Social Media Beauty Norms and Women's Mental Health: A Qualitative Descriptive Study Through the Lens of Self-Discrepancy Theory

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Abstract
Social media now functions as a dominant and disruptive force reshaping contemporary beauty ideals. Image-driven platforms relentlessly circulate hyper-edited visuals that redefine what counts as attractive, acceptable, or worthy. The study directly addresses this gap by examining how social media beauty standards generate emotional distress through the mechanisms outlined in Self-Discrepancy Theory and Social Comparison Theory. This research disrupts that gap by foregrounding women's narratives and revealing the internal conflicts produced by digital beauty norms. Findings show that the relationship between social media beauty standards and women's mental health is driven by a persistent actual ideal self-discrepancy. Participants report that constant exposure to perfected images cultivates unrealistic internal standards, triggering chronic feelings of inadequacy. Addressing this issue requires equally disruptive responses: digital literacy programs that challenge passive image consumption, platform-level transparency around edited content, and therapeutic practices that help women identify and counter self-discrepant beliefs. Together, these interventions aim to break the cycle of emotional harm and promote more critical, empowered engagement online.

Introduction

Social media has transformed how women perceive, present, and evaluate their bodies. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok prioritize visual communication and reward curated aesthetics, establishing beauty as a central component of online participation. These digital environments create new forms of identity negotiation, as users encounter and internalize beauty norms that are often idealized, filtered, and digitally modified. Women's psychological relationships with these images have become an important area of inquiry, particularly as research continues to demonstrate associations between social media use and body dissatisfaction. While quantitative studies establish correlations between social media use and negative psychological outcomes, they seldom capture how women interpret beauty pressures in their lived experience. This study addresses this gap by exploring how women understand, negotiate, and emotionally respond to social media beauty norms. Using Self-Discrepancy Theory, the research examines how perceived gaps between real appearance and ideal or expected standards manifest in emotional distress.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes qualitative, theory-driven insight to contemporary debates on social media and mental health by foregrounding women's lived experiences within increasingly aestheticized digital environments. By documenting how women internalize, negotiate, and emotionally respond to curated beauty norms, the study provides an essential human-centered perspective that is often absent in quantitative research. Such qualitative accounts reveal not only the psychological effects of digital aesthetics but also the relational, cultural, and identity-based processes through which these effects unfold. The findings hold relevance for mental health practitioners who work with clients navigating self-esteem challenges, anxiety, depressive symptoms, or identity tensions linked to social media use. Understanding the mechanisms through which digital beauty standards influence emotional well-being enables clinicians to develop targeted interventions that address self-discrepant beliefs, comparison tendencies, and internalized aesthetic expectations. For educators and youth development professionals, the study offers evidence to support the inclusion of digital literacy curricula that teach students to critically evaluate visual content, recognize the prevalence of image manipulation, and build resilience to comparison-based pressures. Platform designers and technology policymakers can also draw from these insights to consider how interface design, algorithmic curation, and content moderation practices contribute to aesthetic pressures. Incorporating user well-being into platform policy such as transparent labeling of edited images, reducing algorithmic amplification of highly curated content, or promoting diverse and realistic representations can help create healthier digital ecosystems. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for a multidisciplinary approach to mitigating the harms of appearance-focused digital environments one that acknowledges the psychological, cultural, and technological factors that shape women's experiences of beauty in the digital age.

Problem statement

Although extensive research documents associations between media exposure and body dissatisfaction, less is known about the qualitative processes through which social media users experience and interpret beauty pressures in their daily lives. The proliferation of filters, retouching tools, and influencer-led aesthetic narratives increases the salience of idealized standards, yet users often continue to report emotional distress despite cognitive awareness of image manipulation. This study addresses the gap by exploring how women subjectively encounter, internalize, and respond to social media beauty norms, and how such encounters manifest in affective states linked to self-discrepancy.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives.

1. To describe how women experience and interpret beauty norms on image-centered social media platforms.
2. To examine the psychological mechanisms especially upward comparison and internalization that connect social media exposure to emotional outcomes.
3. To interpret participants' accounts through Self-Discrepancy Theory to explain affective consequences of appearance-related discrepancies.
4. To propose practice and policy recommendations for digital literacy, platform governance, and mental health interventions.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Scholarly work on media, identity, and women's psychological well-being consistently emphasizes the central role of appearance-oriented communication in shaping cultural understandings of beauty. Early research on traditional media demonstrated that exposure to idealized feminine bodies influenced women's self-evaluations and body dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). With the rise of social media, the dynamics of exposure have shifted dramatically; users now encounter aesthetic content in personalized, interactive, and continuous ways. Visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok place appearance at the core of participation, transforming beauty from a static media product into a social practice embedded in everyday interactions (Appel et al., 2020).

Shifting Beauty Ideals in the Digital Age

Traditional media research documented how magazines, television, and advertising cultivate narrow beauty ideals centered on thinness and physical perfection (Tiggemann, 2003). Social media intensifies this process by offering constant, algorithmically curated exposure to idealized appearance content. Unlike print and broadcast media, digital platforms deliver imagery within personal networks, increasing its relevance and emotional impact (Perloff, 2014). Women now encounter idealized aesthetics not only from celebrities but also from peers and micro-influencers, which makes the standards appear both socially endorsed and personally attainable. Studies show that frequent exposure to these visuals predicts internalization of appearance norms and heightened self-surveillance (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Although the present study focuses on how social media beauty norms shape women's mental health, broader shifts in digital media ecosystems provide an important contextual backdrop. Convergence within newsrooms has shown how digital technologies restructure information production and audience engagement practices, leading to new expectations for speed, interactivity, and visual content dominance (Shahid & Marwan, 2022). These transformations demonstrate how media environments increasingly prioritize immediacy and digitally mediated aesthetics—conditions that parallel the pressures women experience on social media platforms, where beauty norms are rapidly circulated, amplified, and normalized. Understanding these systemic media shifts strengthens the interpretation of how self-discrepancy processes emerge within digital beauty cultures.

Digital aesthetic cultures and self-presentation

Social media has introduced new aesthetic cultures in which self-presentation is shaped by filters, editing tools, and platform-specific norms. Research indicates that the visual architecture of platforms encourages users to curate images that conform to established aesthetic trends (Chae, 2017). Because these practices are widely adopted, they become normalized as part of everyday digital expression. Over time, edited and stylized images are perceived as "authentic enough," blurring distinctions between natural appearance and digitally enhanced beauty (Aparicio-Martínez et al., 2019). This normalization subtly influences women's identity performances, encouraging conformity to platform-driven expectations.

Influencers and aspirational beauty norms

Influencers play a central role in defining contemporary beauty norms. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are perceived as relatable, which strengthens their persuasive impact (Abidin, 2016). Their content blends aspirational imagery with everyday narratives, creating a sense of authenticity that encourages comparison and imitation. Research shows that women frequently compare themselves to influencers, often perceiving their bodies and lifestyles as achievable despite being curated and commercially constructed (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Because influencer success is tied to aesthetic engagement, their posts often reinforce narrow ideals that circulate widely through algorithmic amplification.

Digital modification and the blurring of reality

Digital modification tools such as Facetune, Lightroom, and automated beauty filters have made image editing both accessible and socially acceptable. As a result, altered images increasingly function as normative benchmarks for beauty rather than exceptional productions (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Even when women understand that images are edited, their emotional responses often mirror reactions to perceived reality, demonstrating the power of repeated exposure (Aparicio-Martínez et al., 2019). The ubiquity of edited visuals contributes to self-doubt and dissatisfaction as women attempt to replicate aesthetics that exist largely through technological manipulation.

Social comparison in the context of social media

Social Comparison Theory provides an important lens for understanding how women evaluate themselves relative to others (Festinger, 1954). Social media facilitates constant comparison by presenting users with curated, idealized representations that emphasize beauty, success, and desirability. Studies consistently show that upward comparison comparing oneself to someone perceived as superior predicts negative body image

outcomes and reduced self-esteem (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Barry et al., 2017). Instagram, in particular, has been identified as a platform where upward comparison is frequent due to its highly visual nature and emphasis on aesthetics (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Women often describe comparison as automatic, suggesting that social media triggers evaluation processes before conscious awareness.

Gendered and racialized beauty norms

Beauty standards on social media remain deeply gendered and racialized. Feminist scholars argue that beauty expectations serve as mechanisms of gender regulation, positioning physical attractiveness as central to women's social value (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). At the same time, digital beauty norms frequently reinforce Eurocentric features light skin, slim facial structure, and specific body proportions which marginalize women whose natural features fall outside these ideals (Ho & Cheung, 2016). Research indicates that women of color often face additional pressures to alter or downplay culturally specific features in order to align with dominant digital standards (Perloff, 2014). These dynamics highlight how social media reproduces broader social hierarchies within digital spaces.

Emotional implications of digital beauty standards

A large body of literature links social media exposure to negative emotional experiences among young women. Frequent engagement with idealized appearance content has been associated with anxiety, shame, depressive symptoms, and reduced self-worth (Bray et al., 2016). Women often describe feeling pressure to maintain an aesthetically pleasing digital identity, creating emotional fatigue and heightened self-consciousness. Perloff (2014) notes that social media users are vulnerable to internalizing appearance feedback, which may amplify distress when self-presentation does not receive validation. These emotional outcomes demonstrate that social media functions not only as a site of entertainment but also as a significant psychological environment.

Platform algorithms and the economics of beauty

Digital beauty norms are reinforced not only culturally but structurally through platform design. Algorithms prioritize content that generates high engagement, which often includes visually striking, idealized imagery (Fuchs, 2021). As a result, users are repeatedly exposed to aesthetic content that conforms to narrow standards, reinforcing the idea that beauty must be performed in specific ways to gain visibility and validation. Influencer economies further incentivize conformity, as aesthetically successful content translates into financial gain (Appel et al., 2020). This economic dimension positions beauty as a commodity within digital platforms, shaping users' motivations and self-presentation behaviors.

Self-Discrepancy Theory as an interpretive framework

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) provides a meaningful framework for understanding the emotional impact of digital beauty norms. According to the theory, individuals hold multiple internal self-guides representations of who they are, who they wish to be, and who they believe they should be. When discrepancies arise between these self-domains, specific emotional outcomes occur. Social media shapes both ideal selves, through exposure to stylized imagery, and ought selves, through perceived expectations associated with maintaining an online presence. Research indicates that actual ideal discrepancies often produce feelings of sadness or disappointment, whereas actual ought discrepancies generate anxiety and guilt (Perloff, 2014). This

framework helps explain why women experience complex emotional reactions even when they intellectually recognize the artificiality of digital beauty images.

Summary of research gap

Although substantial research documents associations between social media use and body image concerns, fewer studies explore the lived experiences through which women negotiate these pressures. Existing scholarship often relies on quantitative measures, which overlook the nuanced emotional and identity processes involved. Additionally, few studies integrate Self-Discrepancy Theory to explain how internalized digital beauty norms create emotional strain. This study addresses these gaps by offering a qualitative, experience-centered exploration of how women understand and respond to social media beauty standards, emphasizing the psychological mechanisms underpinning their emotional well-being (Grabe et al., 2008; Appel et al., 2019).

Research methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for examining lived experiences in naturalistic settings. This design supports detailed descriptions of participants' thoughts, emotions, and interpretations while allowing the analysis to remain grounded in their own words. Social media beauty culture functions as a deeply affective environment shaped by curated imagery, algorithmic visibility, and internalized aesthetic expectations; therefore, a flexible and interpretive research design is required to capture the nuances of women's engagement with these environments. The study is informed by Self-Discrepancy Theory, which explains how emotional distress arises when individuals perceive gaps between their actual, ideal, and ought selves, as well as social comparison theory, which highlights how online contexts intensify upward comparison tendencies. These theoretical perspectives guided interpretation but did not restrict the emergence of unexpected findings.

Methodological approach

The study employs reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, to interpret women's narratives. Thematic analysis is suitable for this research because it enables identification of recurring meanings and emotional patterns within the data. This approach facilitates exploration of how women internalize digital beauty norms, how they compare themselves to influencers and peers, and how these processes generate emotional strain or feelings of inadequacy. Theme development occurred through iterative reading and coding of transcripts, followed by refinement and interpretation of patterned responses. The approach allowed the researcher to examine how participants construct meaning around idealized imagery and how this meaning relates to identity tension and self-evaluation.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used to recruit women who regularly engage with highly visual social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. This sampling strategy ensured participation from individuals who were most likely to encounter beauty-focused content and who could articulate relevant emotional and psychological responses. Eligible participants were women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, an age group that interacts intensively with digital aesthetics and is particularly exposed to beauty-driven trends and

algorithmic feeds. Participants represented diverse academic and occupational backgrounds, and all reported daily or near-daily engagement with social media. A total of 10 participants were selected, which allowed for rich thematic depth and analytic clarity. Data saturation was reached when additional interviews produced no new insights.

Dataset

The dataset consists of 10 semi-structured interviews lasting between forty-five and seventy-five minutes. Interviews were conducted either in person or through secure video conferencing and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Transcripts were produced verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' accounts. The dataset includes detailed descriptions of participants' social media habits, emotional responses to digital beauty content, experiences of comparison and self-evaluation, and reflections on authenticity, pressure, and identity. Field notes documenting contextual cues, emotional tone, and early analytic impressions complemented the transcripts and contributed additional depth to the dataset.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit reflective, emotionally grounded accounts of women's interactions with social media beauty standards. The interview guide prompted participants to describe their habits of viewing appearance-related content, their reactions to influencers and edited imagery, their awareness of digital modification tools, and their feelings of pressure related to beauty and self-presentation. The conversational format allowed the researcher to probe significant experiences and clarify meanings as they emerged. After each interview, field notes were recorded to document nonverbal cues, environmental influences, and initial analytical observations. These notes supported later stages of thematic interpretation and helped situate participants' responses in their lived context. Transcription followed immediately after data collection, ensuring accuracy and minimizing interpretive distortion.

Data analysis procedures

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis. The researcher began with repeated readings of the transcripts to develop familiarity with participants' narratives. Initial codes were then generated to capture salient ideas related to beauty norms, comparison experiences, emotional reactions, and identity negotiations. These codes were subsequently organized into broader thematic clusters that reflected recurring patterns across participants' accounts. Themes were reviewed, refined, and defined through iterative comparison of coded data with the full dataset. Throughout the process, Self-Discrepancy Theory provided an interpretive lens to identify moments where participants described tensions between their actual, ideal, and ought selves. The analytic process also accounted for how algorithmic curation, influencer culture, and digital modification practices shaped these tensions. The resulting themes offer insight into how women make sense of their experiences within aestheticized digital environments.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The researcher's positionality as a woman familiar with social media and exposure to digital beauty culture required a reflexive stance throughout the study. Reflexivity was maintained through journaling, in which assumptions, emotional responses, and analytic concerns were documented and examined. This practice helped

distinguish participants' perspectives from the researcher's own experiences and minimized the influence of subjective bias on interpretation. Reflexive awareness strengthened the credibility and integrity of the analytic process.

Ensuring trustworthiness

The study follows Lincoln and Guba's criteria for qualitative rigor. Credibility was enhanced by prolonged engagement with the data, careful transcription, and ongoing comparison of emerging themes with participants' words. Dependability was supported through detailed documentation of methodological decisions, coding procedures, and analytical development. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and by grounding all interpretations in direct participant accounts. Transferability was addressed by providing rich contextual descriptions of participant characteristics, social media behaviors, and thematic patterns, allowing readers to determine applicability to other settings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Participants provided voluntary consent for recording and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting to ensure anonymity, and data were stored securely. Given the emotional sensitivity of topics such as self-esteem, comparison, and body image, interviews were conducted with care, and participants were encouraged to pause or decline to answer questions if they felt discomfort.

Limitations

Although the study generates rich and insightful data, several limitations must be acknowledged. As with most qualitative research, the findings are not statistically generalizable. The sample consists of women who are willing to discuss sensitive emotional experiences, which may mean their perspectives differ from women who are less comfortable sharing such experiences. Additionally, self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability, although efforts are made to reduce this risk by building rapport and ensuring confidentiality. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the emotional and psychological mechanisms through which social media beauty standards shape women's self-perception.

Findings

The analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews produced four interconnected themes that illuminate how social media beauty standards shape women's emotional experiences and self-perception. These themes include the normalization of digitally enhanced beauty, involuntary upward social comparison, perceived obligation to curate an ideal online self, and the emotional consequences associated with self-discrepancy. Together, they illustrate a cyclical process in which repeated exposure to idealized imagery produces internalized expectations that influence how women evaluate their appearance and sense of self.

Normalization of digitally enhanced beauty

The participants describe social media as an environment where digitally edited and highly curated beauty has become routine. This finding aligns with research showing that frequent exposure to filtered and enhanced images contributes to the internalization of unrealistic beauty standards (Chae, 2017; Tiggemann & Slater,

2014). Although participants are aware that many images are modified, repeated exposure gradually leads them to treat such representations as authentic benchmarks, echoing findings that digital alteration blurs the boundary between natural and constructed beauty (Perloff, 2014). One participant reflects, "After scrolling for a while, even though I know everything is filtered, it still feels like the standard everyone else is reaching." This normalization contributes to internalized expectations that mirror patterns identified in prior work on appearance-based media consumption and self-evaluation (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). As edited appearances become perceived as attainable, women increasingly view their own features as inadequate or deficient.

Automatic upward comparison

A pervasive theme across interviews is the involuntary and automatic nature of comparison. Participants frequently find themselves measuring their appearance or lifestyle against influencers, acquaintances, and strangers on their feeds. This reflects earlier scholarship indicating that upward comparison is often immediate and cognitively automatic in social media contexts (Vogel et al., 2014; Festinger, 1954). One woman notes, "I can be in a good mood, scrolling casually, and suddenly I'm comparing myself to someone I've never met." Because social media predominantly showcases idealized imagery, the comparison almost always positions them unfavorably, consistent with research showing that curated digital content intensifies negative self-evaluative judgments (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). Even when participants intellectually recognize that images are edited or staged, the emotional impact persists supporting evidence that awareness of manipulation does not fully buffer against comparison-driven distress (Fardouly et al., 2017). Repeated exposure to idealized representations generates a lingering sense of inadequacy and frustration, reinforcing a habitual comparison cycle that is difficult to interrupt.

Pressure to present an ideal online self

Participants also describe a strong pressure to manage and curate a polished online self. This mirrors research on impression management and self-presentation practices that suggests individuals strategically craft digital personas to meet perceived social expectations (Goffman, 1959; Chua & Chang, 2016). Women in the study report spending considerable time adjusting angles, filters, lighting, and captions to align with aesthetic norms that dominate their digital communities. One participant explains, "I feel like I have to maintain a certain look online. If I don't, I worry people will judge me." This sense of obligation extends offline, influencing clothing choices, routines, and social interactions an effect supported by studies showing that digital identity maintenance can shape real-world behavior (Marwick, 2015). These pressures align with the "ought self" described in Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), as participants feel compelled to meet expectations associated with social approval and digital visibility.

Emotional consequences of Self-discrepancy

Participants' emotional responses reflect clear patterns of self-discrepancy. Many express sadness, frustration, or a sense of failure when their actual appearance diverges from idealized online beauty standards. These experiences are consistent with research demonstrating that actual–ideal discrepancies are linked to discouragement, diminished self-esteem, and negative affect (Bessenoff, 2006). One participant notes, "No matter what I do, I can't look like the girls on Instagram. It makes me feel like I'm not enough." Others describe

anxiety and guilt associated with maintaining an online presence, echoing findings that actual–ought discrepancies trigger tension, pressure, and self-criticism (Higgins, 1987; Perloff, 2014). The interplay of these discrepancies reinforces the emotional burden produced by digital beauty culture—a burden documented in studies linking social media engagement with increased body dissatisfaction and psychological distress (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). The findings illustrate how digital aesthetics operate as a psychological ecosystem that continually reinforces standards and self-evaluations, shaping both emotional states and everyday behavior.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insight into the psychological mechanisms through which social media beauty standards influence women's emotional well-being. Consistent with existing scholarship, the data show that digital environments intensify appearance pressures by encouraging constant visual comparison and normalizing highly curated beauty (Chae, 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). This study extends previous work by illustrating, through women's lived experiences, how these pressures operate on a personal, emotional, and identity-shaping level. The normalization of digitally enhanced beauty emerges as a critical element in this cycle. Prior research shows that repeated exposure to filtered and perfected images contributes to the internalization of unrealistic beauty standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Perloff, 2014). Participants in this study often express an intellectual awareness of editing practices, yet the emotional impact persists, supporting findings that cognitive understanding alone does not prevent internalization or protect against self-comparison (Fardouly et al., 2017). The findings also affirm the relevance of social comparison theory in digital spaces. Upward comparisons occur automatically and frequently, aligning with research demonstrating that social media amplifies habitual, automatic comparison toward more attractive or socially successful targets (Vogel et al., 2014; Festinger, 1954). Unlike traditional media, social media comparisons involve peers and influencers who appear relatable, thereby heightening perceived expectations and intensifying emotional consequences (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). Self-Discrepancy Theory provides a useful lens for understanding why these experiences generate distress. Participants describe both actual–ideal and actual–ought discrepancies, reflecting Higgins' (1987) assertion that divergence from one's ideal self produces discouragement and low self-esteem, while divergence from one's ought self evokes anxiety, guilt, and pressure. These findings also align with research linking appearance-based discrepancies to negative affect and psychological distress (Bessenoff, 2006). Taken together, these discrepancies form a sustained emotional burden that shapes not only self-esteem but also identity and daily behavior. This study contributes to the literature by showing how digital aesthetics function as a psychological ecosystem—one that reinforces beauty norms through algorithmic visibility, influencer culture, and peer-driven validation (Marwick, 2015). Women's experiences reveal that social media is not simply a space for expression but a powerful environment that shapes emotional life, social expectations, and the evolving sense of self.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media beauty standards exert a profound and multifaceted influence on women's emotional well-being. Through the combined mechanisms of internalization, upward social

comparison, and self-discrepancy formation, digital environments become powerful sites where aesthetic norms are produced, circulated, and reinforced. The repeated exposure to digitally enhanced and highly curated images normalizes unrealistic standards of beauty, which gradually become internal benchmarks against which women evaluate their own appearance and worth. As the findings demonstrate, comparison processes occur rapidly and often unconsciously, positioning women against influencers, peers, and strangers who appear to embody idealized beauty. These habitual upward comparisons intensify feelings of inadequacy and foster emotional responses such as frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt. The study further shows that these emotional outcomes are anchored in self-discrepancy processes: actual–ideal discrepancies contribute to discouragement and reduced self-esteem, while actual–ought discrepancies evoke pressure, guilt, and the sense of needing to curate a flawless online identity. Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate how social media functions not merely as a communication platform but as an aesthetic and psychological ecosystem—one that shapes emotional life, identity formation, and everyday patterns of self-evaluation. By embedding beauty norms in algorithmically amplified content and socially validated visual cultures, digital platforms play a central role in constructing expectations that influence women's psychological well-being. The study's insights underscore the need for interventions that address the emotional consequences of digital beauty culture. Enhancing digital literacy, promoting transparency around image manipulation, and supporting therapeutic strategies aimed at reducing appearance-based self-discrepancy may help mitigate the negative psychological impact of contemporary visual culture. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the importance of fostering more critical, inclusive, and psychologically protective digital environments.

Implications and recommendations

The findings of this study carry several important implications for mental health practitioners, educators, parents, and platform designers. For mental health professionals, integrating discussions of digital aesthetics and online comparison into therapeutic practice may be crucial. Helping clients identify and challenge self-discrepant beliefs, particularly those tied to idealized or "ought" selves shaped by social media, can reduce emotional distress. Cognitive-behavioral interventions that target distorted appearance beliefs, along with self-compassion-based strategies, may support women in reframing negative self-evaluations and developing more adaptive relationships with their online environments. Educators and parents also play a central role in addressing the early internalization of unrealistic beauty standards. Media literacy education specifically programs that teach young people to critically evaluate visual content, recognize digital editing, and understand the emotional effects of social comparison may help buffer against harmful internalization during formative developmental stages. Such early interventions can cultivate more resilient and critically engaged digital users. Technology platforms likewise bear responsibility for mitigating appearance-related harm. Implementing greater transparency around digitally altered images, diversifying the body types and aesthetic representations surfaced by algorithms, and reducing the visibility of engagement metrics may lessen the emphasis on appearance-based validation. These design considerations can help shift platform cultures away from rigid beauty ideals and toward more inclusive and psychologically protective norms. Overall, the study underscores the need for multidisciplinary responses that recognize the psychological, cultural, and technological dimensions

of digital beauty pressures. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated strategies across therapeutic practice, education, family systems, and platform governance to foster healthier relationships with social media and support women's emotional well-being in increasingly visual digital environments.

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