

Role of Instagram Beauty Influencers in Shaping Body Image and False Consciousness among Female University Students

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Abstract

Instagram being the popular social media platform has drastically changed the way people see beauty, femininity, and self-worth within contemporary digital culture. This study examines the role of Instagram beauty influencers in shaping body image and false consciousness among female university students in Pakistan. The research investigates how exposure to influencer content through reels, stories, pictures, and highlights, affects women's perceptions about themselves, consumer motivations, and awareness of unrealistic beauty ideals, by using Cultivation Theory, Social Comparison Theory and Socio-Cultural Theory as base. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted to 300 female students from the University of Sargodha and the University of the Punjab, Lahore. Data were analyzed using demographic, statistical and descriptive analysis. Results showed that higher exposure to influencer content, especially dynamic formats like reels and stories significantly increases body dissatisfaction and self-comparison tendencies. Younger respondents (18–25 years) reported greater insecurity as compared to the older participants, while education and residence had negligible effects, suggesting that influencer culture operates across demographic boundaries. Respondents also demonstrated opposite views simultaneously, admiring influencer beauty while recognizing its unattainable nature. The findings underscore Instagram's pervasive influence as both a cultural and psychological force, reinforcing appearance-driven identities and consumption patterns. The study stresses that media literacy is need of the hour to mitigate the internalization of harmful beauty ideals among young women in digital Pakistan.

Keywords: Instagram influencers, body image, false consciousness, social comparison, Pakistani female students, media effects, influencer culture

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, social media has transformed communication, identity, and self-representation. By 2023, more than 4.9 billion people i.e. approximately 60 percent of the global population, used social media (Statista, 2023). Among different social media platforms, Instagram has emerged as most influential in shaping beauty ideals because of its emphasis on curated imagery and visual storytelling. Users encounter thousands of appearance-focused posts daily, most of which portray flawless skin and slender, idealized bodies. Such exposure links attractiveness to social worth and triggers comparison, dissatisfaction, and self-objectification (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Cohen et al., 2019). Although these findings originate largely from Western contexts, evidence suggests that similar or stronger effects occur in developing countries like Pakistan, where globalized beauty ideals intersect with local expectations regarding femininity and fairness (Nisa et al., 2024). The concept of body image refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and evaluations about their physical self (Grogan, 2008). Constant exposure to idealized social-media imagery intensifies self-comparison, producing body dissatisfaction and self-surveillance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). On Instagram, likes and comments tie self-worth to appearance validation, due to which aesthetic presentation shapes how users see and value themselves. Rooted in Marxist philosophy, false consciousness describes how individuals internalize ideologies that work against their interests (Lukács, 1971; Eagleton, 1991). Within digital culture, women are encouraged to view self-presentation and consumption as empowerment (Gill, 2021). Instagram beauty influencers, while promoting confidence and individuality, propagate unattainable beauty standards and commercial dependence. Thus, empowerment narratives become commodified, redefining identity through purchase and display rather than agency.

This study integrates sociocultural frameworks to explain how influencer culture sustains false consciousness, offering quantitative evidence from Pakistan, an underrepresented context in body-image research. It highlights the need for culturally relevant media literacy to challenge internalized beauty hierarchies and deepens understanding of how Instagram shapes young women's perceptions of empowerment, identity, and self-worth.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the influence of Instagram beauty influencers on body image and false consciousness among female university students in Punjab. Beauty-influencer culture has spread narrow beauty ideals

worldwide, with exposure to such content linked to greater body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and self-objectification (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Cohen et al., 2019; Dignard & Jarry, 2021). In Pakistan, where Western beauty ideals meet local norms of colorism and modesty, limited research shows rising insecurity and fairness internalization among young women (Bilal et al., 2021; Tufail et al., 2022; Nasir & Imran, 2023), while the ideological aspect of false consciousness remains underexplored.

Review of the Literature

Globalization and digitalization together are spreading global beauty ideals, which are magnified by Instagram as it constantly showcases images of thin bodies, flawless skin, and luxury, encouraging young women to compare their appearance to these standards. Prior studies confirm that frequent exposure to highly curated images intensifies body dissatisfaction, lowers self-esteem, and heightens comparison tendencies (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

In Pakistan, globalized beauty ideals intersect with local hierarchies, which results in merging the western standards of slimness and fairness with traditional norms of modesty and femininity. Influencer marketing reinforces these ideals through fairness products and filters, which strengthens colorist and patriarchal values (Bilal et al., 2021; Tufail et al., 2022; Nasir & Imran, 2023).

The notion of false consciousness (Lukács, 1971; Eagleton, 1991) explains how people misperceive their social situation and take on ideologies that work against their own interests. Within influencer culture, women are made to believe that they are getting empowered through consumption of the beauty products and physical transformation, believing these things represent personal success. Research links body image dissatisfaction to increased involvement in social media in Pakistan (Bilal et al., 2021; Tufail et al., 2022; Nasir & Imran, 2023), it largely remains descriptive and overlooks the ideological dimensions. This study fills that gap by exploring how Instagram beauty influencers promote false consciousness and shape body image perceptions among female university students in Punjab.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study provides the foundation for understanding how social media, particularly Instagram, influences young women's perceptions of body image and self-worth. Based on Cultivation Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Social Comparison Theory, this framework explains how exposure to influencer content promotes internalization of beauty ideals and shapes users' self-evaluation. These theories collectively clarify the psychological and sociocultural processes through which digital representations of beauty affect female university students in Pakistan.

- Cultivation Theory explains the long-term normalization of beauty ideals through repetitive exposure.
- Sociocultural Theory situates these ideals within the Pakistani cultural context, showing how global and local norms merge to influence women's identities.
- Social Comparison Theory describes the individual-level process of evaluating one's self-worth against influencer imagery, leading to body dissatisfaction and self-objectification.

Collectively, they show that Instagram is not merely a platform for visual sharing but a space where social meanings, cultural values, and psychological evaluations converge to shape modern femininity. This framework supports the study's investigation that how the beauty influencers reinforces individual insecurities and promote false consciousness through their beauty ideologies.

Methodology

In the present study, quantitative, cross-sectional survey design has been used to examine how exposure to Instagram beauty influencers shapes body image and false consciousness among female university students in Punjab, Pakistan. The research design helped in structured measurement of relationships among variables such as influencer exposure, internalization of beauty ideals, and consumerist attitudes. Data were collected from 300 female students by using convenience sampling technique, (150 each) from the University of Sargodha and the University of the Punjab, representing diverse urban contexts. A structured questionnaire was used

to measure exposure to influencer content, engagement behaviors, body-image satisfaction, and false-consciousness indicators on a five-point Likert scale.

Data were analyzed using SPSS through descriptive, demographic, and statistical analyses to examine relationships and group differences within the data. Ethical measures were taken and strictly followed by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and adherence with the University of Sargodha’s ethical-review guidelines. All sources were properly cited, and data were analyzed transparently to maintain academic integrity.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data analysis of the present study transforms the raw survey data into interpretable findings that directly address the study’s research objectives. It systematically explores patterns, relationships, and differences among variables through demographic, descriptive and statistical analysis. The results reveal how age, education, and residence interact with exposure to Instagram beauty influencers and how this exposure shapes perceptions of beauty, body image, and false consciousness among female university students.

❖ **Demographic Analysis**

It is the collection and examination of population characteristics. (Pollfish, 2025).

Table 5.1 Presents the demographic distribution of respondents.

Table 5.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18-25	169	56.3
	26 and above	131	43.7
Education	Undergraduate	122	40.7
	Postgraduate	178	59.3
Residence	Urban	191	63.7
	Rural	109	36.3

Table 5.1 shows that majority of respondents (56.3%) were aged 18–25, reflecting the demographic most active on Instagram. Postgraduate students made up 59.3% of the sample, and urban participants were predominant (63.7%). This distribution

highlights that younger, urban, and more educated women are overrepresented, a group highly exposed to influencer-driven content and digital beauty culture.

❖ Descriptive Analysis

According to (Kaur et al., 2018), summarization of data in an organized manner is descriptive analysis.

The following section presents the descriptive analysis of the collected data.

Obligation to Look Good

Figure 5.1. Perceived Obligation to Look Good Among Respondents

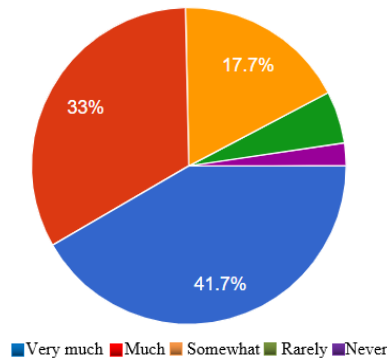
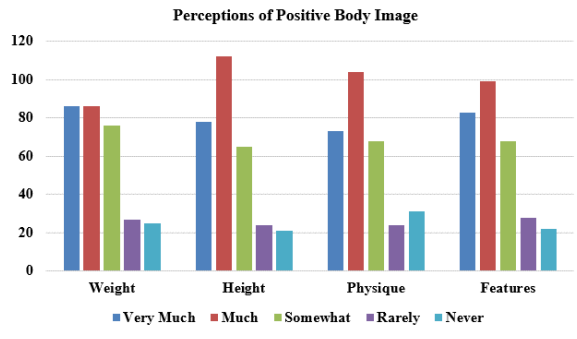


Figure 5.1. Distribution of Respondents' Obligation to Look Good

Figure 5.1 shows that a significant proportion of respondents reported feeling a strong obligation to look good. This finding suggests that appearance management is viewed as a social expectation, not merely a personal preference. It aligns with Sociocultural Theory, indicating that young women internalize beauty norms as part of gendered social conditioning (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Perceptions of Positive Body Image after Exposure

Graph 5.1. Positive Body Image Perceptions after Exposure to Instagram Influencers



According to graph 5.1 although many respondents reported positive feelings about their height, weight, and features immediately after viewing influencer content, inferential results indicate that prolonged exposure correlates with greater dissatisfaction. This duality reflects the short-term validation but long-term insecurity that characterizes influencer culture, consistent with Cultivation and Social Comparison theories.

Perceived Manipulation by Influencers

Table 5.2. Perceived Manipulation into Unworthy Purchases

Category	Very Much	Much	Somewhat	Rarely	Never
Products	113	87	54	21	25
Treatments	88	103	54	20	35
Services	99	89	51	20	41

Table 5.2 shows that across all categories, the majority acknowledged being influenced into purchases they later deemed unworthy. Younger and urban respondents reported stronger manipulation perceptions, suggesting higher exposure and susceptibility to influencer marketing. This supports the capitalist influence dimension of false consciousness identified in the conceptual framework.

❖ Statistical Analysis

Systematic method of gathering, analyzing, interpreting, presenting and deriving conclusions from data is statistical analysis. (Timonera, 2025).

The statistical findings are presented below.

Correlation between Exposure and Satisfaction with Appearance

Table 5.3. Spearman Correlations between Exposure to Influencer Content and Appearance Satisfaction

Variable	ρ (rho)	Sig. (p)
Reels	.465	< .001
Stories	.453	< .001
Pictures	.446	< .001
Highlights	.335	< .001

Table 5.3 shows that all correlations are positive and significant, showing that higher exposure to influencer content is associated with greater perception of influencer impact on appearance. Short-form content like reels and stories exert the strongest influence, indicating that visually dynamic media reinforce internalization more effectively than static imagery.

Age and Perceived Influence

Table 5.4. Cross-Tabulation of Age Group and Perceived Influence

Perceived Influence	18–25	26 and above
Very much	48	53
Much	55	35
Somewhat	31	23
Rarely	14	7
Never	16	9

Table 5.4 shows that both groups perceive influencer impact, but younger respondents (18–25) report slightly higher “Much” responses, confirming greater sensitivity to influencer cues among the digital-native cohort.

Education and Engagement

Table 5.5. Mean Differences in Engagement by Education Level (t-Test)

Activity	Undergraduate (M)	Postgraduate (M)	t	P
Liking	2.21	2.35	1.02	.31
Sharing	2.47	2.57	0.72	.47
Commenting	2.56	2.56	0.00	.99
Reposting	2.93	2.78	0.86	.39
Saving	2.42	2.42	0.00	.99
Following	2.43	2.31	0.84	.40

Table 5.5 shows that engagement patterns are statistically similar across education levels, implying that academic status does not significantly shape online interaction behavior. Both groups are comparably active consumers of influencer content.

Self-Comparison and Self-Evaluation

Table 5.6. Correlation between Self-Comparison and Self-Evaluation

Attribute	r	p
Body shape	.659	< .001
Skin tone	.733	< .001
Facial features	.759	< .001
Outlook	.813	< .001
Attractiveness	.865	< .001

In table 5.6 strong correlations show that self-comparison significantly predicts self-evaluation across appearance dimensions. This supports Social Comparison Theory, confirming that influencer imagery intensifies self-judgment relative to perceived ideals.

Demographics and Body Insecurity

Table 5.7. Body Insecurity by Age, Education and Residence (t-Test)

Variable	Age Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Body insecurity after exposure	18–25 years	169	3.41	0.79	3.61	298	< .001
	26 and above	131	2.83	0.81			
Body insecurity after exposure	Undergraduate	122	3.15	0.84	0.45	298	.654
	Postgraduate	178	3.08	0.88			
Body insecurity after exposure	Urban	191	3.12	0.81	-0.22	298	.823
	Rural	109	3.16	0.85			

According to table 5.7 the t-test results reveal a statistically significant difference between younger (18–25) and older (26+) respondents, $t(298) = 3.61$, $p < .001$, indicating that younger women experience greater body insecurity following

exposure to influencer content. This supports Cultivation Theory, which posits that frequent exposure to idealized media imagery leads to internalization of beauty ideals, particularly among younger audiences who are heavier social media users. However, no significant difference was found between undergraduates and postgraduates ($p = .654$), suggesting that educational level does not moderate these effects, both groups are similarly influenced by Instagram's beauty culture and its associated appearance pressures.

Table 5.8. Independent Samples t-Test: Motivation to Enhance Appearance by Residence

Variable	Residence	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Motivation to enhance appearance	Urban	191	3.44	0.77	-0.91	298	.362
	Rural	109	3.57	0.72			

Table 5.8 shows no significant difference emerged in motivation to enhance appearance between urban and rural participants ($p = .362$). Despite differences in access and exposure, both groups display comparable motivation levels, highlighting that the influencer effect operates as a shared cultural phenomenon rather than a geographically bound trend.

Body Insecurity and Unrealistic Beauty Standards

Table 5.9. Correlation between Body Insecurity and Unrealistic Standards

Attribute	ρ	p
Flawless skin	.204	< .01
Slim bodies	.202	< .01
Aesthetic procedures	.204	< .01
Hair treatments	.263	< .01

According to table 5.9 respondents who agree that influencer standards are desirable also recognize them as unrealistic. This coexistence of admiration and skepticism reflects false consciousness i.e. a state where individuals endorse ideals that simultaneously undermine their self-perception.

Desire to Acquire Attractiveness by Residence

Table 5.10. Physical Attractiveness Desire by Residence

Response	Urban	Rural
Very much	76	37
Much	49	38
Somewhat	35	19
Rarely	14	7
Never	17	8

Chi-Square Test: $\chi^2(4, N=300) = 8.78, p = .067 \rightarrow$ Not significant.

According to table 5.10 urban respondents show slightly stronger desire for influencer-promoted beauty, though the difference is statistically insignificant. This suggests widespread diffusion of beauty ideals across urban and rural divides.

Discussion and Summary

This study examined how exposure to Instagram beauty influencers shapes body image and false consciousness among female university students in Pakistan. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 300 respondents, 150 each from the University of Sargodha and the University of the Punjab, Lahore, through a structured questionnaire. The research explored how content made by the influencers affects self-perception, internalization of beauty ideals, and consumer behaviors related to appearance enhancement. The findings further revealed that Instagram has evolved beyond a platform for photo sharing, becoming a space where beauty standards are constructed, circulated, and normalized. Participants reported high exposure to influencer content in the form of reels, stories and brand endorsements, which significantly contributed to appearance pressure, self-comparison, and body dissatisfaction. Repetitive exposure cultivated perceptions that idealized beauty standards such as, slimness, fairness, flawless skin, and cosmetic enhancement represent attainable goals and markers of social success.

Moreover, the data indicated a two-fold process:

- On one hand, exposure resulted in increased anxiety and pressure to meet unrealistic beauty ideals.
- On the other, it strengthened consumerist motivation, leading many participants to purchase products and treatments endorsed by influencers.

This paradox i.e. acknowledging the artificiality of influencer content while still aspiring to it, captures the essence of false consciousness, where consumerism is misperceived as empowerment. In Pakistan's cultural context, these effects are intensified by prevailing norms that link female worth to physical attractiveness. Thus, Instagram's algorithm which is designed in a way that it shows similar content and reinforces a "beauty echo chamber, narrowing perspectives and maintaining cycles of comparison and insecurity.

The correlation analyses show a direct relationship between exposure to influencer content and how it effects how people perceive their looks. Spearman's coefficients indicated strong positive correlations across all exposure modes ($\rho = .38-.66$, $p < .01$), showing that users heavily engaged with one form of content (e.g., reels) were equally engaged with others (e.g., stories, pictures). This supports Cultivation Theory, suggesting that repeated exposure across media formats reinforces consistent, idealized narratives of beauty.

T-tests revealed that age significantly predicted body insecurity ($t(298) = 3.61$, $p < .001$), while education and residence did not. Younger participants were notably more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction, likely due to higher engagement with social media and greater identity formation pressures. The absence of significant effects for education or residence underscores that Instagram's influence transcends social boundaries, affecting women across socioeconomic and academic strata.

An interesting cognitive dissonance emerged: respondents who admired influencer-promoted ideals also acknowledged their unrealistic and artificial nature. Correlations between agreement with and skepticism of beauty standards were weak but significant ($\rho \approx .20-.26$, $p < .01$). This ambivalence reflects false consciousness, wherein individuals internalize capitalist ideals even while recognizing their manipulative origins. Such simultaneous endorsement and critique suggest that young women are aware of commercialization but remain entrapped by its aspirational appeal.

While some respondents reported short-lived boosts in confidence, particularly in relation to their weight and height, the broader trend revealed long-term insecurity and comparison-driven dissatisfaction. This duality reinforces Social Comparison Theory, emphasizing that upward comparison with influencers generates transient validation but experiencing insufficiency.

Practical Implications

The study has a number of practical implications. The first is the gap for media literacy programs in universities to respond critically to influencer content among female students. Educating students to see the commercial interests behind empowerment narratives could shield them from the debilitating consequences of false consciousness. Secondly, efforts are required from policy perspective to control deceptive beauty advertisements on social media. Collaborations between academia, NGOs and social media platforms can build ethical influencer marketing to promote authenticity instead of consumer manipulation.

Future Recommendations

Based on the findings, several measures are recommended to lessen the negative impact of influencer culture. Higher education institutions should also include media literacy curriculums to students so they could learn how to critically appraise influencer posts and know that these are commercial and artificial, while counseling centers should offer targeted support for body dissatisfaction and self-objectification. Influencers must adopt ethical practices by disclosing sponsorships and promoting diverse, unedited representations of beauty. Broader cultural initiatives should challenge colorism and restrictive beauty norms, encouraging acceptance of varied appearances. Policymakers should regulate digital content by mandating disclaimers for retouched or AI-altered imagery and ensuring transparency in influencer marketing. Finally, future research should employ longitudinal and experimental approaches to assess long-term psychological effects and evaluate the effectiveness of media-literacy interventions in reducing body image harm.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Instagram beauty influencers play a central role in constructing and reinforcing beauty standards that impact young women's body image, self-worth, and consumer behavior. Despite awareness of the artificiality and commercialization of influencer content, female university students continue to internalize these ideals; an embodiment of false consciousness in digital culture. The findings reaffirm that media exposure, cultural norms, and psychological comparison work in tandem to perpetuate unattainable beauty ideals.

As a result, the pursuit of beauty becomes both an act of self-expression and a form of ideological submission to capitalist consumerism. To counter this, media education, ethical content creation, and community-based initiatives must collectively promote healthier digital environments that encourage authenticity, self-acceptance, and critical engagement rather than conformity and consumption.

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