

FROM SOCIAL MEDIA PRESSURES TO SELF-PERCEPTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SELF-PROCESSING IN YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

Social media has established itself in the lives of people especially the young adults. Still, there is little empirical evidence on its influence on the general self-perception. The study explores various psychological processes that can be used to explain the role of social media in self-perception based on self-processing mechanisms. Social media pressures come in place due to exposure to idealized images, internalization of aesthetic ideals, social pressure perceived, and upward social comparison. Self-processing was measured through the self-objectification and self-concept clarity measures. An online questionnaire was used to collect data where 230 Pakistani young adults aged between 18 and 35 years filled the questionnaire. Hypothesized relationships were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling, which was applied subsequently. The results revealed that social media pressures did not bring a direct change in terms of self-perception; rather, they had an impact through mediating self-processing and thus an indirect effect. Upward social comparison turned out to be an important predictor of self-objectification and self-perception. Self-concept clarity, in turn, had a strong connection with self-perception, which explains the usefulness of identity coherence as a key explanatory mechanism. Taken together, these findings underscore the impact of social media pressure when it comes to influencing the internal psychological processes.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Social Media as a Current Sociocultural Space

The current culture of social media has transformed the social understanding of self-perception and the perception of people by others (Choi et al., 2020). Social networking applications for instance, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are the platforms on which people tailor their image using visual representation. Users of these social

networks carefully create, manage, and curate their visual representations, using a visual medium that emphasizes images and video clips and supports the constant sharing of images across multiple platforms. The most frequently shared images tend to depict images of beauty/beautifying, success, and normality; however, these images often reflect ideals developed from filter and trend-based aspirations than real-life experiences

(Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Additionally, traditional media, such as print and broadcast television, focus primarily on the production of content by professional creators; whereas, with social networks, many users produce/contribute content to their peers and then continually refresh the content produced through these platforms. Social media users achieve the social validation by the numbers of likes, comments and shares they get on their shared content, shaping their sense of social approval (Dahlgren et al., 2024).

Over time, repeated exposure on these platforms has made people question their true identities and shifting focus to rather what is trendy (Kvardova et al., 2025). This constant comparison, particularly around appearance fuels the self-consciousness and contributes to the comparison to ideals (Ozimek et al., 2023).

1.2. Developmental Vulnerability in Young Adulthood

During young adulthood, there is a lot of psychological openness. A person's identity is still in development, and their self-definition can change. Young adults typically have a heightened sensitivity to how their peers evaluate them (Carden et al., 2022). Therefore, during young adulthood, young adults are forming their beliefs about their appearance, ability to perform certain tasks, and their perceived social value. Also, during this time, young adults are completing their education, developing their careers, and forming romantic relationships (Zhang & Qin, 2023). Social media is part of this developmental period for most young adults, and they receive a constant flow of feedback from the peers with whom they interact and the continuing availability of comparison opportunities in various aspects of their lives. Because their self-concepts are still developing, the significance placed on external validation is greater than it will be at a later stage of development (Reed-Fitzke, 2020). Having frequent exposure to idealized social media posts from peers may cause Individuals to feel increased social pressure to conform to these ideals and negatively affect their ability to accurately evaluate themselves (Fioravanti et al., 2024). As a result, social media pressures encountered during young

adulthood may exert particularly strong and enduring influences on how individuals come to see themselves.

1.3. Empirical Evidence Linking Exposure and Social Comparison

The effects of idealized social media content are seldom direct as proposed by a growing body of research. Rather, they are more likely to act in terms of social comparison especially upward comparison (Tian, Li, and Zhang, 2025). It is clear, that even the minor exposure to social networking applications with strongly modified pictures can generate upward comparisons, which change their idea of what they look like (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). These exposures do not appear to have an immediate effect, but accumulate in preceding experience.

Longitudinal studies give credence to this issue by demonstrating that these processes have a time progression and are not lost once they have been used in a short duration. Indicatively, Jarman et al. (2024) found appearance-related social media use to predict subsequent decreases in body satisfaction, and upward social comparison explained the decrease. Combined with the previous evidence, this may indicate that upward social comparison is not merely a by-product of social media use, but is not an inert psychological factor in the interaction between exposure to idealized representations and deteriorating self-perception (Tiggemann and Polivy, 2010).

1.4. Sociocultural Processes: Internalization and Perceived Social Pressure

An attempt to isolate the impact of constant exposure to media representations implies that the Sociocultural Model of Body Image is a good framework to comprehend the impact of media representations on the perceptions that people have on themselves. The Sociocultural Model also argues that media is a powerful sociocultural force that shapes people about what is acceptable in terms of appearance and style, as well as signals that deviating in any way will lead to some type of social sanction (Thompson et al., 1999). The end result is that these messages can become internalized and hence instead of looking at these

ideals as external representations then internalized they become personal ideals. Such ideals are unrealistic and unachievable, so in this case, dissatisfaction is even more probable (Merino et al., 2024).

The social media may be regarded as a means of intensifying the effects that media representations produce on how people perceive themselves. The ideal representations are not only prevalent but are also praised in the form of likes and comments and this is subtle signals that the representations are normal and acceptable. In this setting, what people think of as social pressure that they must conform to may be magnified, particularly when the appearance is being displayed and judged at all times. It has been shown that the higher the levels of internalization are the higher the levels of social pressure are, in particular, in cases when the media that they watch is online and comparison is impossible to avoid (Vuong et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2025).

1.5. From Comparison to Self-Processing: Self-Objectification

When there is internalization and perceived pressure the upward social comparison propensity is heightened and this upward social comparison need not be compared only on superficial levels but can occur in a deep form of self-processing (Alessi Longa et al., 2025). Among the effects of such change, there is self-objectification, i.e., the inclination to perceive the self through the eyes of another viewer, and the focus is made on physical attractiveness (Fioravanti et al., 2022). This could be aided by social media which can implicitly propagate self-objectification by focusing on visual self-presentations and social significance it gives to appearance-based feedback.

Research has continuously established that upward social comparison is linked to self-objectification that is also linked to body surveillance, dissatisfaction, and psychological distress. This is not such a superficial tendency but a more profound self-processing process that keeps a dynamic connection with the experience of negative self-view as the effect of sociocultural pressures.

1.6. Self-Concept Clarity and Identity-Level Outcomes

It is, nevertheless, worth mentioning that the pressures of social media are not confined to the looks-related matters, and that the same pressures may potentially influence even more primordial problems of identity. Self-concept clarity refers to the extent to which a person has a stable, coherent and confident sense of self (Hertel, 2018). Perhaps, under the conditions of the existence of idealized depictions, this clarity may start to fade. It is also possible that the external sources of information may be employed to establish the sense of identity, and such clarity may become more challenging to be maintained (Jung et al., 2022).

There is also new research claiming that heavy interaction with the highly curated content may lead to a disintegration of one own sense of self, especially when the personal value is compared to the evolving norms of social media (Rousseau and Rodgers, 2025). Reduced self-concept clarity levels have been linked to negative forms of self-perception and emotional vulnerability and hence indicate that it is a significant identity-based processes by which social media pressures will likely be suffered.

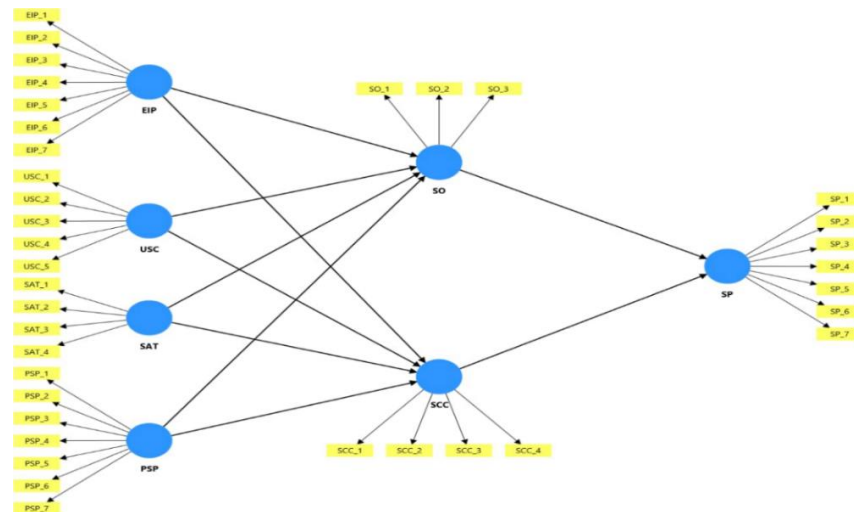


Figure 1: PLS-SEM Measurement Models

The figure 1 displays PLS-SEM analysis. Self-objectification and self-concept clarity represent self-processing mechanisms.

1.7. The Present Study

The present study is focused on the understanding the association between social media pressures and self-perception in young adults. The study explores sociocultural and psychological factors through a structural model (Thompson et al., 1999), and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), it conceptualizes the social media pressures on four constructs: exposure to idealized portrayals, internalization of appearance ideals, perceived social pressures, and upward comparison.

The study stresses on evaluative social media aspects over usage frequency. Social media pressures were hypothesized as influencing self-perception indirectly via self-processing. Self-processing was considered as mediators, comprising of self-objectification and self-concept clarity. These variables and connections have been

studied before apart from each other. This study explores the combined and separate relationship of these variables, using a PLS-SEM model. Targeted population was young-adults between the ages of 18-35 due to their high exposure to social media platforms. The study examined how social media pressures will affect self-perception going through self-processing.

1.8. Hypotheses

H1: The positive relationship between social media pressures and upward social comparison among young adults will exist.

H2: Positive correlation will exist between upward social comparison and self-objectification, and negative correlation will be found between upward social comparison and self-concept clarity.

H3: The theoretical framework suggests that the social pressures of the social media affect the self-perception indirectly by the self-processing mechanisms, which are self-objectification and the clarity of self-concept.

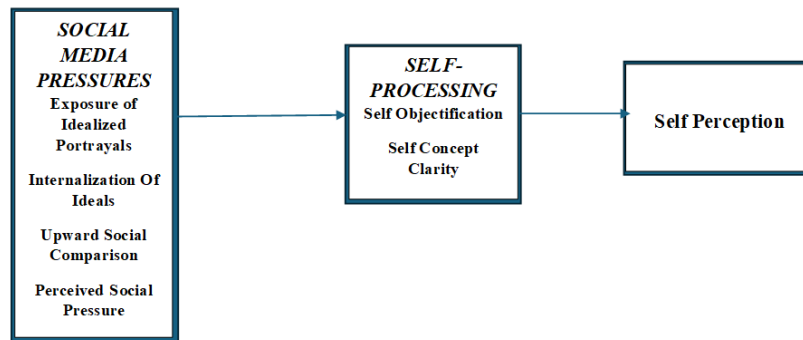


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework Linking Social Media Pressures to Self-Perception

The theoretical framework suggests that the social pressures of the social media affect the self-perception indirectly by the self-processing mechanisms, which are self-objectification and the clarity of self-concept.

2.0. Materials and Methods

2.1. Population and Sample

The sample consisted of young adults recruited from universities in Pakistan. In total, 230 participants between the ages of 18 and 35 took part in the study. Eligibility was limited to individuals who were currently enrolled in a university program, proficient in English, and active users of at least one social media platform. The subjects who indicated that they did not use social media were also not included in the dataset before analysis. The rest of the group was very widely distributed in academic subjects and social classes. The attendance was optional and other than age limit and social media usage requirement, no other exclusionary parameters were designed.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographic Information

The respondents provided basic demographic information, which included age, gender, and area of study, academic advancement and residence country.

2.2.2. Social Media Pressures

Social media pressures were reduced to a multidimensional construct that in turn encompasses key sociocultural processes through which digital milieus influence self-assessment. The construct also included exposure to idealized representations, internalization of appearance standards, perceived social pressure and upward social comparison. All these aspects altogether summarize the material stimulus that users receive and the resulting psychological response to using social media.

2.2.3. Exposure to Idealized Social Media Portrayals

The exposure to idealistic representations was measured using items based on instruments that are regularly used in the researches on the topic of appearance-focused social media usage (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016; Tiggemann and Anderberg, 2023). Respondents reported how often they were exposed to idealized images related to physical appearance, lifestyle, and success on social media through Instagram and TikTok. The answers were graded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = very often) whereby a higher score corresponded with more exposure.

2.2.4. Appearance-Focused Social Media Use

Participants also gave details about how often they engaged with appearance-based content on appearance-oriented applications, namely,

Instagram and TikTok. The items were rated on a continuum of 5 points (1 = never; 5 always) and averaged, and the higher the mean scores, the more the engagement with the appearance-oriented material.

2.2.5. Internalization of Sociocultural Ideals

The appearance ideals were assessed through the relevant subscales of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (SATAQ-4; Schaefer et al., 2015). The answers to statements that presented the assimilation of culturally supported appearance norms were agreed with on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = definitely disagree; 5 = definitely agree). High scores indicate a higher level of internalization. The subscales had high internal consistency in the current sample.

2.2.6. Perceived Social Media Pressure

Perceived social pressure was measured with adapted items that assessed the extent to which participants believed that they felt pressured to meet appearance and lifestyle standards that were shared on social media (Fardouly and Holland, 2024). The answers were recorded on a five-point Likert scale on which higher scores indicated how much pressure was perceived.

2.2.7. Upward Social Comparison

The actual comparison of upward social comparison was assessed through adapted versions of the comparison measures created before (O'Brien et al., 2009). Respondents were asked to respond to how often they made comparisons with people who they considered to be more attractive, more successful, or liked more on social media. The responses were noted on a five-point Likert scale where the larger the scale the more intense is the upward comparison tendencies.

2.2.8. Self-Objectification

Self-objectification was measured by a validated measure of the tendency to evaluate self in the perspective of an observer and appearance monitoring (Fioravanti et al., 2022). The participants responded to questions using a five-point Likert scale (the higher the score, the more self-objectified the person is).

2.2.9. Self-Concept Clarity

The self-concept clarity was measured by the use of the Self-concept clarity scale (Chen and Shi, 2025). Items were used in determining the extent to which the participants considered their self-conception to be stable, coherent, and identifiable. The answers were measured using a five-point Likert scale where the higher the score, the better the clarity.

2.2.10. Self-Perception

Self-perception was operationalized as a higher order construct that represents the general self-evaluation, both in satisfaction with appearance and the identity related self-assessments. Relevant scales provided standardized scores which were used as indicators of global self-perception and the higher the score, the more positive the self-perception.

2.3. Procedure

Data collection was preceded by the acquisition of ethical approval by the relevant institutional ethics committee. The participants were recruited through mailing lists and websites of the universities. After the administration of the informed consent, participants were asked to fill an anonymous questionnaire through the online platform on a secure survey site. The study lasted about 20 and 25 minutes to complete. The use of participation was on a full-fledged voluntary basis and the respondents were aware of their right to discontinue while they would not be penalized.

2.4. Data Analysis Plan

The data were analyzed under the PLS-SEM of SmartPLS (version 4). This methodological option was explained by its suitability to intricate modeling and forecast studies, and its resistance to the infractions of multivariate normalcy (Hair et al., 2019). The specification did not include demographic covariates because the focus of the analysis was narrowed down to psychological and social media-related constructs.

The dataset was screened before model estimation in terms of missing values and outliers. All respondents who had no activity on social media were not included in the final analytic sample.

Since there is no requirement of normally distributed variables in PLS-SEM, no transformations were done.

Measurement model was evaluated and tested by looking at loading of indicators, internal consistency (Cronbachs alpha and composite) and convergent validity was determined by looking at average variance extracted (AVE). The discrimination validity was measured through the use of Heterotrait Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (HTMT, Henseler et al., 2015).

Upon the evidence of measurement model adequacy, the structural model was evaluated

through the verification of collinearity through Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, path coefficients and explanatory variance (R^2). Significance testing of direct and indirect effects was done by using bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 resamples. Mediation was conjectured when bootstrapped confidence intervals were not equal to zero. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was used to assess model fit, and the values below .08 are acceptable fit values (Hair et al., 2019).

3.0. Results

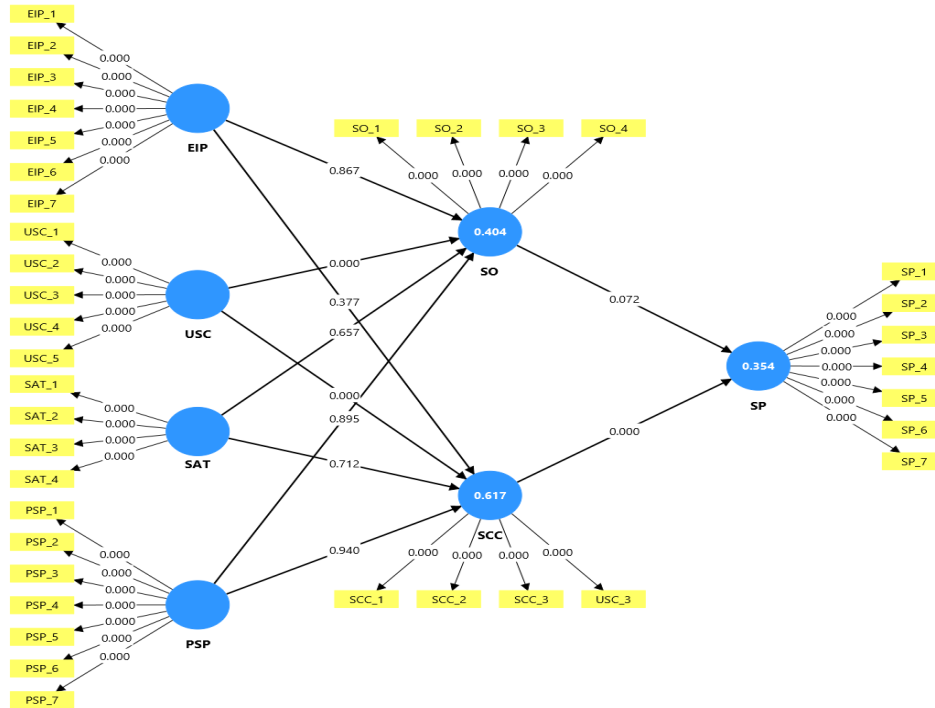


Figure 3: PLS Structural Equation Model

Note: Standardized path coefficients of PLS-SEM analysis are shown. Self-objectification and clarity of self-concept are self-processing mechanisms.

3.0.1. Structural Model and Path Analysis

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the structural model, which sought to examine the relationship between social media pressures and self-perception along with the structural equation

of the self-processing mechanisms through self-objectification and self-concept clarity. Pressures of social media were addressed as a multidimensional construct and they include exposure to idealized representations, internalization of ideals, perceived social pressure, and upward social comparison. The completed model is shown in Figure-3.

Upward social comparison was the strongest predictor of sociocultural across the model. An

upward comparison was found to be higher in relation to more self-objectification ($\beta = 0.634, p <.001$) and less self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.493, p <.001$). This trend indicates that the idea of appearing relatively inferior to relatively superior people on social media regularly can interfere with both the self-judgment involving appearance and the overall identity alignment.

Self-concept clarity had the strongest relationship with self-perception ($\beta = 0.772, p <.001$). Those who noted a more consistent and coherent sense of self had also noted more positive overall self-perception. Conversely, self-objectification was not directly linked to self-concept ($\beta = -0.002, p = 0.958$), suggesting that mood may affect indirectly or as well as other cognitive mechanisms in one way or another.

Direct routes between exposure and idealized representations, internalization of ideals and perceived social pressure were not significant.

Nevertheless, there was an upward social comparison and self-concept clarity between these variables and self-perception, which presented a pattern of complete mediation. It implies that sociocultural coercive forces instilled in social media space can influence the self-perception rather not through a direct impact but primarily, as a result of internal psychological dynamics.

On a larger scale, the model explained significant percentage of the variance in key outcomes as it explained the 35.4% of the variance in self-perception, 61.7% in self-concept clarity, and 40.4 percent in self-objectification. Combined, these results confirm the suggested framework by emphasizing self-processing as the mediating mechanism through which social media forces have an impact on self-perception, and upward social comparison as the most instrumental antecedent in the process.

Table 1: Bootstrapping Results for Structural Model Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
EIP -> SCC	0.042	0.044	0.048	0.884	0.377
EIP -> SO	-0.010	-0.009	0.062	0.167	0.867
PSP -> SCC	0.003	-0.001	0.036	0.075	0.940
PSP -> SO	-0.006	-0.010	0.046	0.132	0.895
SAT -> SCC	-0.012	-0.009	0.034	0.370	0.712
SAT -> SO	0.020	0.025	0.044	0.444	0.657
SCC -> SP	0.493	0.494	0.067	7.387	0.000
SO -> SP	0.126	0.127	0.070	1.801	0.072
USC -> SCC	0.772	0.770	0.029	26.595	0.000
USC -> SO	0.634	0.632	0.053	11.944	0.000

Note. Bootstrapping was used to evaluate the structural model of hypothetically hypothesized relationships between exposure to idealized portrayals (EIP), perceived social pressure (PSP), social appearance talk (SAT), upward social comparison (USC), self-objectification (SO), self-concept clarity (SCC) and self-perception (SP). Table-1 shows path coefficients, t-values and p-values.

The findings showed that exposure to idealized images did not have a significant effect on self-

concept clarity ($\beta=0.042, t=0.884, p=0.377$) or self-objectification ($\beta = -0.010, t=0.167, p=0.867$). In the same way, there was no significant relationship between perceived social pressure and self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.003, t = 0.075, p = 0.940$) or self-objectification ($\beta = -0.006, t = 0.132, p = 0.895$). The social appearance to self-concept clarity ($\beta = -0.012, t = 0.370, p=0.712$) and social appearance to self-objectification ($\beta = 0.20, t = 0.444, p = 0.657$) paths were also not significant.

Conversely, upward social comparison was shown to be a potent predictor of the two mediators. There was a strong positive correlation between upward social comparison and self-concept clarity ($\beta=0.772$, $t = 26.595$, $p < 0.001$), and self-objectification ($\beta= 0.634$, $t = 11.944$, $p < 0.001$). In the outcome paths, it was revealed that self-concept clarity had a significant predictive value on self-perception ($\beta = 0.493$, $t= 7.387$, $p < 0.001$), with the higher the self-concept clarity, the higher

the self-perception. The correlation between self-objectification and self-perception, however, was not significant ($\beta = 0.126$, $t = 1.801$, $p < 0.072$). In general, the results indicate that although direct sociocultural pressures did not have critical impacts on self-processing variables, upward social comparison was centralized, and it indirectly affected self-perception by having a high impact on self-concept clarity.

Table 2: Internal Consistency Reliability and Convergent Validity of the Measurement Model

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)
EIP	0.913	0.916	0.931
PSP	0.934	0.971	0.944
SAT	0.819	0.888	0.874
SCC	0.810	0.813	0.874
SO	0.879	0.882	0.917
SP	0.941	0.945	0.952
USC	0.846	0.855	0.891

Note. The measurement model was tested with the consideration of internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha and indices of composite reliability (rho alpha and rho composite reliability). Table 2 reveals that all the constructs have satisfactory values of reliability, and the values are greater than the recommended value of 0.70.

The values of Cronbach alpha were 0.810 to 0.941, which means that there was acceptability and excellent internal consistency among the constructs. Idealized Portrayals ($\alpha = 0.913$), Perceived Social Pressure ($\alpha = 0.934$) and Self-Perception ($\alpha = 0.941$) all exhibited high reliability indicating that these items were very consistent. The Social Appearance Talk ($\alpha = 0.819$) Self-Concept Clarity ($\alpha = 0.810$) Self-Objectification (α

$= 0.879$) and Upward Social Comparison ($\alpha = 0.846$) are also within the recommended criteria. These were further supported by composite reliability estimates. The rho alpha was found to be between 0.813 and 0.971 and the rho c was found to be between 0.874 and 0.952 and hence all constructs have an excellent convergent validity. Importantly, Perceived Social Pressure had the largest rho alpha of 0.971, whereas Self-perception was the most compelling in composite Reliability (rho_c = 0.952) which means that there was a good coverage of its indicators by the latent construct.

On the whole, the obtained results prove that the measurement model has sufficient internal consistency reliability and convergent validity and can be used in its further structural model analysis.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity Assessment Using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

EIP	PSP	SAT	SCC	SO	SP	USC
0.301						
0.410	0.182					
0.387	0.118	0.228				
0.275	0.092	0.192	0.083			

0.342	0.164	0.293	0.674	0.549		
0.446	0.147	0.308	0.80	0.735	0.570	

Note. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) was used to determine the discriminant validity of the measurement model, as was shown in Table 3. The values of HTMT were compared with the recommended level of 0.85 that whether the constructs are empirically different or not.

The findings indicate that all of the HTMT values are significantly below the conservative threshold, which is a good indication of sufficient discriminant validity between the constructs. The relationship between Exposure to Idealized Portrayals (EIP) and Perceived Social Pressure (PSP) had a ratio of 0.301 and between EIP and Social Appearance Talk (SAT) had 0.410. On the same note, the HTMT value between PSP and SAT was low (0.182) and this implies that there is certain distinction between the two constructs.

Moreover, the HTMT ratios of the Self-Concept Clarity (SCC) were also within acceptable range, with the scores of 0.387 (EIP-SCC), 0.118 (PSP-SCC), and 0.228 (SAT-SCC). The correlations with Self-Objectification (SO) showed satisfactorily high levels of discriminant validity with HTMT of 0.275 (EIP-SO), 0.092 (PSP-SO), 0.192 (SAT-SO) and 0.083 (SCC-SO).

Though, comparably higher HTMT values were found between Self-Perception (SP) and certain constructs namely SCC (0.674) and SO (0.549), the values were still below the proposed cutoff, and hence demonstrates that there was still discriminant validity. Generally speaking, the HTMT findings validate that all the constructs in the model are conceptually and empirically different.

Table-4: Post Hoc Analysis of Structural Path Coefficients Across Significance Levels

	Path coefficients	Alpha 1%	Alpha 5%
EIP -> SCC	0.042	0.066	0.205
EIP -> SO	-0.010	0.017	0.074
PSP -> SCC	0.003	0.011	0.056
PSP -> SO	-0.006	0.014	0.063
SAT -> SCC	-0.012	0.018	0.080
SAT -> SO	0.020	0.026	0.102
SCC -> SP	0.493	1.000	1.000
SO -> SP	0.126	0.546	0.787
USC -> SCC	0.772	1.000	1.000
USC -> SO	0.634	1.000	1.000

Note. Table 1 shows the post hoc comparison of structural path coefficients, where the relationship between variables is examined to be stable at a higher level of significance ($\alpha = .01$ and $\alpha = .05$). This analysis was done to measure the strength of the estimated paths in addition to the main bootstrap significance testing.

Throughout the model, upward social comparison proved to be the most predictive. In particular, the people who were more upwardly socially compared were significantly more likely to have lower levels of self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.772$, $t = 26.595$, $p < .001$) and to be more highly self-objectified ($\beta =$

0.634, $t = 11.944$, $p < .001$). These effects were huge and consistent, which means that comparative-based processes are central to the process of shaping the way people process information about themselves in the context of social media.

Self-concept clarity was also a strong positive predictor of self-perception ($\beta = 0.493$, $t = 7.387$, $p < .001$). People who claimed to have a less ambiguous and coherent sense of self also claimed more positive general self-perception. Conversely, the direct effect of self-objectification on self-perception was not found to be statistically

significant ($\beta = 0.126$, $t = 1.801$, $p = .072$), and appearance-based self-surveillance might not play a direct role in explaining broader self-evaluative effects when other self-processing mechanisms are taken into account together.

Direct exposure-to-idealized-portrayals, perceived social pressure, and internalization of the appearance ideals to self-concept clarity and internalization of appearance ideals to self-objectification were small and non-significant ($ps > .05$). These sociocultural pressures seem to be act indirectly and not directly by virtue of the upward social comparison, which serves as the immediate psychological mechanism that connects the social media environment with the internal self-processing.

All in all, the model explained a significant percentage of variance in self-concept clarity ($R^2 = 0.617$) and self-objectification ($R^2 = 0.404$) and a significant percentage of variance in self-perception ($R^2 = 0.354$). Combined, the results indicate that the cognitive approach of single persons towards social media content, in particular, upward comparison, can have a more impact than the actual exposure or influence of perceived pressure, and the self-concept clarity turns out to be the closest predictor of self-perception.

4.0. Discussion

This current research was aimed at learning how social media demands influence self-conception in young adults and focused specifically on the psychological mechanisms that might underlie these effects. Instead of analyzing social media use as an exposure variable, the researchers concentrated on the qualitative pressures inherent in these media and studied their functioning in terms of self-processing. All in all, the results indicate that the influence of the social media pressures on self-perception is highly indirect, and it occurs via both internal mental and identity-related mechanisms instead of the direct ones.

4.1. Social Media Pressures and Self-Processing

The sociocultural factors that were analyzed showed the strongest and consistent predictor in the model, upward social comparison. Those who

more often made comparisons with those who were considered to be better than they were found to adopt greater levels of self-objectification and less clarity in self-concept. This trend is highly consistent with the social comparison theory, according to which the habitual upward comparisons may bring self-assessments into a dysfunctional state, especially in settings full of idealized and carefully selective messages.

By contrast, exposure to idealized images, internalization of appearance norms and perceived societal pressure showed no significant direct effects on self-processing or self-perception. Though not intuitive, the results imply that these variables can be a set of distal circumstances, which increase comparative opportunities but do not alter self-related outcomes. That is, mere exposure to idealized media or being subjected to pressure by social standards might not be enough to inhibit self-processing, unless individuals actively become involved in comparative processing. This difference narrows down the sociocultural paradigms by emphasizing on upward social comparison as a closer mechanism in the digital environments.

4.2. Self-Processing as a Mediating Mechanism

In line with Hypothesis 3, self-processing was a key mediator between social media pressures and the self-perception. Nevertheless, the two self-processing indicators used did not play an equal role. The strongest predictor of self-perception in the model was self-concept clarity which means that individuals with a more coherent and stable sense of self had more positive self-evaluations. This observation highlights the significance of processes at the identity level in the formation of the process of incorporating social experiences into self-perception.

Even though upward social comparison was a great predictor of self-objectification, self-objectification was not a predictor of self-perception in the final model. This is an indication that the appearance-oriented self-monitoring can not necessarily be directly converted in extended instances of negative self-assessment unless accompanied by a lack of identity coherence. Collectively, these pieces of evidence indicate self-concept clarity as a

rather essential psychological process by which the influence of social media pressures is manifested.

4.3. Interpretation of Hypotheses and Model Pathways

The findings are partial support or complete support of Hypotheses 1 and 2 and total support of Hypothesis 3. There was no significant association between social media pressures and poorer self-perception, although the effects of the latter were mediated by the latter, which is why the offered mediation framework should be accepted. Upward social comparison was identified as the most important sociocultural predictor in the model whereas self-concept clarity was identified as the most prominent outcome-related construct. This trend implies that there is a step-by-step process as bigger social media pressures suggest upward comparison, comparison messes with self-processing, and broken self-processing contributes to worse self-perception. Notably, these conclusions bring out the fact that not every sociocultural pressure is equally forceful and internal cognitive activity with the content can be more effective than mere exposure.

4.4. Conclusion

Overall, the current research proves that the social media pressures shape self-perception not directly but mainly with the help of internal self-processing. Upward social comparison proved to be the major sociocultural route, and the clarity of the self-concept proved to be a crucial factor in influencing the result of the self-perception. Using a combination of several sociocultural and psychological variables in one structural framework, the research adds to the available literature as well as pinpoints the main areas where anti-psychological activity could be focused in the context of reducing the adverse psychological effect of social media in the young adult stage.

4.5. Limitations

There are several study limitations that one should address. The first, the cross-sectional design does not provide the ability to make causal conclusions on the directionality of the relations between social media pressures, self-processing, and self-

perception. As much as the proposed pathways are theoretically based, longitudinal or experimental studies should be carried out in the future to prove the time sequence and the cause and effect.

Second, the use of self-report measures is prone to bias in the response, such as social desirability and shared method variance. The understanding of pressures of social media and self-processing of participants might be inadequate to reflect the real online actions and real-time comparisons. Adding behavioral indicators or experience sampling data or data on platform usage in future studies might offer more intensive evaluation.

Third, the sample size was composed of young adults enrolled in universities in Pakistan, which might confine the Abdolaziz et al. (2016) findings to other age categories, cultures, or non-university populations. The sociocultural constructs of appearance, identity, and usage of social media might vary in different situations and future studies ought to focus on whether the model suggested is generalizable to the various cultural and demographic considerations.

Lastly, although the study concentrated on the main processes of self, other associated psychological factors such as personality traits, emotion regulation strategies, or social support were not incorporated in the model. These reasons have the potential to moderate or buffer the influences of social media pressures and should be taken into account in new studies.

These limitations do not preclude the fact that the study provides a theoretically consistent and empirically supported analysis of the psychological processes according to which social media pressures can influence self-perception among young adults.

4.6. Implications and Future Directions

In terms of application, the results can indicate that any intervention to enhance the self-perception of young adults can be more expected to be less concerned with decreasing the number of social media consumptions and more linked to the ways that people perceive and compare themselves to others in digital settings. These may be strategies that minimize maladaptive comparison or enhance self-concept clarity, e.g.

identity-focused reflection or cognitive restructuring.

Longitudinal research designs would help clear up future studies to have a better understanding of the temporal ordering of these processes. Also, a more detailed insight into the influence of digital environments on self-processing could be achieved by considering behavioral signs of comparisons or platform-specific characteristics. Investigating personal variation, e.g., personality traits or social support, could also explain why others are more vulnerable to comparison-motivated self-processing compared to others.

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