

## Filtered Ideals and Real Consequences: Social Media Exposure, Body Image Concerns, and Eating Attitudes in Generation Z

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### Abstract

The estimated number of Generation Z is about 64 million members of this cohort (Musawer, 2025). Generation Z is the most connected generation with more than 46.3 per cent of adults accessing social media. This paper seeks to explore the connection between social media use, body image, and eating attitudes in Generation Z based on the inescapable nature of the various social media platforms and uses the data of 750 participants aged 13 to 22 to investigate the impacts of digital platforms on perception of body image and eating disorders behaviors. Regression analysis demonstrated that the use of social media was significantly predictive of eating attitudes. The findings reinforce the importance of social media use in driving the issues of body image and affecting eating attitudes among the members of Generation Z, which supports the need to implement specific interventions that will focus on the mental health consequences of engaging

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with digital platforms.

### Introduction

Generation Z is a group of people born since 1997 and 2012. This is a large group of people in Pakistan, and it is estimated that there are about 64 million members of this cohort (Musawer, 2025). Generation Z is the most connected generation with more than 46.3 per cent of adults accessing social media. Statistically, it has been shown that 98% of the Generation Z daily possess a mobile phone and 95% are directly involved in social media (Selig, 2025). They like sites that suit their interests, and 45 per cent give up on the sites that do not satisfy their liking Gen Z is as well varied and 16 per cent are identified within a range of gender identities (Gen Z Characteristics, 2024). To most, self-expression and self-reality in digital spaces are the key to forming relationships (What is Gen Z? 2024).

Generation Z has been especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of being exposed to social media due to the digitized environment. An exposure to idealized images and beauty ideals in society leads to insecurities, low self-esteem, and body image negativity (Yu, n.d.). These effects affect both the male and female members and often lead to unhealthy dietary practices on their part. Extensive use of social media is linked to addictive behaviors that, consequently, undermine the state of mental health and the overall functioning (He & Yang, 2022). The behavioral patterns are added to

the disordered eating, and eventually impact on overall well-being (Mushtaq et al., 2023).

The spread of social media throughout the world has reformed the perception of body-images. The use of Instagram and Snapchat extends the belief in idealized beauty, where filters are used to enhance the looks or share more controlled content that glorifies fake body ideals, leading users to develop dissatisfaction with their own natural looks (Perloff, 2014).

Attitudes towards eating include beliefs, feelings and behaviors concerning food and body weight. These tendencies are shaped under the influence of personality, media, cultural standards, and peer pressure (Tylka & Barcalow, 2015). In the Generation Z, these perceptions have been closely related to the body image and online exposure. Unhealthy eating habits can be expressed in the form of emotional eating, bingeing, or restrictive dieting- all signs of other, more dangerous eating disorders (Quick et al., 2020).

Eating attitudes are divided into three dimensions: (1) dieting behavior, which is the deliberate restriction of food consumption as a result of social and peer pressure to achieve a thin body (Ferreira et al., 2019); (2) bulimia and food preoccupation, which is defined by binge eating and compensatory strategies, such as purging or fasting, which is typically caused by an appearance concern (Monteleone et al., 2020); (3) oral control which describes the perceived self-control over food intake which is often related to the need

Eating disorders are becoming more prevalent across the world, especially in females, and they have been linked to physical health implications like infertility, cardiovascular disease, and mental health disorders (Wu et al., 2020). In Pakistan, the disorders are underreported, but their effects on the health of the youth are getting more and more significant (Liu et al., 2021). The virtue of female teenagers is often subjected to great pressure to meet the beauty ideals, which leads to discontentment and unhealthy eating habits. Although the issues of male body-images are less commonly addressed, they are also prevalent and associated with overtraining and performance doping (Kessler, 2024). Constant exposure to unrealistic bodies through social media may result in negative body images and eating disorders. The empirical research indicates that the youths tend to be forced to be conformists, hiding their true selves on the internet (Pachankis et al., 2023). Body appreciation, media literacy and emotional regulation interventions have proven to reduce the impact of disordered eating behaviors and develop healthier attitudes (Halliwel, 2015).

This research aims at investigating the predictive association between social media use and eating attitudes in Generation Z, to test disparities in body-image perception among different degrees of social media use, and to test the interactive effects between social media use and eating attitudes and body image. It is theorized that there is a significant positive predictive association between social media use and eating attitudes among Generation Z and also a similar association between social media use and body-image perception. Literature on the subject has been paying a growing interest in the impact of social media on body image and eating behavior among adolescents and young adults. The connection has been examined through studies all around the globe, relying on perspectives like the sociocultural theory, the social comparison theory, the theory of gratification, and theory of self-objectification. To a large extent, the existing body of literature confirms the claim that the popularity of appearance-based platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, have a negative impact on self-perception and lead to disordered eating.

Empirical studies always show that highly visual platforms have a more significant effect on body image as compared to textual platforms because of their focus on curated and idealized images. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) discovered that the length of time Facebook was spent and the number of interactions with photos were positively correlated with body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls. Tiggemann and

Zaccardo (2015) also reported that the exposure to the images of fitspiration on Instagram increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction compared to the neutral travel images. It is supported by experimental research. According to Brown and Tiggemann (2015) young women, who were exposed to thin-ideal Instagram photos, had a higher level of body dissatisfaction compared with the ones who were exposed to non-appearance-related content, and upward appearance comparison acts as a mediator. Similarly, Fardouly et al. (2018) have found that disclosures, particularly image-edited ones or body-positive disclosures, intensified dissatisfaction in some cases, implying that plain content warnings may not be protective, except in all cases. The swift rise of Tik Tok has earned the interest of scholars because its algorithm helps to support existing beauty ideals. According to Rathore and Qureshi (2021), adolescents in Pakistan who were intensive users of TikTok and Instagram experienced an increase in appearance-related anxiety, which was presumably the result of repeated exposure to a stylized image. The beautification filters provided by Snapchat are also dangerous since Bell et al. (2021) linked their use to a higher dissatisfaction with the body and a higher likelihood of undergoing cosmetic surgery among Canadian teenagers. Collectively these results suggest that the study of platform architecture, visual focus and algorithmic personalization can increase body-image issues by maintaining exposure to ideal standards.

Longitudinal designs have better causal inferences since they follow time dynamics. In a two-year follow up of 350 adolescents in Australia, Fardouly, Magson, Rapee, et al. (2018) found that an escalating social-media use forecasted future growth in body dissatisfaction and internalization of beauty ideals, especially in females. The authors of De Vries et al. (2019) found a feedback loop among Dutch adolescents, where low self-esteem predicted increased social-media use, which in turn predicted reduced body satisfaction.

Steinsbekk, et al. (2022) showed that passive viewing of social media Narratives was associated with decreases in the body image satisfaction, but active viewing did not show significant correlation, indicating that passive scrolling can be particularly harmful. Bell, et al. (2021) have discovered two-way associations between social-media use and disordered-eating symptoms among Canadian adolescents, thus confirming the cyclic character of the association.

The sensitivity of development also has an effect. Fardouly, et al. (2018) established that intensive use of Instagram in the early years of adolescence was associated with greater deteriorations in body image with a six-year follow-up, which was mediated by appearances comparisons and thin-ideal internalization.

The South Asian studies also show similar patterns and different cultural variables. A positive correlation was noted between facebook use and body dissatisfaction among Pakistani female university students by Khan et al. (2017), which the authors attribute to the exposure to Western ideals of beauty.

These insights are enhanced by qualitative data. Pakistani adolescent female performers are under pressure to meet the criteria of thinness popularized in the West and the ideals of fair skin promoted locally. In Ahmed (2023) the author has shown that exposure to both fitspiration and skin-lightening content yielded similarly high levels of body dissatisfaction among Pakistani youth, showing the overlap of appearance pressures.

There are certain protective determinants. A conversation about the content of social-media on the part of parents reduced the relationship between its use and dissatisfaction, but restrictive access without discussion did not have a protective value. These observations are supported by regional research; Moreover, Indian girls who Instagram Bollywood feminine icons revealed more thin-ideal internalization, which points to the fact that local entertainment media strengthen similar pressures.

## **Research Gaps**

The existing literature, with reference to various contexts, confirms that platforms that are visual-oriented and particularly those that use algorithms to advance appearance-focused content are associated with high levels of body dissatisfaction and the internalization of beauty ideals. Both experimental and longitudinal research findings show short term causal effects and long term, reinforcing patterns. Media literacy programs and content disclaimer services have had mixed results, and some have even made people more dissatisfied. Cultural variables, such as colorism, have overlaps with thinness ideals in the South Asian context, which results in pressurization layers. The gaps to be addressed are that there is a lack of longitudinal studies in the South Asian contexts, male participants were under-represented, and culturally-modified interventions were not evaluated fully. These gaps must be addressed to formulate effective measures that can be used to reduce the effects of the social media on adolescent body image in the region.

The growing omnipresence of social media and its effects on body image and eating attitudes is a subject of interest of a psychological investigation. The given research aims at examining the complex nature of the interaction between social-media usage, body image, and eating attitudes among Generation Z in Pakistan. Most of the studies are the result of the Western world, whereas most of the research on these variables is growing, albeit with restrictions on generalizability to Eastern cultures. In addition, little has been done on the understanding of this triangular interrelationships social media, body image, and eating attitudes in a single model in Pakistan. This study fills this gap by targeting individuals of the Pakistani Generation Z who are between the ages of 13 and 33.

## **Method**

This study employed a **quantitative and correlational research design**. The sample comprised **750 individuals** from **District Gujrat**, including **600 students** from educational institutes, and **150 community members**. Participants aged **13 to 22 years**, and were selected through **purposive sampling**. They were grouped into early teens, late teens, and young adults based on literature suggesting purposeful concerns within these age groups (Balasundaram & Avulakunta, 2023). Individuals younger than 13 or older than 22, or those unwilling to participate, were excluded.

## **Research Instruments**

Three validated scales and a demographic form were used:

**Demographic Sheet.** Included age, gender, education, height, weight, birth order, social class, and media usage habits.

**Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ).** A 5-item scale (Przybylski et al., 2013) assessing weekly social media activity. Responses are on a 7-point Likert scale. Reliability ranges from  $\alpha = .82$  to  $.89$ .

**Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26).** A 26-item scale (Garner et al., 1982; Urdu version by Jamil et al., 2023) measuring disordered eating behaviors across three subscales. Responses use a 6-point scale. Reliability for this study was  $\alpha = .91$ .

**Body Self Image Questionnaire – Short Form (BSIQ-SF).** A 27-item scale (Rowe, 2005) with 9 subscales assessing body image concerns. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. Subscale reliabilities range from  $\alpha = .68$  to  $\alpha = .92$ .

## **Procedure**

Data were collected over two months. Institutional and community permissions were obtained. Participants received printed Urdu versions of the questionnaires to fill it out. Completion time was **20 to 35 minutes**. Prior to data collection, **ethical approval** and scale usage permissions were obtained. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and confidentiality was guaranteed. Written and verbal informed

consent was obtained from all respondents. No physical or emotional harm was caused during the study.

**Results** Data were analyzed using **SPSS Version 24**.

Following are the Cronbach's alpha values of all used scales

Table 1 Reliability of analysis

Scales	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
SMEQ	5	.81
BSIQ-SF	27	.80
EAT-26	26	.81

Note.SMEQ=Social Media Engagement questionnaire, BSIQ-SF= Body Self Image Questionnaire-Short Form, EAT-26= Eating Attitude Test-26

Table 2 Model Summary for Regression Analysis Predicting Eating Attitudes and Body Image from Social Media Usage

Outcome Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	β	t	P
Eating attitudes	.90	.081	.007	6.109	.091	2.47	.014*
Body image	.174	.030	.029	23.339	.238	4.83	.000***

Note. R = correlation coefficient, R<sup>2</sup> = coefficient of determination

Note<.05\*, p<.01\*\*, p<.001\*\*\*.

Table 2 shows that social media usage significantly predict body image. The model explained 3% of the variance in body image. Results indicated that social media usage was a significant predictor of eating attitudes, R = .09, R<sup>2</sup> = .008, F (1, 748) = 6.11, p = .014. The model explained 0.8% of the variance in eating attitudes. Social media usage positively predicted eating attitudes though the link is weak.

**Table 3** Difference across age groups on Body image, eating attitudes and social media usage

Variable	Early teens		Late teens		Young adults		F(2,326)	η <sup>2</sup>	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Body image	83.11	19.405	80.58	13.523	77.25	12.671	8.903	.023	.000***
Eating attitudes	32.36	14.36	26.49	8.406	26.95	10.22	21.069	.053	.000***
Social media usage	17.7	13.14	13.93	10.262	16.42	10.483	7.208	.019	.001**

There is a significant difference across age groups with early teen have more concern for their body image and eating attitude. Moreover, they spend more time on social media then their comparatives.

Table 4 Summary of Independent t-test across gender

Variable	Males	Females	t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD			
Social media usage	16.54	11.74	1.29	.198	0.09
Eating attitudes	26.47	12.89	-5.08	.000***	0.39
Body image	81.56	17.44	2.14	.033*	0.15

Note. M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation

Table 4 shows that there is significant difference across gender on body image concerns.

### **Discussion**

The results show that the use of social-media has a significant predictive value of body-image dissatisfaction with a small effect size. Such results correspond to Western studies that claim that social media encourages appearance comparisons, adopting unrealistic beauty ideals, and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Jackson et al., 2022). The teenage years of developmental development make one more susceptible to peer pressure and identity exploration, which makes adolescents susceptible to media-induced appearance ideals (Tiggemann and Slater, 2014). A multiple-regression analysis showed that three antecedents include social-media use, dissatisfaction with body-image, and increased perceived ideal body-weight discrepancy as significant predictors of disordered eating. This consistent with Solomon and Brown (2019), who say that media exposure is the fundamental cause of eating disturbance. A t -test on independent samples revealed that the females reported markedly more disordered-eating symptoms as compared to males and favored gender differences in eating pathology. Moreover as mentioned by Riaz and Batool (2022), who find that appearance-oriented media exposure relates to internalized beauty ideals and eating disorders.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The cross-sectional design does not allow conclusive causal conclusions. Self-reported information is prone to bias because of the social desirability. More socioeconomic status, parental education, and platform-specific social-media should become part of analytic models in future research.

These limitations need to be overcome by future studies using culturally informed longitudinal research. The media literacy, the body-positivity awareness, and the clinicians, should be encouraged in school-based programs and take into account family structure and gender roles. The current research adds value to literature on media effects by contributing to the Pakistani traditionally underrepresented field.

### **Implications**

Results highlight the importance of online beauty ideals as a subject of digital-literacy programs to train the adolescents on skills in critically evaluating online ideals of beauty. It should be advised to parents about the dangers of overexposure to social-media. These findings justify the use of culturally competent prevention and national education approaches in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

The research reveals the fact that the more people use social-media, the more they become dissatisfied with their bodies and their eating habits are also poor in Pakistan among Generation Z. Increased digitization can enhance body anxiety and reinforce body disordered eating.

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