

SOCIAL MEDIA USE, BEAUTY IMAGE EXPOSURE, AND INFLUENCER  
ENGAGEMENT AS PREDICTORS OF BEAUTY IDEALS AMONG  
MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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**Abstract**

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed how beauty ideals are constructed, communicated, and internalized in contemporary society. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Snapchat have become dominant sources of beauty-related content, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z. Through influencers, celebrities, filters, sponsored advertisements, and digitally enhanced images, social media continuously promotes idealized standards of physical attractiveness that shape body image, self-esteem, self-presentation, and consumer behavior. Existing studies have largely focused on Western populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding how social media exposure shapes beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z in Punjab, Pakistan. The present study investigates the influence of social media exposure on beauty ideals among these generational cohorts. The study included 600 respondents using a multistage sampling technique on the basis of a cross-sectional design. The findings of the study revealed that social media plays a significant role in shaping beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z. Significant positive relationships were found between social media exposure and beauty ideals. Frequency of social media use ( $\gamma = 0.483$ ), Time spent on social media ( $\gamma = 0.537$ ), and active engagement ( $\gamma = 0.535$ ) were all significantly associated with beauty ideals ( $p < .001$ ), with influencer engagement showing the strongest relationship. The study emphasizes the need for media literacy programs, ethical influencer marketing practices, mental health awareness campaigns, and regulatory policies to promote healthier and more realistic representations of beauty on digital platforms. The findings

*contribute significantly to sociological literature on social media, beauty culture, digital identity, and youth behavior in contemporary society.*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the way people communicate, interact, and perceive themselves in contemporary society. Among the most influential developments of the modern era is the emergence of social media, which has become deeply integrated into everyday life. Social media refers to various internet-based platforms and applications that enable users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, images, videos, and personal experiences through online networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It has also been described through the acronym "SLIM," sharing, learning, interacting, and marketing (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, and Twitter have evolved beyond simple communication tools and now function as powerful agents of cultural influence, social interaction, and identity formation (Siagian et al., 2023; Gelles, 2020). Social media has become an integral part of everyday life, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z, who extensively engage with digital content, influencers, online trends, and virtual communities (Intel, 2017; Naumovska, 2017; Denton, 2019). These platforms have transformed communication and cultural practices while becoming influential spaces for identity formation, self-presentation, and perceptions of beauty (Jong & Drummond, 2013; Siagian et al., 2023). Unlike traditional media, social media enables users to consume, create, edit, and circulate beauty-related content, thereby accelerating the production and reinforcement of contemporary beauty ideals (Kinski, 2017; Barker, 2017). Social media continuously exposes users to idealized and digitally enhanced representations of beauty, including images promoted by influencers, celebrities, brands, and content creators (Perloff,

2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). The rise of influencer culture and "Instagram aesthetics" has intensified appearance-based comparisons among Millennials and Generation Z, potentially contributing to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety, and unrealistic beauty expectations (Verrastro et al., 2020; Fioravanti et al., 2022; Fardouly et al., 2018). At the same time, social media provides opportunities for body positivity, self-expression, diversity, and challenges to traditional beauty norms (Yoo & Kim, 2018; Pila et al., 2019).

These influences are particularly significant in Pakistan, where young people are increasingly exposed to global beauty trends, influencer culture, and online consumerism (Suhaimi & Rahman, 2023; Gelles, 2020). However, most existing research has been conducted in Western societies and has emphasized psychological rather than sociological dimensions. Limited empirical research has comparatively examined how social media exposure, beauty-related content, and influencer engagement shape beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z in Pakistan (Hafeez & Zulfiqar, 2023). Therefore, this study investigates how social media usage patterns, beauty-related content, and influencer engagement influence beauty ideals and body-image perceptions among these generations from a sociological perspective.

## Research Objectives

To analyze social media usage patterns among millennials and Gen Z.

To investigate how the use of social media affects people's ideas about what is considered to be beautiful among Millennials and Gen Z.

## Hypotheses

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Frequency of social media use significantly influences beauty ideals.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Time spent on social media significantly affects perceptions of beauty standards.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Active engagement (posting or interacting) with social media content significantly influences beauty ideals.

## Literature Review

Beauty ideals have historically been shaped by cultural, social, and media influences. Although classical perspectives emphasized proportion, symmetry, and harmony, research demonstrates that perceptions of attractiveness vary across cultures and are influenced by social experiences and cultural exposure (Aly et al., 2012; Milutinovic et al., 2014). Globalization and digital communication have further accelerated the circulation of beauty standards, with social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube contributing to the diffusion of global and often Eurocentric ideals emphasizing slim bodies, lighter skin, and facial symmetry (Yan & Bissell, 2014). Millennials, generally born between 1981 and 1996, experienced the transition from traditional media to digital communication and are strongly influenced by online interactions, influencers, peers, and digital representations of beauty (Barska, 2015). Generation Z, generally born between 1997 and 2010, grew up within an already digital environment and has extensive exposure to image-based platforms, beauty filters, influencer lifestyles, and viral trends (Mintel, 2017; Verrastro et al., 2020). Consequently, social media has become an important environment for shaping appearance perceptions and identity among both generations.

Social media exposure is associated with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, appearance anxiety, and reduced self-esteem, particularly when users engage in upward comparisons with idealized influencers, celebrities, and peers (Fardouly et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2014). Social

Comparison Theory explains how individuals evaluate themselves through comparisons with others, while Objectification Theory highlights the internalization of socially defined appearance standards (Festinger, 1954; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Feminist Media Theory further explains how media reproduce gendered expectations surrounding beauty and physical appearance (Gill, 2007). Influencer culture represents another important mechanism through which beauty ideals are communicated. Influencers are often perceived as authentic, relatable, and credible, increasing their ability to shape followers' attitudes, consumption patterns, and appearance expectations (De Veirman et al., 2017). Beauty tutorials, product reviews, skincare routines, cosmetic recommendations, and aesthetic trends have transformed social media into a powerful beauty-information ecosystem. Algorithms may further reinforce these ideals by repeatedly recommending similar appearance-focused content, increasing users' exposure to idealized representations (Perloff, 2014). However, the literature also identifies positive dimensions of social media. Body-positive and inclusive content can promote diversity, self-acceptance, and body appreciation, potentially reducing harmful appearance comparisons (Cohen et al., 2019). Thus, social media can simultaneously reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and provide spaces for challenging conventional ideals. Despite growing international scholarship, limited research in Pakistan has examined the sociological relationship between social media exposure, beauty-related content, influencer engagement, and beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z. This study addresses this gap by examining how these digital influences shape beauty ideals, body image, and self-presentation within the Pakistani sociocultural context.

**Methodology**

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the association between social media exposure and beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z in Punjab, Pakistan. The sampling frame included Millennials (1981–1996) and Generation Z (1997–2010) who actively used at least one major social media platform (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube) and were enrolled in higher education institutions or accessible through online social media communities.

A multistage sampling approach was used. In the first stage, three universities—Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi; Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan; and The University of Faisalabad—were randomly selected as study clusters. In the second stage, 200 eligible respondents were purposively selected from each university, including Millennials and Generation Z, students and faculty members, and males and females. The final sample comprised 600 respondents from urban and rural areas. The sample size was determined using Cochran's

(1977) formula for large populations. Initially, 600 questionnaires were distributed, of which 66 were excluded due to incomplete or inconsistent responses and replaced with additional questionnaires, yielding 600 complete and valid responses.

Data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising demographic characteristics and measures of social media use, exposure to idealized beauty images, following beauty influencers, and beauty ideals/body image perception. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Content validity was established through expert review, and a pilot study assessed the instrument's clarity and comprehensibility. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeded 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) summarized respondent characteristics, while Chi-square tests were used to examine associations between the independent and dependent variables.

**Results and Discussion****Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents.**

| Characteristics                                 | Frequency | Percentage % |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| <b>Generation / Birth Year</b>                  |           |              |
| Millennial (Gen Y) - born between 1981 and 1996 | 264       | 44.0         |
| Gen Z - born between 1997 and 2010              | 336       | 56.0         |
| <b>Gender</b>                                   |           |              |
| Male                                            | 288       | 48.0         |
| Female                                          | 311       | 51.8         |
| Non-binary                                      | 1         | 0.2          |
| <b>Education Level</b>                          |           |              |
| Up to Intermediate (12 years of education)      | 162       | 27.0         |
| Graduation (16 years of education)              | 269       | 44.8         |
| Postgraduate (18 years of education)            | 133       | 22.2         |
| PhD                                             | 36        | 6.0          |
| <b>Occupation</b>                               |           |              |
| Student                                         | 452       | 75.3         |
| Faculty Member                                  | 148       | 24.7         |
| <b>Monthly Family Income</b>                    |           |              |

|                          |            |              |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Up to 100,000 PKR        | 207        | 34.5         |
| 100,001 to 200,000 PKR   | 174        | 29.0         |
| 200,001 to 300,000 PKR   | 126        | 21.0         |
| Above 300,000 PKR        | 93         | 15.5         |
| <b>Area of Residence</b> |            |              |
| Urban                    | 323        | 53.8         |
| Peri-Urban               | 165        | 27.5         |
| Rural                    | 112        | 18.7         |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>600</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Generation Z constituted the majority of the sample (56.0%), while Millennials accounted for 44.0%, providing relatively balanced representation for generational comparison. Gender distribution was also relatively balanced, with females comprising 51.8%, males 48.0%, and non-binary respondents 0.2%. Regarding education, 44.8% of respondents had 16 years of education or a bachelor's degree or higher, followed by 27.0% with intermediate education, 22.2% with postgraduate qualifications, and 6.0% with doctoral degrees. In terms of occupational status, students represented

75.3% of the sample, while faculty members accounted for 24.7%. Monthly family income varied across respondents: 34.5% reported incomes up to PKR 100,000, 29.0% reported PKR 100,001–200,000, 21.0% reported PKR 200,001–300,000, and 15.5% reported more than PKR 300,000. Regarding residence, 53.8% lived in urban areas, 27.5% in peri-urban areas, and 18.7% in rural areas. Overall, the sample reflects relatively diverse socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, with greater representation of Generation Z, students, and urban residents.

**Table 2: Association between Social Media Factors and Beauty Ideals/Body Image Perception among Millennials and Generation Z**

| Hypothesis | Independent Variable                                         | $\chi^2$ | p-value | Gamma | p-value | Decision  |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|-------|---------|-----------|
| $H_1$      | Frequency of Social Media Use                                | 170.725  | <0.001  | 0.483 | <0.001  | Supported |
| $H_2$      | Time Spent on Social Media                                   | 168.833  | <0.001  | 0.537 | <0.001  | Supported |
| $H_3$      | Active Engagement (Posting or Interacting) With Social Media | 198.991  | <0.001  | 0.535 | <0.001  | Supported |

Table 2 presents the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) and Gamma tests examining the associations between social media-related factors and beauty ideals/body image perception among Millennials and Generation Z. All three hypotheses were statistically significant and supported. Frequency of social media use was significantly associated with beauty ideals/body image perception ( $\chi^2 = 170.725$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.483$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a moderate positive relationship ( $H_1$ ). Exposure to idealized beauty images also showed a significant,

moderately strong positive association ( $\chi^2 = 168.833$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.537$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting  $H_2$ . Similarly, following beauty influencers was significantly associated with beauty ideals/body image perception ( $\chi^2 = 198.991$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.535$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting  $H_3$ . Overall, the findings demonstrate that greater social media use, exposure to idealized beauty content, and engagement with beauty influencers are associated with stronger internalization of beauty ideals and altered body image perceptions. Notably, exposure

to idealized beauty images showed the strongest association ( $\gamma = 0.537$ ), closely followed by following beauty influencers ( $\gamma = 0.535$ ), while

frequency of social media use showed the weakest association ( $\gamma = 0.483$ ).

**Table 3: Association between frequency of social media usage by the respondents and their beauty ideals.**

| Frequency of social media use * Beauty ideals cross-tabulation.        |                     |                                                     |                |             |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Frequency of Social Media                                              |                     | Beauty Ideals Among Millennial and Gen Z % (Number) |                |             |             |
|                                                                        |                     | To a great extent                                   | To some extent | Not at all  | Total       |
| 1                                                                      | Not at all          | 37.0 (37)                                           | 10.4 (37)      | 9.7 (14)    | 14.7 (88)   |
| 2                                                                      | To some extent      | 37.0 (37)                                           | 74.4 (264)     | 27.6 (40)   | 56.8 (341)  |
| 3                                                                      | To a greater extent | 26.0 (26)                                           | 15.2 (54)      | 62.8 (91)   | 28.5 (171)  |
| Total                                                                  |                     | 100.0 (100)                                         | 100.0 (355)    | 100.0 (145) | 100.0 (600) |
| Chi-Square: 170.725 Sig. Level: 0.000, Gamma: 0.483, Sig. Level: 0.000 |                     |                                                     |                |             |             |

The cross-tabulation indicates a clear positive trend between social media use and the influence of beauty ideals. Among respondents with higher social media use, 62.8% reported greater influence of beauty ideals, suggesting that frequent exposure to idealized beauty content may contribute to the internalization of socially constructed beauty standards. Respondents with moderate social media use were more likely to report moderate influence (74.4%), whereas those with little or no use showed comparatively lower levels of influence. The Chi-Square test confirmed a significant association between social media use and beauty ideals/body image perception ( $\chi^2 = 170.725$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The Gamma coefficient ( $\gamma =$

0.483,  $p < .001$ ) indicated a moderate positive relationship, supporting H1. These findings suggest that social media acts as a significant socializing agent through repeated exposure to idealized representations of beauty, potentially shaping individuals' perceptions of appearance and body image. The results are consistent with previous research linking social media exposure with body-image perceptions and beauty-related attitudes (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Overall, greater social media use is associated with stronger internalization of normative beauty standards among Millennials and Generation Z.

**Table 4: Association between times spent on social media by the respondents and their beauty ideals**

| Time Spent on Social Media * Beauty ideals cross tabulation.           |                     |                                                     |                |             |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Time Spent on Social Media                                             |                     | Beauty Ideals Among Millennial and Gen Z % (Number) |                |             |             |
|                                                                        |                     | To a great extent                                   | To some extent | Not at all  | Total       |
| 1                                                                      | Not at all          | 42.0 (42)                                           | 8.5 (30)       | 6.9 (10)    | 13.7 (82)   |
| 2                                                                      | To some extent      | 35.0 (35)                                           | 70.4 (250)     | 30.3 (44)   | 54.8 (329)  |
| 3                                                                      | To a greater extent | 23.0 (23)                                           | 21.1 (75)      | 62.8 (91)   | 31.5 (189)  |
| Total                                                                  |                     | 100.0 (100)                                         | 100.0 (355)    | 100.0 (145) | 100.0 (600) |
| Chi-Square: 168.833 Sig. Level: 0.000, Gamma: 0.537, Sig. Level: 0.000 |                     |                                                     |                |             |             |

A bivariate analysis was conducted to examine the association between time spent on social media and beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z. Cross-tabulation results revealed a clear positive pattern: 62.8% of respondents with high social media use reported greater influence of beauty ideals, while 70.4% of those with moderate use reported influence to some extent. In contrast, respondents with little or no social media use showed comparatively lower levels of influence. The Chi-Square test confirmed a statistically significant association between time spent on social media and beauty ideals/body image perception ( $\chi^2 = 168.833$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The Gamma coefficient ( $\gamma = 0.537$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated a moderately strong positive relationship, suggesting

that greater time spent on social media is associated with stronger influence of dominant beauty ideals. Thus, H2 was supported. These findings indicate that prolonged exposure to curated, filtered, and idealized beauty content may contribute to the internalization of socially constructed beauty standards. The results are consistent with previous research showing that repeated exposure to appearance-focused social media content can cumulatively shape perceptions of beauty and self-image (Perloff, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017). Overall, the findings suggest that both frequency and duration of social media engagement are important in shaping contemporary beauty perceptions among Millennials and Generation Z.

**Table 5: Association between active engagement on social media by the respondents and their beauty ideals**

| Active engagement on social media * Beauty ideals cross tabulation     |                     |                                                     |                |             |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Active engagement on social media                                      |                     | Beauty Ideals Among Millennial and Gen Z % (Number) |                |             |             |
|                                                                        |                     | To a great extent                                   | To some extent | Not at all  | Total       |
| 1                                                                      | Not at all          | 38.0 (38)                                           | 9.9 (35)       | 9.7 (14)    | 14.5 (87)   |
| 2                                                                      | To some extent      | 38.0 (38)                                           | 73.8 (262)     | 21.4 (31)   | 55.2 (331)  |
| 3                                                                      | To a greater extent | 24.0 (24)                                           | 16.3 (58)      | 69.0 (100)  | 30.3 (182)  |
| Total                                                                  |                     | 100.0 (100)                                         | 100.0 (355)    | 100.0 (145) | 100.0 (600) |
| Chi-Square: 198.991 Sig. Level: 0.000, Gamma: 0.535, Sig. Level: 0.000 |                     |                                                     |                |             |             |

Cross-tabulation revealed a positive pattern between active social media engagement and the influence of beauty ideals. Among respondents with high active engagement, 69.0% reported greater influence of beauty ideals, while 73.8% of those with moderate engagement reported influence to some extent. Respondents with low or no engagement showed comparatively lower levels of influence. The Chi-Square test confirmed a statistically significant association between active social media engagement and beauty ideals/body image perception ( $\chi^2 = 198.991$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The Gamma coefficient ( $\gamma = 0.535$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated

a moderately strong positive relationship, suggesting that greater active engagement is associated with stronger internalization of beauty ideals. Thus, H3 was supported. These findings suggest that activities such as posting, commenting, and interacting with beauty-related content may reinforce appearance-based social comparison and the internalization of culturally constructed beauty standards. The results are consistent with previous research linking active social media use to body-image concerns and the internalization of appearance ideals (Cohen et al., 2017; Meier & Gray, 2014).

**Conclusion**

The findings show that all three social media-related factors were significantly associated with beauty ideals among Millennials and Generation Z in Punjab, Pakistan, supporting Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Frequency of social media use, exposure to idealized beauty images, and following beauty influencers were positively associated with beauty ideals, with influencer following showing the strongest relationship. This may reflect the credibility, relatability, and parasocial relationships developed between influencers and followers, which can facilitate the internalization of idealized beauty standards. These findings are consistent with previous research linking social media and influencers to body image, appearance comparison, and beauty perceptions (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In Pakistan's expanding digital environment, influencer marketing and algorithm-driven content may further reinforce globalized and commercialized beauty standards (Cohen et al., 2017; Verrastro et al., 2020; Hafeez & Zulfiqar, 2023). The findings highlight the need for media literacy, ethical influencer practices, and culturally diverse representations of beauty to promote healthier body-image perceptions, while contributing evidence from a relatively under-researched non-Western context.

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