates upward appearance-based social comparisons, which in turn progressively normalise narrow beauty ideals as internal personal reference points, ultimately eroding young women's genuine self-esteem while elevating a fragile, appearance-contingent form of self-worth. The psychological consequences of influencer content exposure are not incidental or peripheral; they are structurally embedded in the very mechanisms, perceived authenticity, parasocial relatability, and algorithmically amplified idealisation, that make such content so pervasive in young women's daily digital lives.

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model: Beauty influencer content exposure as the independent variable; narrow beauty standard internalisation and appearance-related self-esteem as psychological outcomes; social comparison as the primary mediating mechanism (P3).



Research Propositions

Overview: The three propositions presented below are drawn

from the theoretical arguments and literature discussed in Sections 2 and 3. As this is a conceptual paper, the propositions are based on existing theory and research rather than empirical testing. They are intended to provide a basis for future quantitative or mixed-methods research. Table 2 summarises the propositions and the theories supporting them.

Proposition 1: Influencer Content Exposure and Beauty Standard Internalisation

P1: Greater exposure to beauty influencer content is positively associated with stronger internalisation of narrow beauty standards among young women.

P1 suggests that repeated exposure to beauty influencer content may gradually influence what young women consider to be a desirable or acceptable appearance. Within the S-O-R framework, influencer content represents the stimulus that may shape subsequent perceptions and evaluations. Repeated exposure can make particular beauty ideals appear more common and, over time, may lead individuals to use these ideals when judging their own appearance. Algorithmic recommendations can reinforce this process by repeatedly showing users similar appearance-focused content.

Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) found a consistent relationship between social media use and body image concerns among young women and noted the role of repeated exposure to appearance-focused content in making idealised standards more familiar. Hafeez and Zulfiqar (2023) also reported a relationship between exposure to idealised beauty standards and body dysmorphic tendencies, suggesting that repeated engagement with such content may influence how women view their own appearance. Although Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) developed objectification theory before the rise of social media, their work helps explain how externally defined appearance ideals can become standards through which individuals evaluate themselves.

The nature of influencer content may further contribute to this process. Abidin (2016) and Duffy and Hund (2015) noted that influencer content often combines personal expression with careful self-presentation and commercial or platform-related considerations. As a result, content that appears personal and relatable may still present a relatively narrow view of beauty. Taken together, these studies provide a basis for proposing that repeated exposure to beauty influencer content may be associated with stronger internalisation of narrow beauty standards among young women.

Proposition 2: Beauty Standard Internalisation and Appearance-Related Self-Esteem

P2: Stronger internalisation of narrow beauty standards is associated with lower genuine self-esteem and higher cosmetic-contingent self-esteem among young women.

P2 distinguishes between global self-esteem and cosmetic-contingent self-esteem. Global self-esteem reflects a person's general sense of self-worth and is commonly measured using scales such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Cosmetic-contingent self-esteem, as used in this paper, refers to self-worth that is closely tied to appearance and to the extent to which a woman feels able to meet socially defined beauty expectations through cosmetics, grooming, or other appearance-related practices.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) helps explain this relationship. Once narrow beauty standards become internalised, appearance-related choices may begin to feel less like personal choices and more like expectations that have to be fulfilled. Women may then judge themselves partly on how closely they believe they match these standards. If the standards are difficult to achieve or maintain, feelings of competence and control may also be affected, which can have implications for overall self-worth.

Earlier research provides some support for this argument.Perloff (2014) described a cycle in which lower self-esteem may lead individuals to seek greater social validation, which can increase exposure to idealised standards and reinforce negative self-evaluations. Vogel et al. (2014) similarly found that upward social comparison on social media was associated with more negative self-evaluation. Li et al. (2025) further reported that awareness of idealised beauty standards does not necessarily protect users from their effects, finding links between social media use, body-related envy, and consideration of cosmetic surgery even among those who recognised that online beauty ideals were highly idealised.

These findings suggest that internalising narrow beauty standards may affect self-esteem in two ways. It may weaken a broader and more stable sense of self-worth while making appearance more important to how women feel about themselves. Confidence may therefore depend increasingly on whether an individual feels that she is meeting the expected beauty standard. When she feels that she is doing so, appearance-related confidence may increase; when she feels that she is falling short, that confidence may be reduced. On this basis, P2 proposes that stronger internalisation of narrow beauty standards is associated with lower genuine self-esteem and higher cosmetic-contingent self-esteem among young women.

Proposition 3: Social Comparison as the Primary Mediating Mechanism

P3: The relationship between beauty influencer content exposure and the internalisation of narrow beauty standards is mediated by appearance-based social comparison. Greater exposure to influencer content may increase upward appearance comparisons, which can in turn contribute to stronger internalisation of narrow beauty standards.

P3 considers the role of social comparison in explaining how influencer content may influence beauty-related beliefs. Simply being exposed to influencer content may not have the same effect on every viewer. What may matter is how women respond to the appearances they see and whether they compare themselves with them. When an influencer is viewed as more attractive or closer to an ideal

appearance, repeated comparison may make the beauty standards shown in the content more personally relevant.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory provides the basis for this proposition. People commonly evaluate themselves by comparing their characteristics with those of others, particularly when there is no clear objective standard for comparison. Appearance is one such area because attractiveness cannot be judged against a single universal standard. Social media increases the opportunities for these comparisons by providing users with a continuous stream of appearance-focused content. Kennedy et al. (2023) found that appearance-based social comparison on social media was associated with body dissatisfaction among young women. Hafeez and Zulfiqar (2023) similarly suggested that beauty-focused social media environments can encourage upward comparisons by repeatedly exposing users to idealised forms of appearance.

Bonfanti et al. (2025), in their systematic review and meta-analysis, also reported a consistent relationship between social comparison on social media and body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms. Pedalino&Camerini (2022) found that social media use was related to body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, with appearance comparison helping to explain this relationship. Together, these findings suggest that exposure itself may not fully explain the psychological effects of beauty-related social media content. The comparisons users make with the people they see online may be an important part of the process.

P3 therefore proposes that appearance-based social comparison provides a pathway between beauty influencer content exposure and the internalisation of narrow beauty standards. Repeated exposure creates more opportunities for upward comparison, and these comparisons may gradually make certain beauty ideals appear more desirable or normal. Over time, women may begin to use these ideals as reference points when evaluating their own appearance. The proposed pathway is therefore **influencer content exposure →upward appearance-based social comparison → internalisation of narrow beauty standards**.

Discussion

The Psychological Pathway of Beauty Influencer Content: The framework has three processes that are often examined separately: beauty standard internalisation, self-esteem, and social comparison. Using the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) as the overall structure, the framework draws on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to explain how beauty influencer content may influence young women's perceptions of appearance and, in turn, their sense of self-worth.

Influencer Content Exposure and Beauty Standard Internalisation (P1): The internalisation of narrow beauty standards is likely to develop gradually rather than from a single exposure. Repeated exposure to similar images and messages can make particular forms of appearance seem increasingly normal or desirable (Fardouly&Vartanian, 2016). This may be reinforced by algorithms that repeatedly recommend highly engaging and carefully presented beauty content. Although influencer posts may appear personal and authentic, they are often shaped by platform expectations and audience responses (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Over time, repeated exposure to this type of content may therefore influence how young women understand and judge their own appearance.

Beauty Standard Internalisation and Self-Esteem (P2): An important aspect of the framework is the distinction between general self-esteem and self-esteem that is closely tied to appearance. When narrow beauty standards become personally important, appearance-related choices may no longer feel entirely personal. Instead, maintaining a particular appearance can become something that is expected or necessary for feeling good about oneself. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, this shift may weaken a more stable sense of self-worth while making confidence increasingly dependent on meeting external appearance expectations. This distinction is particularly relevant when considering the psychological effects of frequent engagement with beauty content.

Social Comparison as the Mediating Mechanism (P3): The framework positions social comparison as the link between exposure to beauty influencer content and the internalisation of beauty standards. Seeing idealised appearances does not necessarily produce the same response in every viewer; the effect may depend partly on whether viewers compare their own appearance with what they see online. Social media can provide frequent opportunities for such comparisons, particularly in beauty-focused environments (Kennedy et al., 2023; Hafeez & Zulfiqar, 2023). Tiggemann and Slater (2013) similarly found that appearance comparison helped explain the relationship between social media use and body dissatisfaction. This supports the view that comparison may be an important part of the process through which repeated exposure to influencer content becomes connected with internalised beauty ideals

Practical Implications

For Policymakers and Regulators: The framework suggests that the effects of beauty influencer content are influenced not only by what users see but also by how platforms select and repeatedly recommend such content. The social comparison pathway proposed in P3 therefore points to the importance of considering algorithmic exposure alongside individual media use. Measures such as greater transparency about recommendation systems, wider representation of different forms of appearance, and stronger user controls over the content they are repeatedly shown could help reduce excessive exposure to narrow beauty ideals (Kennedy et al., 2023; Bonfanti et al., 2025). Digital literacy can support these efforts, particularly when it also helps users recognise the emotional effects of idealised content rather than focusing only on how such content is produced.

For Mental Health Professionals and Educators: The framework also has implications for professionals working with young women. One useful distinction is between general self-esteem and appearance-based self-worth. A young woman may feel confident about her appearance while still depending heavily on beauty standards for that confidence. Recognising this difference can help practitioners explore whether self-worth is becoming too closely linked to appearance and appearance-related practices (Rosenberg, 1965; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The social comparison pathway proposed in P3 is another area that may be useful in practice. Repeated comparison with idealised appearances can become part of everyday social media use and may not always be recognised by users themselves (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014). Helping young women identify when and how these comparisons affect their feelings about themselves may therefore be more useful than focusing only on whether they understand that online images can be edited or curated. For educators, media literacy programmes could similarly include discussion of emotional responses to beauty content alongside critical evaluation of digital media.

Conclusion: This paper developed a conceptual framework to examine how beauty influencer content may influence beauty perceptions and self-esteem among young women aged 18 to 24. Drawing on the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the framework brings together three related processes. P1 suggests that repeated exposure to influencer content may contribute to the internalisation of narrow beauty standards. P2 links this internalisation with lower global self-esteem and greater dependence on appearance-based, cosmetic-contingent self-esteem. P3 proposes that appearance-based social comparison helps explain the relationship between influencer exposure and beauty standard internalisation.

The framework makes three main contributions. First, it brings beauty standard internalisation and self-esteem into the same conceptual model rather than examining them separately. Second, it gives greater attention to social comparison as a possible pathway through which influencer exposure may influence beauty-related beliefs. Third, it distinguishes cosmetic-contingent self-esteem from general self-esteem, suggesting that future studies should examine these forms of self-worth separately.

As a conceptual study, the framework has not been empirically tested. Future research can examine the proposed relationships using validated measures and methods such as PLS-SEM or covariance-based SEM. Longitudinal studies would also be useful for understanding whether repeated exposure and comparison have effects that develop over time. Qualitative research could further explore how young women experience appearance comparisons and how they understand the difference between feeling confident about their appearance and having a broader sense of self-worth. Research across different cultural settings, including Indian and Western contexts, may also reveal differences in the way beauty ideals are interpreted. Finally, future studies could compare micro- and macro-influencers, personal beauty narratives, and brand-related influencer content, as these forms of content may not affect audiences in the same way. Overall, the framework provides a basis for examining beauty influencer content as more than a form of digital marketing. It highlights the interaction between repeated exposure, social comparison, beauty standards, and self-worth, and provides directions for future empirical research into these relationships.

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Table 1. Summary of all the research papers

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Theory	Context / Sample	Key Constructs	Key Findings	Limitations / Research Gaps
Levin, Harriger, Fardouly, & Tiggemann (2025)	Narrative review on influencer nature, content types (idealized vs. body-positive), and multifaceted impact on follower body image.	Social Comparison Theory, Parasocial & Trans-Parasocial Interaction, Objectification Theory	Theoretical synthesis of global literature on social media influencers and followers (adolescents & young adults).	Idealized imagery, body positivity, trans-parasocial relationships, body surveillance, facial dissatisfaction.	Idealized influencer posts increase body/facial dissatisfaction, surveillance, and ED risks. Body-positive diverse content improves mood and body appreciation. Trans-parasocial dynamics amplify influence.	Requires empirical psychosocial studies on influencers' own well-being, biases, attitudes toward BoPo content, and awareness of follower impacts.
Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles (2014)	Effects of social networking site (Facebook) use and social comparison orientation on state/trait self-esteem and self-evaluations.	Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)	Study 1: Cross-sectional survey (N=145). Study 2: Experimental design (N=120 undergraduates, USA).	Upward vs. downward social comparison, Facebook usage frequency, state self-esteem, relative self-evaluations.	Frequent Facebook use correlates with lower self-esteem via upward social comparison. Experimental exposure to upward Facebook profiles lowers state self-esteem and relative self-evaluations.	Laboratory setup with fictitious profiles; relies primarily on college student samples; cross-sectional correlational design in Study 1.
Hafeez & Zulfiqar (2023)	Exploration of how unrealistic social media beauty standards set by influencers contribute to body dysmorphia and mental distress.	Objectification Theory, Social Comparison Theory	Qualitative/literature analysis focusing on female social media users and adolescent populations.	Digitized dysmorphia, selfie editing/manipulation, unrealistic beauty expectations, body dissatisfaction, eating disorder drive.	Comparisons with edited influencer/celebrity photos promote facial dissatisfaction, body dysmorphic tendencies, and drive for thinness when unrealistic ideals cannot be met.	Relies on secondary synthesis; lacks direct clinical diagnostic sampling or longitudinal tracking across wider age groups.
Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell (2015)	Experimental impact of brief exposure to Facebook vs. online fashion magazines vs. neutral sites on state mood and body image.	Social Comparison Theory, Tripartite Influence Model	Experimental study with N=112 female university students and staff (aged 17–25, UK).	Facebook exposure, state negative mood, state body dissatisfaction, face/hair/skin discrepancies, appearance comparison tendency.	Brief Facebook exposure significantly increased negative mood relative to neutral control. Among women high in appearance comparison tendency, Facebook exposure increased face, hair, and skin discrepancies.	Short exposure duration (10 min in lab); female university sample; focused on general Facebook browsing rather than specific content types.
Systematic Review of 10 RCTs (2022) [RP21]	Literature synthesis reviewing 10 clinical trials and RCTs on social media use, filter usage, and comparison effects on mental health.	Social Comparison Theory, Sociocultural Model	Synthesis of 10 studies (RCTs, clinical trials, cohorts) of adolescents and young adults (ages 13–40, N>100 per study).	Social media addiction/screen time, selfie filtering/photoshop, eating disorder risk, body dissatisfaction, social comparison.	Social media exposure (even 20 mins) increases anxiety and eating disorder pressures. Filtering photos elevates anxiety and fatness feelings. Peer comparison is a stronger distress	Methodological heterogeneity across the 10 reviewed trials; reliance on self-report screening instruments.
					predictor than screen time.	
Lang & Ye (2024)	Qualitative investigation of young Chinese women's perspectives on beauty ideals, fitspiration, and body positivity (#BoPo) on social media.	Sociocultural Theory, Objectification Theory, Postfeminist Frameworks	Qualitative thematic study with N=28 young female social media users in urban China.	Chinese beauty ideals (A4 waist, thinness), body positivity (#BoPo), fitspiration, appearance anxiety, digital resistance.	Participants critically recognized narrow beauty standards. Body positivity encouraged self-acceptance but was critiqued for commercialization/commodification. Fitspiration elicited mixed health vs. pressure responses.	Qualitative sample restricted to young urban Chinese women; findings may not extend to males, rural populations, or non-digital natives.
Pedalino & Camerini (2022)	Examining upward social comparison with peers and influencers as mediators between Instagram use intensity and body dissatisfaction.	Social Comparison Theory, Tripartite Influence Model	Cross-sectional survey of N=221 young female Instagram users in Switzerland/Italy.	Instagram usage intensity, upward comparison (peers vs. influencers), body image discrepancy, body appreciation.	Upward social comparison with peers and influencers fully mediated the relationship between Instagram use and body discrepancy, and partially mediated body appreciation. Influencer comparisons showed stronger effects.	Cross-sectional design limits causal inference; convenience sampling of young females; self-reported usage metrics.

Bocci Benucci, Fioravanti, Silvestro, et al. (2024)	Differential impact of following nutritional, fitness, and entertainment influencers on women's body dissatisfaction and eating disorder (ED) risk.	Sociocultural Theory of Body Image, Tripartite Influence Model	Cross-sectional study of N=5,060 female Instagram users (aged 18–65, mean age 35.3) in Italy.	Influencer category (nutritional, fitness, entertainment), EAT-26 scores, dieting, bulimia/food preoccupation, body dissatisfaction.	Following nutritional and fitness influencers significantly predicted higher ED symptoms and body dissatisfaction compared to entertainment influencers. Following nutritional influencers was the single strongest predictor of ED risk.	Convenience sampling recruited via influencers' accounts; cross-sectional design; inability to control for potential daily content overlap across accounts.
Qualitative Study on UGC & Brand Engagement (2020) [rp 10]	Developing a Social Brand Engagement model by exploring consumer motivations for creating, sharing, and reacting to User-Generated Content (UGC).	Social Influence Theory, Social Proof Theory, Social Constructionism	Qualitative interview study with N=32 fashion product consumers and active social media users.	User-Generated Content (UGC), social brand engagement, emotional attachment, social motives, peer feedback/eWOM.	Social motives (peer validation, brand knowledge, risk reduction, emotional connection) drive UGC exchange, shaping consumer brand engagement and body/aesthetic presentation online.	Purposive qualitative sample focused on fashion product buyers; relies on self-reported motivations without longitudinal behavioral tracking.
Ameen, Cheah, Kumar, et al. (2022)	Investigating how AR-enabled virtual makeup try-on apps affect Gen Z women's body image, self-esteem, and actual purchase behavior.	Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)	3 multi-group PLS-SEM studies of Gen Z female consumers using a leading European beauty brand's AR try-on app (N>1,000).	Perceived augmentation, body image satisfaction, state self-esteem, actual purchase behavior (depth/breadth), celebrity trust, social media addiction.	Perceived AR augmentation significantly enhances Gen Z women's body image, which directly boosts self-esteem and purchase behavior. Celebrity trust and addiction act as key moderators.	Context limited to a single European beauty brand app; focused exclusively on Gen Z women; lacks cross-cultural validation across non-Western beauty norms.
Qualitative Study on Consumer Identity (2024) [rp 3]	Exploring female consumers' identity transformation, body image, and emotional responses when consuming beauty and lifestyle influencer content.	Belk's Extended Self (1988), Goffman's Impression Management (1959), Butler's Gender Performativity (1993)	Qualitative in-depth interview study with N=14 young female consumers (aged 18–30) across Finland, Sweden, and Denmark.	Identity transformation, ideal body standards, aesthetic inspiration, affect & emotion (happiness, community), gender performativity.	Influencer consumption fosters emotional connection, community, and aesthetic inspiration; however, it also reinforces societal gendered beauty ideals and body self-evaluations.	Small qualitative Nordic sample; intensive narrative data without long-term tracking of actual purchase or behavioral changes.
Lukman, Muis, et al. (2023)	Examining the relationship between social media intensity use and body image dissatisfaction among early adult women in Indonesia.	Psychoanalytic Body Image Theory, Sociocultural Beauty Standard Models	Quantitative survey study of early adult female social media users in Indonesia.	Social media intensity use (SONTUS scale), Body Image Dissatisfaction (BID scale: appearance evaluation, orientation, body area satisfaction).	High social media use intensity significantly predicts greater body image dissatisfaction among early adult women, driven by rigid societal slimness ideals and online peer comparisons.	Geographically restricted sample (Indonesia); cross-sectional correlational design limits causal inferences; self-report measurement scales.
Alfonso-Fuertes, Ruiz, & Vives (2023)	Analyzing associations between Instagram screen time, account types followed, appearance comparison, body shape dissatisfaction, and self-esteem.	Sociocultural Theory, Objectification Theory	Cross-sectional survey of N=409 Spanish Instagram users (mostly young adult women).	Instagram screen time, account categories (fashion/beauty vs. professional), PACS-R, Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.	Higher Instagram time and following fashion/beauty accounts significantly predicted higher physical appearance comparison, greater body shape dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem compared to professional accounts.	Cross-sectional design; single-country Spanish sample; lack of clinical/psychological profiling; BSQ scale items biased toward female eating disorder symptoms.
Rapid Literature Review (2023) [rp16]	Rapid systematic review evaluating the psychological effects of social media usage on body image and self-esteem among emerging adults (2015–2023).	Psychoanalytic Perspective, Objectification Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Cognitive Behavioral Frameworks	Systematic synthesis of 15 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2023 focusing on emerging adults.	Social media exposure, body image dissatisfaction, self-esteem, self-compassion, mindfulness-based interventions.	Social media usage consistently exacerbates body dissatisfaction and reduces self-esteem in emerging adults through appearance comparison and self-objectification; self-compassion serves as a protective buffer.	Rapid review protocol with strict date/language filters; qualitative synthesis without quantitative meta-analysis.
Jung, Barron, Swami, & Lee (2022)	Testing the applicability of the Tripartite Influence Model linking social media use intensity to body esteem (appearance & weight) in young adult women.	Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999), Social Comparison Theory	Quantitative survey of N=579 young adult women in the United States.	Social media use intensity, appearance ideal internalization, appearance-based social comparison, Body Esteem Scale (Appearance/Weight).	Internalization of appearance ideals and social comparison sequentially mediated the link between social media intensity and body esteem. Direct effects between intensity and body esteem were equivocal.	US female undergraduate sample; cross-sectional design preventing longitudinal causal validation; focused on self-reported usage intensity rather than specific content types.
Fioravanti, Bocci Benucci, Ceragioli, & Casale (2022)	Systematic review of 43 experimental studies investigating the direct effect of viewing beauty ideal images (thin,	Sociocultural Theory of Body Dissatisfaction, Objectification Theory, Social Comparison Theory	Systematic review of 43 experimental studies (total N>7,000, primarily undergraduate females in Australia, USA, UK).	Beauty ideal images (thin, attractive, fitspo), body dissatisfaction, body appreciation, state appearance comparison,	Brief acute exposure to thin, attractive, and fit ideal SNS images consistently causes immediate increases in	Reviewed studies predominantly featured Caucasian female undergraduate samples; men and older adults

	attractive, fit) on SNSs on body image.			self-objectification.	body dissatisfaction. State appearance comparison acts as a primary mediator. Body-positive content shows preliminary beneficial effects.	underrepresented; lack of long-term real-world exposure designs.
Glaser, Jansma, & Scholten (2024)	Qualitative daily diary study exploring youths' real-time Instagram content consumption habits, motivations, and affective body image responses.	Identity Development Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Tripartite Model	7-day intensive qualitative daily diary study with N=28 young Instagram users (aged 18–25) in the Netherlands.	Real-time content categories (Thin ideal, Body Positivity, Fitness, Lifestyle), upward/downward social comparison, state body satisfaction, active vs. passive consumption.	Passive exposure to thin-ideal and fitspiration content triggered immediate upward comparisons and body anxiety. Body positive and lifestyle content elicited positive mood and self-acceptance when perceived as authentic.	Small qualitative sample (N=28) from a single nation; self-selection bias of participants willing to complete daily diaries; short 7-day tracking window.
Taylor & Armes (2024)	Experimental study testing the impact of upward, downward, and neutral Instagram image comparison levels on young adults' pre- and post-exposure self-esteem and body-esteem.	Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)	Experimental study with N=48 young adult social media users (UK).	Upward comparison images, downward comparison images, neutral control images (abstract/nature), state self-esteem, body-esteem.	Upward social comparison images significantly decreased state self-esteem and body-esteem; downward comparison images significantly increased self-esteem and body-esteem; neutral control images produced no change.	Small sample size (N=48); laboratory/analog experimental setup; single exposure session does not capture cumulative long-term daily social media habits.
Tran, Rosales, & Copes (2020)	Qualitative exploration of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation for makeup use, its role as a self-esteem buffer, and the impact of beauty standards on ethnoracially diverse YouTube beauty influencers.	Jacobsen's (2006) Psychology of Aesthetics Framework, Ryan & Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory	Qualitative thematic study with N=9 female YouTube beauty influencers (aged 21–40, Black, Hispanic, White) in the USA and UK.	Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, self-esteem buffering, hegemonic beauty standards, facial aesthetics, ethnoracial disparities.	Internally motivated makeup use directly boosts self-esteem via agency and creativity; externally motivated makeup use indirectly buffers low mood by fostering audience confidence. Black influencers highlighted structural industry pay/sponsorship disparities.	Small qualitative sample size (N=9); limited to female cisgender YouTube influencers; findings cannot establish quantitative causality or population generalizability.

Table2: Theoretical Foundations of the Conceptual Framework

Theory	Original Source	Core Proposition	Role in This Framework
Stimulus-Organism-Response(S-O-R) Model	Mehrabian & Russell (1974)	External stimuli shape internal psychological states which produce attitudinal and behavioural responses	Influencer content (stimulus) → emotional and cognitive processing (organism) → beauty standard internalisation and self-esteem erosion (responses), provides over all structural architecture
Social Comparison Theory	Festinger (1954)	People evaluate their own worth and attributes by comparing themselves to others, particularly through upward comparisons	Explains how influencer content exposure triggers upward appearance-based comparisons that mediate beauty standard internalisation.
Self-Determination Theory	Deci & Ryan (1985)	Psychological wellbeing depends on fulfilment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness	Explains how pressure to conform to influencer beauty ideals undermines autonomy and erodes genuine self-esteem, basis for Proposition 3

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