

THE ROLE OF CAMERA FILTERS IN SHAPING BEAUTY STANDARDS AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18059177>

Keywords

Camera Filters, Shaping Beauty Standards, Unrealistic Expectations

Article History

Received on 27 October 2025

Accepted on 13 December 2025

Published on 26 December 2025

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how camera filters on social media influence beauty standards, self-perception, and emotional well-being among youth in Pakistan. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen participants aged sixteen to twenty-five from urban and suburban areas of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: internalization of idealized beauty, emotional and psychological effects, social validation and pressure to conform, and self-awareness and resistance. Participants reported feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem, and social pressure to maintain a digitally enhanced appearance, often resulting in a disconnect between their online and offline identities. However, some also demonstrated growing resistance to filter culture, embracing authenticity and reducing social media use. The findings support Cultivation Theory, suggesting that repeated exposure to filtered content can shape perceptions of beauty and identity. This study underscores the need for media literacy, mental health interventions, and policy-level efforts to promote realistic and diverse representations of beauty in digital spaces.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital environment, social media platforms are seamlessly integrated into everyday life, shaping people's perceptions of themselves and others. A central element of this change is the widespread use of camera filters, which allow users to alter their appearance by enhancing facial features, smoothing imperfections, and altering skin tone. Although these tools were designed for artistic expression, they have unintentionally promoted unattainable standards of beauty and altered society's expectations of beauty (Newman & Sheth, 1985, p. 179). The ability to create an ideal

representation of oneself has created a culture that values visual perfection, often to the detriment of mental and emotional health (McCombs, 1997, p. 434).

The growing reliance on filters invites exploration into how individuals experience and interpret their psychological and social effects, especially as they relate to self-esteem and body confidence. Emerging narratives indicate that individuals who frequently use filters often describe feelings of dissatisfaction with their appearance and develop symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kleeman et al., 2018, p. 312). This trend is not limited to a

particular region but has global implications. Such technologies are also being used more and more frequently in Pakistan. Pakistani youth, especially women, are very active on social media, where filtered images dominate the visual culture and perpetuate unrealistic beauty ideals (Khan, 2021, p. 45). The normalization of these enhanced images fosters false self-perceptions and reinforces narrow definitions of beauty (Chae, 2017, p. 128). Filters allow users to create highly polished, idealized versions of themselves that resemble celebrities or models. However, this curated representation promotes a culture of comparison and self-doubt (Perloff, 2014, p. 376). Users, especially teenagers, tend to internalize these unrealistic ideals, leading to poor self-esteem and body image. Moreover, the effects of filters extend beyond individual perceptions, altering society's interpretation of attractiveness and influencing certain beauty practices, including cosmetic procedures and skin care regimens (Nasir & Bashir, 2020, p. 213). This trend highlights the need for closer examination of the psychological and behavioral effects of filter use, especially among vulnerable populations.

George Gerbner introduced cultivation theory in 1976, giving a way to understand such effects. According to this theory, being exposed to the same media content many times changes a person's way of seeing the world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 123). If we look at this theory in relation to social media, it's clear filtered photos just keep promoting unrealistic beauty standards that affect users' thoughts and actions. Once these images are common, the difference between natural beauty and enhanced beauty increases, making people dissatisfied and wanting to look like an ideal. The authors explain how media has an impact on people's values and personal identity.

It has been discovered that teenagers and young adults are easily influenced by them. According to a study led by Kleemans et al. (2018, p. 317), when adolescent girls use Instagram, they usually feel more dissatisfied with their physical appearances. In the same way, Khan (2021, p. 48) found that Pakistani youth became more anxious and less satisfied when looking at filtered selfies,

proving that this concern exists in many places. They prove that young people can be easily influenced by beauty standards from the media and may face problems in the future.

Their results are seen in mental well-being as well as actions taken by people. Many people on social media turn to drastic actions such as changing how they look and altering their eating habits trying to look like the 'ideal' that is popular on social media (Fardouly et al., 2015, p. 182). The situation in Pakistan is made more severe by local customs and social expectations, so it needs individual attention. Viewing the link between cultural values and technology reveals how it may impact mindset and behavior and calls for us to pay more attention to it (Nasir & Bashir, 2020, p. 216).

This research looks at how young individuals see camera filters in terms of outer beauty, their thoughts on beauty, and its influence on mental health, particularly for Pakistani adolescents. The aim of this research is to explain the ways in which filtered images can alter people's views, create unrealistic goals, and lower their self-esteem and happiness with their bodies. By looking into these factors, this study seeks to support better mental and self-image health among the youth by helping them be more alert about what they see online (Chae, 2017, p. 130). Being aware of these effects enables people to decide on improved ways to use technology and limit negative outcomes.

Using a qualitative approach, this study wants to highlight what people say and to show how using beauty apps affects their identity and social relationships.

Objectives

- To explore how individuals interpret and respond to beauty norms shaped by camera filters.
- To understand how filtered images are experienced in relation to self-esteem and body confidence among youth.

Research Questions

- How do camera filters influence people's perceptions of beauty and perfection?
- What impact do filtered images have on the self-esteem and body confidence of young people?

Literature Review

Because of social media, camera filters are now available for users to change their appearance in photos and videos. Though these filters are used for creativity, they play a big role in affecting society's ideas of beauty and mental health of many people.

Effect on beauty norms

Many times, camera filters give an idea of beauty with effects like perfect complexion, bigger eyes, and thinner cheeks. Also known as the "Instagram face," this trend has created an image of "clearly white, not ethnic," and makes beauty harder to express for many people (Tolentino 2019). If people use such filters too much, it may lead others to think that meeting such standards is normal. Psychological impacts

The difference between the real and the digitally changed picture may make some people feel pressure. Studies have pointed out that, when people frequently see perfected images, they often feel that their appearance is unsatisfactory and their self-esteem decreases. Comparing one's appearance to others this much may result in problems such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), causing people to view themselves incorrectly (Rajanala et al., 2018).

Unattainable expectations and perfectionism

The filters can easily be altered, which can encourage unrealistic expectations of an individual's appearance. Users may feel pressured to conform to these digitally altered ideals, leading to perfectionistic behavior and a distorted self-image. The phenomenon known as 'Snapchat body dysmorphia' reflects how individuals internalize filtered appearances and pursue cosmetic changes in response to how they perceive themselves in relation to enhanced images.

Theory

Culture theory was proposed by George Gerbner in 1976 to explain how long-term media exposure affects an individual's perception of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 123). The theory initially focused on television, but is now applied to social media, where visual content and filters shape perceptions of beauty standards (Morgan et al., 2009, p. 98).

Why it was proposed

Gerbner wanted to study how repeated media messages affect beliefs and attitudes, suggesting that media construct reality rather than reflect it (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 125). His focus was on how media creates stereotypes, social norms, and expectations (Newman & Sheth, 1985, p. 179).

Key Experiment

Gerbner analyzed television shows and surveyed viewers. He found that frequent confrontation with content such as violence leads to a distorted view of the world, the so-called mean-world syndrome (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 130). Relevance to the topic: This theory can be directly applied to social media filters and beauty ideals.

Repeated exposure to filtered images has been described by researchers as contributing to the normalization of beauty ideals that are perceived as unattainable by many participants (Perloff, 2014, p. 376).

Social comparison: Filters promote a culture of comparison, which leads to self-doubt, dissatisfaction with one's body, and pressure to edit appearance (Fardouly et al., 2015, p. 182).

Validation and reinforcement: Participants in previous studies have shared that positive feedback on filtered images often reinforces their perception that altered appearances are more socially valued than natural ones (Chae, 2017, p. 128).

Cultural influences in Pakistan: In Pakistan, existing cultural beauty pressures exacerbate the impact, especially among young women, as studies such as Khan (2021, p. 45) and Nasir & Bashir (2020, p. 213) have shown.

The Role of Camera Filters in Shaping Beauty Standards and Unrealistic Expectations

The emergence of social media channels has profoundly transformed views on beauty standards and self-perception (McCombs, 1997, p. 434). The advent of camera filters and image editing applications exposes users to meticulously crafted, digitally modified portrayals of attractiveness. While these instruments enhance visual appeal, they also foster unrealistic standards and detrimental self-images, particularly among

teenagers and young adults (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 45).

Countless studies have examined the psychological ramifications of filters and image editing, underscoring their influence in generating body dissatisfaction, self-esteem challenges, and identity struggles (Fox & Vendemia, 2016, p. 290). Kleemans et al. (2018) assessed the effects of Instagram visuals on the body image of adolescent girls. The study documented that participants often expressed heightened feelings of body dissatisfaction when engaging with digitally modified pictures. (Kleemans et al., 2018, p. 317). This illustrates how social media filters advance unattainable beauty standards, which can inflict negative psychological consequences (Andreassen et al., 2017, p. 182).

Fadouli et al. (2015) explored social comparison dynamics on Facebook. The findings suggest that viewing filtered images raises anxiety regarding appearance and leads to adverse self-evaluations (Fardouly et al., 2015, p. 184). This indicates how filters perpetuate unrealistic beauty ideals and heighten anxiety (Mills et al., 2018, p. 178).

Perloff (2014) emphasized the mental health ramifications of social media filters, including depression, self-objectification, and diminished self-assurance (Perloff, 2014, p. 376). The research indicates that frequent exposure to filtered visuals nurtures unrealistic perceptions of beauty and internalized peer pressures, negatively impacting mental well-being (Stapleton et al., 2017, p. 289).

Yang et al. (2020) examined Snapchat filters and their effects on adolescent body image. The study concluded that regular use of filters exacerbated negative self-perception and heightened appearance anxiety (Yang et al., 2020, p. 212).

Khan (2021) concentrated on Pakistani youth, revealing that filtered selfies lead to increased anxiety and self-objectification, significant among women who encounter cultural beauty expectations (Khan, 2021, p. 49). The research investigates how cultural influences amplify the effects of filters (Nasir & Bashir, 2020, p. 216).

Farooq (2019) studied the effects of Pakistani television and social media on beauty standards. The research demonstrated how these platforms reinforce unrealistic expectations, shape societal

norms, and induce self-doubt (Farooq, 2019, p. 138).

Zafar and Rafique (2021) examined beauty filters among Pakistani university students, finding that they caused issues with self-esteem and comparison anxiety (Zafar & Rafique, 2021, p. 201). Their findings underscore the influence of filters in crafting unattainable benchmarks for beauty (Ahmed & Kamran, 2018, p. 312).

Naveed and Zia (2023) analyzed the effects of photo editing applications on self-image. Their findings showed that exposure to filtered media heightened anxiety and increased the yearning for cosmetic alterations (Naveed & Zia, 2023, p. 221). Hassan and Ali (2023) investigated the role of TikTok filters on Pakistani youth, revealing greater dissatisfaction with natural beauty and emphasizing how filters skew beauty perceptions and undermine self-esteem (Hassan & Ali, 2023, p. 227).

In summary, the body of literature reveals the extensive influence of camera filters on mental health and perceptions of beauty, establishing a basis for understanding the wider psychological and cultural ramifications of these filters.

While most of the past research has used surveys or experimental methods to examine the effects of camera filters, fewer studies have prioritized individuals' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. This study seeks to address that gap by adopting a qualitative approach to explore how youth interpret and internalize beauty ideals shaped by digital filters.

Methodology

Research Design

This study chooses a qualitative and phenomenological approach to look into how people view the effects of social media filters on their thoughts about beauty and self-image.

Population

The study focuses on college and university students aged 16–25 from Islamabad and Rawalpindi, who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. These individuals were chosen for their

firsthand experiences with camera filters and body image concerns.

Sampling Method

This study uses purposive sampling to select participants who are knowledgeable and reflective about their social media usage and who can offer in-depth insights into how filters affect their self-perception.

Sample Size

A sample of approximately 15–20 participants will be selected. This size allows for in-depth, thematic exploration of individual experiences, which is consistent with qualitative research goals.

Demographics

Participants will include both male and female youth aged 16–25. A range of educational backgrounds and social media habits will be considered to capture diverse perspectives.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. These interviews will encourage participants to reflect openly on their use of camera filters, perceptions of beauty, and personal experiences with body image.

Data Analysis

Patterns in the interview data were found through the application of thematic analysis. Responses will be classified and categorized into themes that represent how participants perceive, comprehend, and deal with beauty standards influenced by camera filters, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-phase paradigm.

Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the key themes identified through thematic analysis of interviews conducted with youth aged 16–25 in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study aimed to understand how social media filters influence beauty perceptions, body confidence, and emotional well-being.

Theme 1: Internalization of Idealized Beauty

People regularly explained how they often compare their own looks to the way others are altered in photos. A lot of people adjusted their ideas of beauty to what social media showed, making them examine their own appearance more frequently.

"Every time I see myself without a filter, I feel like something's missing. The real me doesn't feel good enough." – 19-year-old female participant

The consistent use of filters has shifted perceptions of what is considered 'normal' or 'beautiful', making filtered perfection the benchmark.

"I don't post unfiltered pictures anymore. I feel exposed. Like people will judge my flaws." – 21-year-old male participant

"Sometimes I scroll through my photos and can't recognize the real me anymore." – 20-year-old female

"Everyone starts to look the same. I find myself editing to match what gets the most likes." – 18-year-old male

This internalization aligns with Cultivation Theory, suggesting that repeated exposure to idealized, digitally altered images cultivates a distorted sense of beauty norms.

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Effects

Most people who took part in the study described emotional distress and a feeling of shame when picturing themselves normally after seeing their filters. Some young people preferred to stay away from social events since their online identity stood in the way.

Many think I keep the same look in person as I have online. When they come across me face to face, I think I'm not living up to their expectations. This study concerns 22-year-old female participants.

It was also mentioned that some people come to rely on special effects to feel attractive and involved in social gatherings.

I would never want to take a selfie without applying a filter. To me, it's now a big part of who I am. – A teenager who is 18 years old

Noticing that nobody is judging me does not seem to include the version of me people admire.

I start to feel anxious every time I prepare to share a video on the Internet. Sometimes I ask myself if I appear real to the point where I seem plain.

I tend to get rid of pictures that aren't popular among my followers. It feels as if I just couldn't look good today—said a 19-year-old female.

They make apparent the emotional strain that filter culture puts on girls, given that society already places heavy emphasis on having a perfect look.

Theme 3: Having Others Approve of You and Feeling Pushed to Act Like Everyone Else

Those taking part in the study highlighted that social recognition on their content motivated them to alter their pictures. Images that were edited heavily got more attention from users.

Photos that have been filtered always attract more likes on social media. That's how things go when it comes to laws. Natural ones? The difference is not very significant. – 20-years-old woman

Being outside of the beauty trend usually gets you ignored. Even worse, they may point out the things you are not good at. – A male teenager who is 17
Your only requirement is to always look flawless to maintain your significance online.

My friends think poorly of pictures that are not edited. They actually advised me, "You look exhausted, so fix your appearance."

As a result, the pressure from 'likes' on social media supports strict beauty standards, causing users to work harder on presenting themselves in a certain way.

Theme 4: Resistance and Self-Awareness

Interestingly, several participants showed a growing awareness of the harms associated with filter use. Some had begun intentionally posting unfiltered photos or limiting their social media time.

"I realized I was losing my real identity. Now I try to post without filters, even if it's scary." – 23-year-old female

"I took a break from Instagram, and it helped me see myself differently – more kindly." – 19-year-old male

"Posting without filters is like taking off a mask. I was scared, but it felt honest." – 24-year-old female

"I follow accounts that show real faces – it helps me stop being so harsh on myself." – 18-year-old female

As a result, people are led to look for something true and genuine in themselves instead of going with popular trends.

Discussion

It has been found that being repeatedly exposed to curated content leads people to adopt the preferred beauty standards and rethink their own appearance. Curating one's identity online brings on feelings of stress, worry about being better, and needing outside approval.

In addition, since being accepted by society and being physically appealing matter greatly in Pakistan, the problem is made worse. The information in the participant accounts proves that the purpose of filters goes well beyond making people and things look different. The theme of resisting online risks implies that today's youth are gaining more understanding of digital matters.

For these reasons, we need to offer youth digital media classes, place them in supportive networks, and give them mental health services that highlight realness and embracing their bodies.

Conclusion and Implications

A summary of the conclusions made by the study appears in this chapter, as well as notes on the study's limitations and possible topics for future research. The purpose of this study was to find out the effects of social media camera filters on beauty expectations, youth's self-image, and mental health in Pakistan. Looking at digital media and its effects through participants' own lives, this research enriches the knowledge on this subject.

A summary of the results is discussed here.

Four major themes came up when interviewed fifteen youths within the age range of sixteen to twenty-five through semi-structured conversations.

1. **Internalization of Idealized Beauty:** A lot of people felt pressure to try and look as beautiful as what the filters promise. Many people became used to seeing digital filters, so they began to compare themselves to the perfect-looking images.
2. **Anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of having their looks scrutinized by real people** were some of the emotional consequences of using filters. There

were people who needed filters to fit in with their peers.

3. Like and comment figures that appeared on social media encouraged members to change their pictures before sharing them. Maintaining online safety required people to confirm their identity.
4. A number of participants were getting more aware of the bad outcomes that filter culture can bring. There were those who stepped back from filters, liked being true to themselves, and stayed away from social media.
5. They prove that using camera filters affects more than just appearance, and can strongly affect a person's sense of self.

Implications

For Youth and Families: Individuals who are still young need chances to speak about their lives online without being judged. Supporting people to share their feelings and talents without focusing on looks may make them less dependent on how digital beauty is shown.

In schools and colleges, it helps to introduce programs covering the gap between our online lives and real life. Students ought to learn how to critically analyze information they get digitally and appreciate being who they truly are.

For Mental Health Practitioners: Counselors and psychologists must consider the emotional stress caused by curated online personas. Body image counseling should address not only in-person comparisons but also the psychological burden of maintaining digital identities.

For Policymakers and Tech Platforms: There is a need for transparent policies around filter labeling, especially on apps heavily used by youth. Platforms can offer optional reminders that filters are in use, and promote body-positive content as part of their algorithmic suggestions.

Limitations

- The study was limited to urban and suburban youth in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Perspectives from rural regions or other cities may differ.
- Since participants were self-reporting, their responses may reflect bias or selective recall.

- The study focused on users aged 16–25. Insights from older or younger individuals were not captured.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Conduct longitudinal studies to track the evolving relationship between filter usage and self-perception.
- Explore gender-based differences in how filters affect identity and self-esteem.
- Examine how digital detox or minimal social media usage impacts body confidence over time.
- Include cross-cultural comparisons to examine whether similar patterns emerge in different socio-cultural environments.

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