Social Media Use and Self-Image in University Students: The Influence of Social Media on Body Appreciation, Self-Esteem, Self-Concept Clarity and FOMO

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of social media use on self-image among university students, with a particular focus on self-esteem, body appreciation, and self-concept clarity. Drawing on a sample of 300 undergraduate students (142 male, 170 female) from Pakistani universities, the research examines the mediating roles of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and validation-seeking behaviors such as likes, comments, and follower counts. The methodology employed a cross-sectional design using standardized psychometric instruments: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2), Self-Concept Clarity Scale, and the FOMO Scale. Descriptive and inferential

statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Pearson correlation results indicated a significant negative association between daily social media usage and self-image components. Females reported significantly lower self-esteem and body appreciation scores compared to males, alongside higher FOMO levels. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha confirmed strong internal consistency across all scales ($\alpha > .85$). These findings underscore the psychosocial cost of digital engagement among youth, particularly in collectivist cultures where gender roles and social conformity amplify digital pressures.Findings of the analysis showed that time spent with social media was significantly and negatively correlated with every aspect of self-image (self-esteem, body appreciation and self-concept clarity). The fear of missing out (FOMO) was mostly reliant on concern over digital validation (likes, followers). The regularity of participation that was assessed with SMEQ was also observed to be connected with the low self-concept clarity and augmented FOMO.

1. Introduction

The increasing penetration of social media in the lives of young adults has essentially changed the way they build, conceive, and define themselves. Students attending universities are especially active participants of Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, and Twitter as platforms providing not only the means of communication but also an effective set of social comparison and projecting oneself. As much as such platforms enable a person to filter and share their own life, it also brings certain forces of pressure which leads to distorted self-image, depreciation of personal value, and making an individual dependent on others to validate themselves.

The stage of emerging adults whereby they experiment with regards to identity, relationship and independence is especially vulnerable of the influx of digital platforms. At this stage, one is involved in developing stable self-concepts and developing autonomy. Nevertheless, the continuous presence of perfect bodies and measures of popularity (e.g., likes, comments, followers) can interfere with this process by developing insecurity, appearance pressure, and contingent self-esteem.

The other psychological variables that have also come out to mediate the relationship between usage of social media and well-being are self-concept clarity, Fear of Missing out (FOMO) as well as body image dissatisfaction. Although the constructs are researched individually, a limited number of research studies have been carried out on how the constructs interact in collectivist communities like Pakistan, where gender norm and family honor compound the self-presentation online. The current research fills this gap because it involves the inquiry into the connection between social media use and several dimensions of self-image in university students.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the general attitude that a person holds regarding his or her usefulness. It contains both the affective and cognitive components of the self. Self-esteem does influence resilience, motivation, relationship with other people and how we deal with the challenges in life. Due to these factors scientists have discovered that individuals whose self-esteem is more favorable tend to perform better at school, they are better accepted by their peers and are less anxious and depressed (Liu et al., 2025).

The internet world opens up some additional issues in terms of self-judgment. Posts, likes, shares, and comments online may have a very powerful effect on our self-perception. Recent research presents a gendered tendency: women are more inclined than men to feel badly about themselves following the comparison of their looks with those they observe in social media (Agbewu et al., 2025). This observation is consistent with sociocultural theory that states that notions of beauty and acceptance by peers have a larger control over self-perceptions among female groups.

Body Appreciation

Body appreciation involves treating, viewing and respecting one self with regard to one body as much as it has flaws or as much as it does not measure to the society standards (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It is the healthy type of body image that promotes self-care and emotional strength. In more detail, in addition to a personal holiday because of the appearance of the body, body appreciation is associated with acceptance in terms of bodily diversity and functionality (Swami et al., 2023). According to researchers, body appreciation may mediate the negative social pressures, particularly those ones that are emanated by unrealistic beauty advertisements on the media (Tylka, 2011). Body appreciation, in academic research, is associated with increased self-worth and reduced likelihood of disorder eating and the inability to have a healthy relationship with their bodies (Agbewu et al., 2025). This is why Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) has become an efficient method to assess the construct in different genders and cultures. Social media has provided a new avenue of social comparison and tends to decrease the body satisfaction of social media users, particularly adolescent and young adult females (Swami et al., 2023).

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

FOMO: it is an constant concern that other people are gaining gratifying experiences that an individual can not join. The feeling that people are having fun without you and the feeling that you need to be constantly plugged-in can also be called Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). This concern is commonly caused by the lack of feeling accepted, being smart or able, being free to choose your way (Przybylski et al., 2013). Due to all these needs, FOMO may become dangerous to the extent of compulsive use of social media, sleep disorders, and school apathy (Soraci et al., 2025). According to the latest research, FOMO lies somewhere in the middle of life dissatisfaction and social media addiction, so individuals with poor emotional well-being resort to a high level of connectivity when they are depressed or stressed (Soraci et al., 2025).

Askari and Rashid (2025) noted that in Pakistan, FOMO is one of the primary reasons to post flash and seek acceptance confirmations online, particularly amongst the youth connected with depression and negative behaviors. It is strictly connected with obsessive use of social media, poor sleep schedules, and anxiety. Students with traits of high FOMO are prone to feed-check, are afraid of losing access to digital resources and derive enjoyment on being digitally present at the expense of in-real-life associations. **Self-Concept Clarity**

The self-concept clarity (SCC) refers to how clearly, consistently, and stable people read about themselves. Self-concept clarity is a type of meta-cognitive scheme used to display the quality of both structuring as well as linking of self-knowledge. Individuals with a clear self-concept are more psychologically robust, full of meaning, and truer in relationships. Individuals who record low measures in self-concept clarity tend to be highly emotionally instable and susceptible to external influences and might not have a strong sense of identity (Campbell et al., 2003; Van Dijk et al., 2021).

One of the effects of social media that has been documented by researchers is that social media can exacerbate self concept clarity changes particularly on teens and young adults because their identities are not fully established yet. The sight of perfected bodies of others and the necessity of developing a digital identity may divide oneself into pieces. When users begin to associate their self-worth with their online response: likes, shares, followers etc, it eats away at their true self-perception. Since the online identities are volatile and can go the wrong side without notice, the difference between a real and an ideal self rises, decreasing the clarity of self-concept even more. Hence, self-concept clarity is one of the most significant issues when it comes to psychosocial implications of digital life, especially among university students who have to deal with complex identity transitions.

Significance of the study

This study contribute to growing domain of digital psychology, digital psychology is the science of digital technology on mental thinking and perception. This paper addresses the way in which social media consumption affects the self-image and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) among university students in Pakistan, whose population is traditionally underrepresented in the research on digital mental health in the global context. The findings will assist in describing the ways in which social media may result in behavioral difficulties and loss of identity, emotional fragility and social isolation.

The study examines the manner in which the feedback in terms of likes, comments, and followers count combines with self-esteem, appreciation of the body, and presumed purity of the self-concept when dealing with FoMO. It will be innovative in uniting cultural knowledge and scientific discoveries and its data that are offered in context-specific perspective to Pakistani university students will make the understanding of digital validation and social comparison more enriching.

Practical value of the study is that it is used by psychologists, educators and digital wellbeing proponents. The findings of this research can inform shaping evidence-based preventative measure that enhance digital self-awareness. Such steps can encompass mental health

campaigns run by the university, psychoeducation on the impact of algorithms, and workshops, which develop the resistance to online-based comparison.

The analysis establishes a general theoretical framework of the future work on digital literacy, emotional management, and stabilization of self-concept on the internet. The research helps endorse comprehensive mental health approaches that align with the digital context of the Generation Z with which the researchers also determine self-image variables as predictors alongside buffers in the face of digital stress factors.

1.5 Objectives and Hypotheses

The primary objective of this study is to explore how social media usage relates to self-image among Pakistani university students, with attention to gender differences and the mediating roles of FOMO and self-concept clarity. The study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant negative correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and self-image (including self-esteem, body appreciation, and self-concept clarity).

H2: Higher concern over social validation (likes, comments, followers) is significantly associated with lower self-image indicators.

Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional survey research design that was quantitative in nature was employed in the study to examine the association between social media use and four components of self-image: self-esteem, body appreciation, self-concept clarity, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). A study sample of N=312 university students (172 males, 140 female) was recruited using online social media platforms. The research applied convenience and snowball sampling in Internet-based platforms and data was collected via Goggle forms. They participants were aged 18-30 years, Each of them had at least one active social media presence.

Demographic Questionnaire

Table 1

Sample characteristic	Full sample	
	n	%
Gender		
Female	170	54.5
Male	142	45.5
Education Level		
Graduation	276	88.5
Post-Graduation	36	11.5

Note: n= number of participants and %= percentage.

Measuring instruments

Demographic Sheet.

Demographic sheet included age, gender, education level, and social media usage habits such as time spent on social media, platforms used, and level of engagement i.e. active vs. passive use.

Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ)

Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ) was used to measure social media engagement, assessing how frequently social media has been utilized as part of the everyday routine (e.g. is ir used before sleep, after waking up, at meals etc). This self-report measurement tool is anchored on an 8-point scale of frequencies; the scale covers the levels of not one day (0) to every day (7). The bigger the scores, the more regularly social media is used. The tool presents tolerable psychometric validity and has been effectively used in the study of digital behaviours.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) evaluated self-esteem as an indicator of a 10-item self-report. The participants give a Likert scale rating of the statements on a scale of 1-4 whereby those who are strongly in agreement with the statement give a score of 1 with a score of 4 being that of strong disagree. Items 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9 have been reverse coded in such a way that the higher the total score, the higher is the global self-esteem level. The scale has been found to be very consistent in terms of reliability with Cronbach alphas reliably being above .85 in populations of varying nature.

Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2)

Body appreciation was also analyzed on the Body Appreciation Scale 2 (Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It is a 10-subjective report scale that determines respect, acceptance and appreciation towards the body by users irrespective of societal norms. The answers will be measured using a scale of 5 points (Never =1, Always =5) Likert. BAS-2 has excellent internal consistency with the Cronbach alpha values usually reported at values higher than 0.90 in cross-national samples.

Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS)

The Self-Concept Clarity was defined through the 12-item Self-Concept Clarity Scale test by Campbell et al (2003). This scale is evaluating to which extent self concept of a person is clear, stable, and internally consistent. The respondents provide answers using the 5-point Likert scale that runs between deeply disagreeing (1) and completely agreeing (5) with the item 11 being reverse-scored. The higher the scores the more the self concept clarity. Internal consistency estimates have ranged between .86 and .91 and the scale has shown good psychometric

properties.

Fear of Missing Out Scale (FOMO)

The variable of Fear of missing out was quantified by the 10-item Fear of Missing Out Scale provided by Przybylski et al. (2013). This tool measures the intensity of feelings of anxiety at the risk of missing out on social experiences by individuals. It measures a 5-point Likert scale of either, 1, minimum (Not at all true of me) to maximum (Extremely true of me) which equates to more FoMO. The scale has shown a good internal consistency (a >.85) and construct validity in the sample of student population in the university.

2.4 Procedure

The Departmental Research Committee allowed the research and gave the research permission. The participants were provided with a Google form online to include and informed consent. They were assure about the confidentiality of their information. Voluntary participation of the participant was ensured. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized in the statistical analysis of the data. Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple linear regression were applied

Data Analysis

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. SMEQ	312	3.4	2.0	.221**	--			
2. RSES	312	2.5	0.9	-.46**	.24**	--		
3. BAS-2)	312	3.1	1.2	-.46**	-.18**	.43**	--	
4. Self-Concept Clarity	312	3.0	1.2	-.48**	-.22**	.42**	.42**	--
5. FOMO	312	2.9	1.2	.33**	.51**	.35**	.43**	-.50**

Note. *p < 0.05, *p < 0.01*

The Pearson correlation analysis (N = 312) demonstrated that there are important associations among the main study variables. Social media hours (SM Hour) correlated positively with social media engagement (SMEQ; r = .21, p < .01), as well as, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO; r = .33, p < .001). SMEQ was positively correlated with FOMO (r = .51, p < .001), andnegatively related with self-esteem (RSES; r = -.46, p < .001) as well as self-concept clarity (r = -.22, p < .01).

Self-esteem had a negative correlation with the body appreciation (BAS-2; r = -.18, p < .01) and FOMO (r = -.35, p < .001). Remarkably, an estimated positive correlation existed

between BAS-2 and self-concept clarity (r = .42, p < .001) and FOMO (r = .43, p < .001). Lastly, self-concept clarity was highly and negatively related with FOMO (r = 0.50 p < 0.001).

These findings of the current research indicate that the more one utilizes and is involved with social media, the greater the level of FOMO is and the lower the self-esteem and self-concept clarity, the more likely the person will be experiencing a high level of FOMO.

Multiple Linear Regression

Table 3

Variable	B	SE	β	p
Constant	-.597	.169	-	.000
Social Media hours	0.01	0.03	.022	0.56
SMEQ	0.15	.02	.246	.000
Concern over likes	0.95	0.06	0.64	.000

Note. p<.000

A multiple regression was performed to test that concern over likes, social media engagement (SMEQ) and social media hours significantly predicted Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) among university students (N = 312). There were no significant differences in all three models, $F_{(3, 308)} = 169.00$, p <.001, all of which explained 62.3 % of the variance in FOMO scores ($R^2 = .623$).

Concern over likes revealed to be the strongest or most significant predictor (2526), followed by SMEQ (.192, p < .001) thus demonstrating that the higher a validation-seeking commitment and attendance to the social media, the higher the FOMO increases. On the contrary, the hours on social media were not an effective predictor (B =.02,p =.56), indicating that quantitative factors of using the media and worrying about the reaction, but not time per se, are more important to consider when learning about FOMO.

These results are supportive of Hypothesis 2 as it proves that worry about social media validation indicators prominently raises the level of FOMO in emerging adults.

4. Discussion

Results of the current research indicate that Fear of Missing out (FOMO), self-image-related factors (self-esteem and appreciation of bodies), and self-concept clarity are more strongly linked with social media usage and interest in social validation (likes, comments, followers) in university-aged students. The outcomes are strong evidence in support of the given hypotheses and are in tandem with the developing literature regarding the psychological ramifications of the digital environments.

In line with the past studies, FOMO has found its new identity as a significant psychological consequence of social media behavior. Specifically, worry about likes was the most significant predictor of FOMO, which proves the point that the external validation-seeking behavior is front and center in the online experiences of young adults. The initial definition of FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013) comprehended it as a force that drives overuse of digital connections found in other people, and new research (Soraci et al., 2025) confirms that feedback loop properties through social media make this problem worse, in cases where individuals reduce their self-evaluation to assessments of digital settings. Notably, the study established a positive relationship between social media engagement and FOMO and negative relationships between FOMO and self-esteem as well as self-concept clarity. These findings are in line with those conducted by Liu et al. (2025) that showed that students who have higher levels of social comparison on online settings stand the risk of developing fragmented perspectives of themselves and weak overall emotional stability. It is especially relevant in collectivistic societies, such as Pakistan, where social norms of appearance and peer pressure tend to be accepted to the utmost (Askari & Rashid, 2025).

The correlation between body appreciation and FOMO is positive, which implies a complicated interplay. Although the body appreciation indicates positive self-image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), the observation of ideal bodies so often in the online environment may create ambivalence, i.e., both admiration and fear. Swami et al. (2023) emphasized that body appreciation is a protective factor under the following conditions and circumstances: with the moderated (or combined (combined with media literacy interventions)) exposure to digital spaces.

Major difference in gender was also reported in the study, as the females provided lower responses on self-concept clarity and high responses on the level of FOMO. This conclusion supports the findings of the previous research (Gaurav & Pandey, 2025) according to which the female population is more predisposed to the appearance-related comparison and validation stress on social networks. Such differences can be explained by social pressures to fit the idealized beauty standards, which disproportionately affect women as a result of algorithmic content filtering (Abrevaya et al., 2025).

The study provides further evidence to support the theoretical probability that self-concept clarity is threatened in online contexts in which the self is waxing and waning, vetted and edited. Toma & Hancock (2013) contend that when there is a continuous process of recalibration according to the parameters of online identities, a distortion of fixed self-concepts can develop when outside attestation forms the criterion of authenticity. This can be seen in our research, where the lower the SCC, the stronger the relationship with higher FOMO and social media use, reinstating the theory of identity instability as the by-product of excessive involvement in the digital world.

Conclusion

The study highlights the psychological intricacy of the social media use in students who attend universities, especially in the factors that determine the identity of their **self-image, self-worth and digital worries. The findings indicate that Fear of Missing Out (FOMO is greatly

predetermined by the level of individual engagement and their fear of social validation (likes, comments, the number of followers). Moreover, research shows that the related engaged use of social media is associated with **worse self-esteem and clarity of self-concept, which is handled by a disintegrated and somewhat externally contingent self.

It is also important to mention the role of body appreciation, which demonstrates a two-edged connection with social media. Although it is a resource used as protective self-image, it remains susceptible to the adverse impacts of comparing and ideal curations. Gender proved to be another influential aspect, where women reported even more FOMO and lower self-concept clarity. indicating that even in the virtual world, the gendered, beauty-based and validation social norms continue to have their toll.

These results emphasize an urgent necessity in having evidence-based digital wellness plans to which cultural and developmental issues are sensitive. Particular attention must be paid to stimulating **self-awareness, media literacy, and self-validation, including young adults who are still working through identity formation in an era of hyper connectivity. Teachers, psychologists and policy makers should focus on such efforts to nurture resilience, self-concept clarity and autonomy so that the students can use digital media in a healthy psychological manner.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results of the given study are of significant value to educators, psychologists and digital wellness advocates that would eliminate the psychological hazards posed by the use of social media among university students. Any intercession must focus on media literacy classes that assist students to perceive and build in an evaluative manner and break down unrealistic social comparisons and validation-seeking behavior. FOM and related issues can be included in the programs and the activities organized by university counseling centers to enforce the concept of self-concept clarity and build up strong internal self-worth via mindful, cognitive-behavioral techniques and offering self-affirming activities. All of this being said, awareness initiatives must be spearheaded in such a manner that they emphasize body diversity and find ways to lessen appearance-related pressure in female students. Institutions can create a more resilient generation that is more emotionally intelligent and more self-aware to be able to handle digital worlds without losing their sense of identity or damaging their mental health by providing young adults with tools to validate or self-affirm and ensure emotional control in their lives.

The educational interventions related to self-concept clarity and critical media literacy should also be given attention by providing the students with means of interpreting and questioning the curated reality framed on the internet. In addition, it may be beneficial to help cultivate good body image and resilience against FOMO by discussing the issue in a group or taking a digital detox challenge.

Limitation and Recommendations

 Although the current study presents important knowledge about how social media influence self-image and FOMO at the psychological level in university students, it still has weaknesses.

To start with it is possible that there will be the potential social desirability bias when self report measures are used because the participants of the research may have done it in such way to consider it as more favorable but not really true. To achieve additional objectivity in future studies, multi-methods may be used: behavioral observations or peer-reports have to be involved.

Secondly, the sample pool was restricted to university students, that is why the results are hard to be applied to other age groups or non-academic populations. It is highly recommended that future research should aim at adopting more diverse groups, a wider study of ages, educational experience, and social economic statuses so as to present a more reflective picture of the phenomena we are studying.

Thirdly, even though the study was performed in Pakistani cultural setting, it failed to undertake cross-cultural comparisons. It would be interesting to investigate the degree of impact of cultural expectations, gender roles, and societal demands on social media behavior and psychological effects within the context of various cultures (and how they apply to the study) to make the theoretical perspective of further studies more rich and applicable.

Lastly, the study design used is cross-sectional; this hinders its capacity to form some causal relations. Future studies are also recommended to use longitudinal and experimental design and mixed methods to study the way digital behavior and psychological constructs change over time. Also, other psychological factors, eg, emotional regulation, social anxiety, or digital literacy, may be used to enhance the insight and apply future interventions in detail.

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