

PHOTO EDITING BEHAVIOUR, ONLINE SELF-PRESENTATION
PRESSURE, AND DIGITAL APPEARANCE DISSATISFACTION AMONG
GENERATION Z UNIVERSITY STUDENTSFaiza Aftab^{*1}, Yashfeen Amer², Laiqa Rasheed³, Fatima Laraib⁴¹faiza.aftab@skt.umt.edu.pkDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21868254>**Keywords**

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Abstract

With increased utilization of social media by Generation Z people, photo editing and online self-presentation have become an essential part of digital identity. Although such behaviors may help improve their appearance online, it is possible that it may also cause digital appearance dissatisfaction. This study examined the association of photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction among university students of Generation Z. The research adopted cross-sectional correlational research design with a quantitative approach. Three hundred university students, consisting of 150 males and 150 females from various universities of Sialkot, formed a convenient sample for this study. They filled standardized questionnaires on photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction. Descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, independent samples t-test, hierarchical multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA were performed on the obtained data. It was found that there exists a significant positive correlation among photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction. Further analysis of hierarchical regression showed that photo editing behavior and online self-presentation pressure significantly predicted digital appearance dissatisfaction. From the above results, one can observe that increased involvement in photo editing and the pressure to have a perfect self-image on social media is related to digital appearance dissatisfaction among Generation Z university students. Through the findings, there is a need for proper measures to be put in place in order to ensure healthy social media behavior and body image in such individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has fundamentally reshaped how young people communicate and construct their identities. For Generation Z, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are central spaces for self-expression, exposing users to a continuous stream of appearance-related evaluation, idealized beauty standards, and pressure to present an attractive online image (Hussain, 2012; Ransome, 2024). A defining feature of this environment is the widespread availability of photo-editing applications, beauty filters, and AI-based appearance-enhancement tools, which allow users to smooth skin, reshape bodies, and construct idealized versions of

themselves before sharing an image. Photo editing behavior refers to this deliberate manipulation of photographs, ranging from minor color adjustments to substantial facial and body alterations (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022); while not inherently problematic, frequent editing driven by appearance concerns and fear of negative evaluation is consistently linked to poorer mental-health outcomes (Vangeel et al., 2021). Longitudinal research shows that editing predicts later appearance dissatisfaction, which in turn predicts further editing forming a potentially self-reinforcing cycle, and cultural context matters: in South Asian, collectivistic settings, photographs are

evaluated by extended family and community as well as peers, tying editing to family reputation (Khan et al., 2021; Nawaz et al., 2020).

Alongside this, social media cultivates online self-presentation pressure the perceived obligation to curate and maintain a desirable digital image in order to secure likes, comments, and social approval (Chae, 2017; Steinsbekk et al., 2023). The construct extends Goffman's theory of impression management to digital spaces, where the audience is larger, more persistent, and able to quantify approval. University students are especially susceptible, since emerging adulthood is marked by active identity formation and heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation and this pressure has been shown to predict psychological distress independently of raw social media use. It has intensified markedly among Generation Z relative to earlier cohorts (Twenge & Campbell, 2022) and is closely tied to photo editing, since idealized self-presentation motivates editing that offers only temporary relief before raising the standard a person feels compelled to meet again (McLean et al., 2022). Collectivistic cultures, where reputation is a family and community concern, show distinctly higher levels of this pressure, including among Pakistani university students (Wang et al., 2023).

A more recently identified construct, digital appearance dissatisfaction, captures the negative evaluations and emotional reactions people experience toward their appearance specifically within digital contexts such as selfies and social media photographs (Ryding & Kuss, 2020; Ozimek et al., 2023). It arises from an ongoing process of comparing one's digital appearance to the curated, idealized appearances of others (Fardouly & Rapee, 2023), or from the perceived gap between one's authentic appearance and the digitally idealized appearance achievable through editing technologies (Ozimek et al., 2023). Experimental evidence supports a causal link: participants who shared heavily filtered self-photographs reported significantly greater appearance dissatisfaction than those who shared unfiltered images (Kleemans et al., 2021), and photo editing behavior and online self-presentation pressure have emerged as the two strongest predictors of this dissatisfaction,

operating as an interconnected system rather than independent phenomena (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023).

Three complementary theories inform the present study. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; extended by Vogel et al., 2021) holds that social media's continuous, curated exposure to idealized images intensifies upward comparisons that fuel both editing and dissatisfaction. Self-Discrepancy Theory proposes that editing tools make the ideal self visually tangible, widening the gap between one's edited and unedited appearance. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; extended by Vandenbosch et al., 2022) explains how social media trains users to view themselves as objects to be assessed by an audience, generating self-objectification and appearance-related dissatisfaction. Together, these frameworks position photo editing behavior and self-presentation pressure as interconnected antecedents of digital appearance dissatisfaction, and stronger self-presentation concerns are consistently linked with greater appearance disturbance through comparison and self-objectification (McGovern et al., 2022).

This study is significant because it examines photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction within a single framework, moving beyond prior research that has largely treated these constructs in isolation. The inclusion of both male and female university students also addresses a historical gap in body-image research, which has traditionally centered on women, despite growing evidence that men experience comparable appearance-related pressures. Findings may inform media-literacy programs and counselling strategies aimed at helping students develop healthier relationships with their digital self-image. Building on this literature, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between Photo Editing Behavior and Online Self-Presentation Pressure, the relationship between Photo Editing Behavior and Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction, and the relationship between Online Self-Presentation Pressure and Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction among university students, and to determine whether Photo Editing Behavior and Online Self-Presentation Pressure jointly predict Digital

Appearance Dissatisfaction among Generation Z university students (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Although social media use, appearance comparison, and photo editing have been studied extensively, digital appearance dissatisfaction remains a comparatively new construct whose predictors have rarely been examined within a single integrated model. Photo editing behavior and online self-presentation pressure are typically studied in isolation rather than as interacting processes that may jointly shape how young people feel about their digital appearance, and most existing evidence comes from Western samples, limiting its applicability to non-Western, collectivistic contexts such as Pakistan, where family and community scrutiny of appearance may intensify these processes. Despite the rapid growth of photo-editing technology and the mounting pressure on Generation Z to maintain an idealized online image, it remains unclear how these behavioral and social pressures combine to produce dissatisfaction with one's digital appearance among Pakistani university students. The present study addresses this gap by examining the interrelationships among photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction among Generation Z university students in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design, appropriate for examining associations among photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction at a single point in time, without manipulation of variables.

Participants

The sample consisted of 300 university students (150 male, 150 female) recruited from various universities in Sialkot.

Sampling Technique

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling technique, a non-probability method in which individuals are selected based on their availability, accessibility, and willingness to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). This approach was chosen for its efficiency and feasibility in reaching Generation Z university students within the available resources and timeframe.

Exclusion Criteria

Individuals below 17 years or above 25+ years of age were excluded from the study, along with participants who were not enrolled in a university and individuals who did not use social media. Participants who submitted incomplete questionnaires were also excluded, as were individuals with self-reported severe psychological disorders, and participants residing in cities not included in the study.

Photo Editing Questionnaire (PHED)

Developed by Denisha O'Neill (2021), this 12-item scale measures photo editing behaviour across two subscales: Photo Editing Frequency and Photo Editing Impact. Responses are rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Always), with higher scores indicating greater engagement in photo editing practices.

Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS)

Developed by Chris Fullwood et al. (2016), this scale assesses online self-presentation behaviours, including idealized self-presentation, multiple identity expression, self-consistency across platforms, and preference for online over offline interaction.

Appearance-Related Social Media

Consciousness Scale (ASMC)

Developed by Sophia Choukas-Bradley et al. (2020), this 13-item scale measures appearance-related concerns and self-consciousness in social media contexts using a 7-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater appearance-based social media consciousness, associated with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and social comparison behaviours.

Procedure

Data collection followed institutional and ethical protocols. Formal permission was obtained from the relevant universities, after which participants were approached within university settings and informed of the study's objectives. Prior to administering the research instruments, participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining their rights, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any time.

The questionnaire included a demographic information sheet along with three standardized

instruments: the Photo Editing Questionnaire (PHED), measuring photo editing behaviour; the Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS), measuring online self-presentation pressure; and the Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale (ASMC), measuring digital appearance dissatisfaction. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Data collection was completed over approximately two weeks, with 300 questionnaires distributed and fully completed, then organized and prepared for statistical analysis.

RESULTS**Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Demographic Variables (N = 300)**

Demographic Variables	M	SD	f	%
Age	2.65	0.76		
17-18			14	4.7
19-20			116	38.7
21-22			133	44.3
23-24			36	12.0
25+			1	0.3
Gender	1.50	0.50		
Male			150	50.0
Female			150	50.0
University Type	1.83	0.58		
Public			72	22.0
Private			228	76.0
Academic Level	4.43	2.19		
BS 1			28	9.3
BS 2			44	14.7
BS 3			20	6.7
BS 4			93	31.0
BS 5			13	4.3
BS 6			47	15.7
BS 7			6	2.0
BS 8			49	16.3
Current Living Arrangement	1.20	0.78		
With parents			274	91.3
Hostel			14	4.7

With friends			0	0.0
Alone			3	1.0
Other			8	2.7
Family System	1.41	0.60		
Nuclear			192	64.0
Joint			95	31.7
Extended			12	4.0
Socioeconomic Status	2.17	0.57		
Lower			18	6.0
Middle			221	73.7
Upper			54	18.0
Daily Social Media Use	2.97	1.20		
1-2 hours			39	13.0
3-4 hours			76	25.3
5-6 hours			66	22.0
6+ hours			92	30.7
Most Used Platform	1.86	1.34		
Instagram			194	64.7
Snapchat			23	7.7
TikTok			44	14.7
Faebook			9	3.0
Other			30	10.0
Do You Edit Photos Before Posting?	2.96	1.39		
Always			66	22.0
Often			44	14.7
Sometimes			80	26.7
Rarely			57	19.0
Never			53	17.7
Type of Editing	2.52	1.74		
Filters			149	49.7
Skin smoothing			30	10.0
Reshaping			18	6.0
Full apps			22	7.3
None			81	27.0

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Reliability Coefficient of Scales (N = 300)

Scales	M	SD	Range	Sk	Ku	A
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PE	28.07	6.33	35.00	.273	-.273	.602
POSS	60.73	11.41	58.00	.095	-.326	.738
ASMC	43.47	14.94	73.00	.309	-.255	.868

Note. Standard Error of Skewness = .141, Standard Error of Kurtosis = .281. PE = Photo Editing Scale; POSS = Presentation of Online Self Scale; ASMC = Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale. Sk = Skewness; Ku = Kurtosis; α = Cronbach's Alpha

Table 3

Correlation Analysis Among Photo Editing Behaviour, Online Self-Presentation Pressure, and Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction (N = 300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
Photo Editing (PE)	-	.252	.268	.452
Online Self-Presentation (POSS)	-	-	.425	.373
Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction (ASMC)	-	-	-	-

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Public and Private University Students on Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	Public (n = 72)		Private (n = 228)		t	p	95% CI LL - UL	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Photo Editing (PE)	27.59	5.94	28.15	6.47	-0.63	.530	-2.31 - 1.19	0.09
Online Self-Presentation (POSS)	62.24	11.13	60.07	11.49	1.36	.174	-0.97 - 5.31	0.19
Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction (ASMC)	38.61	15.84	44.79	14.56	-2.98	.003	-10.27 - 2.09	0.41

Note. PE = Photo Editing Scale; POSS = Presentation of Online Self Scale; ASMC = Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit. Cohen's d: small = 0.20, medium = 0.50, large = 0.80.
p < .05.

Table 5: One-Way Analysis of Variance for Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction (ASMC) Across Daily Social Media Use Groups (N = 300)

Daily social media	M	SD	F(4, 295)	p	η^2
1-2 hours	34.08	10.46	6.687	.000	.00008
3-4 hours	44.79	15.06			
5-6 hours	42.88	13.58			
6+ hours	47.73	16.48			
Total	43.47	14.94			

Note. ASMC = Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale. η^2 = eta squared (effect size). $p < .001$.

Table 6: One-Way Analysis of Variance for Digital Appearance Dissatisfaction (ASMC) Across Photo Editing Frequency Groups (N = 300)

Photo editing frequency	M	SD	F (4, 295)	p	η^2
Always	51.91	15.43	10.066	.000	.12
Often	46.52	15.92			
Sometimes	41.49	11.66			
Rarely	38.49	14.86			
Never	38.75	13.34			
Total	43.47	14.94			

Note. ASMC = Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale. η^2 = eta squared (effect size). $p < .001$.

Table 7

Hierarchical Regression for Demographics and Scales as Predictors of Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness (ASMC) (N = 300)

Predictors	B	SE	B	95% CI for B		ΔR^2
				LL	UL	
Step I						.16
Age	1.37	1.32	.07	-1.22	3.96	
Gender	-.45	1.71	-.02	-3.81	2.91	
University Type	3.80	1.50	.15	.84	6.75	
Academic Level (Education)	-.09	.45	-.01	-.97	.80	
Current Living Arrangement	-.11	1.05	-.01	-2.19	1.96	
Family System	-2.28	1.40	-.09	-5.04	.48	
Socioeconomic Status	-.54	1.53	-.02	-3.55	2.47	

Daily Social Media Use	1.56	.68	.13	.21	2.90	
Most Used Platform	.05	.61	.01	-1.15	1.25	
Photo Editing Frequency	-3.24	.62	-.30	-4.46	-2.02	
Type of Editing	-.31	.50	-.04	-1.30	.68	
Step II						.13
Age	.94	1.21	.05	-1.45	3.32	
Gender	-.95	1.57	-.03	-4.05	2.15	
University Type	3.01	1.38	.12	.28	5.73	
Academic Level (Education)	.12	.42	.02	-.70	.94	
Current Living Arrangement	-.21	.97	-.01	-2.12	1.69	
Family System	-2.55	1.29	-.10	-5.09	-.02	
Socioeconomic Status	.60	1.42	.02	-2.18	3.39	
Daily Social Media Use	1.21	.63	.10	-.03	2.45	
Most Used Platform	-.11	.56	-.01	-1.22	1.00	
Photo Editing Frequency	-2.28	.59	-.21	-3.43	-1.12	
Type of Editing	.05	.46	.01	-.86	.97	
Photo Editing Scale (PE)	.91	.12	.38	.66	1.15	
Step III						.06
Age	.76	1.17	.04	-1.54	3.05	
Gender	-.99	1.51	-.03	-3.96	1.99	
University Type	2.91	1.33	.11	.29	5.53	
Academic Level (Education)	.19	.40	.03	-.59	.98	
Current Living Arrangement	-.09	.93	-.01	-1.93	1.74	
Family System	-2.16	1.24	-.09	-4.61	.28	
Socioeconomic Status	.72	1.36	.03	-1.96	3.40	
Daily Social Media Use	1.03	.61	.08	-.16	2.23	
Most Used Platform	.02	.54	.00	-1.05	1.08	
Photo Editing Frequency	-2.11	.56	-.20	-3.22	-1.00	
Type of Editing	.24	.45	.03	-.64	1.12	
Photo Editing Scale (PE)	.78	.12	.33	.54	1.02	
Presentation of Online Self (POSS)	.33	.07	.25	.20	.45	

Note. University type was coded as 1 = public, 2 = private; Family system was coded as 1 = nuclear, 2 = joint, 3 = extended; Gender was coded as 1 = male, 2 = female; Living arrangement was coded as 1 = with parents, 2 = hostel, 3 = with friends, 4 = alone, 5 = other; Socioeconomic status was coded as 1 = lower, 2 = middle, 3 = upper. PE = Photo Editing Scale; POSS = Presentation of Online Self Scale; $p < .05$. $p < .01$. $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined how photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and digital appearance dissatisfaction relate to one another among Generation Z university students in Pakistan. All three variables were significantly correlated with one another, indicating that editing, pressure, and dissatisfaction are closely linked in students' digital lives rather than operating as independent experiences.

Photo editing behavior was positively associated with online self-presentation pressure ($r = .252$), suggesting that students who edit their photographs more frequently also feel a greater pull to curate an idealized online image. This is consistent with Goffman's (1959) Self-Presentation Theory, which frames social media as a continuous, editable stage for impression management. In a collectivistic setting like Pakistan, where social approval and family reputation weigh heavily on young adults, this comparison-driven editing behavior is culturally coherent rather than incidental.

Photo editing and digital appearance dissatisfaction produced the strongest correlation overall ($r = .452$), consistent with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987): editing appears to widen the gap between the actual and idealized self, so that the more students refine their online image, the less satisfied they become with their unedited appearance. In the hierarchical regression, PES remained the strongest predictor across the model ($B = .91$ at entry, $\Delta R^2 = .132$, F change (1, 287) = 53.23, $p < .001$), confirming that this relationship holds even once demographic factors are accounted for.

Online self-presentation pressure was also positively related to digital appearance dissatisfaction ($r = .373$) and remained a significant, independent predictor once photo editing behavior was controlled ($B = .33$, $SE = .07$, $\beta = .248$, $p < .001$). This pattern aligns with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): platforms built around visible feedback (likes, comments, followers) push students toward constant upward comparison, an effect likely sharpened in Pakistan's increasingly image-conscious, collectivistic social media culture.

Together, photo editing behavior, online self-presentation pressure, and demographic

variables meaningfully explained variance in digital appearance dissatisfaction, with photo editing behavior contributing the largest share. Students from private universities and those with heavier daily social media use and more frequent editing habits reported the highest dissatisfaction, reflecting a clear dose-response pattern: the more one edits and the more one is exposed, the greater the discontent with one's natural appearance. Gender differences were largely absent, suggesting appearance-related pressure on social media is now shared across male and female students rather than falling predominantly on one group.

Overall, photo editing behavior stands out as the central, most actionable driver of digital appearance dissatisfaction in this sample, with online self-presentation pressure compounding its effect. Interventions emphasizing media literacy, screen-time awareness, and healthier engagement with editing tools may prove more effective in reducing digital appearance dissatisfaction among Pakistani Generation Z students than addressing any single factor in isolation.

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