



Social Appearance Anxiety and Self-Esteem: A Study of Pakistani TikTok Users

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Abstract: TikTok's quick growth has changed how people use social media, making it easier for them to express themselves creatively and compare themselves to others. Despite the platform's emphasis on visibility and engagement, worries about one's appearance and esteem have only grown. The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between Social Appearance Anxiety (SAA) and Self-esteem among TikTok users. Further, it also investigates social appearance anxiety as a predictor of self-esteem and the role of demographic variables. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of 200 TikTok users. The Social Appearance Anxiety Scale and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale were used to collect data. Correlational analyses revealed that there is a significant negative relationship between SAA and self-esteem among TikTok users. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify social appearance as a predictor of self-esteem and time duration. Results indicate that social appearance anxiety was a significant predictor of self-esteem and time spent on TikTok. Results indicate differences in SAA in relation to the gender of the participants. It can be concluded that TikTok use may trigger psychological issues, hence negatively affect the self-esteem of youth.

Key Words: Social Appearance Anxiety, Self-esteem, TikTok Users, Purposive Sampling

Introduction

Social media devices are now closely connected with day-to-day activities in the digital age, and these devices dramatically impact the perceptions of individuals and others. TikTok is one of the most impactful and popular short-video-based apps in the world. First released in 2014 as Musically and renamed TikTok in 2017, the app was the most downloaded on the Apple iOS by 2018 with almost half a billion users (most of whom were between the ages of 13-18) (Lartey, 2024). In TikTok, users can make short, visually stimulating videos that can be supplemented with music, filters, and special effects and in which they can express themselves creatively and communicate with many people simultaneously (Mulida & Silma, 2025). TikTok has over 1.5 billion active users across the globe today (Ariffin et al., 2024), and its algorithmic personalisation platform continues to keep the customer engaged through the so-called customer customisation, where the content is suggested by TikTok based on personal preferences for viewing.

TikTok, despite its huge popularity, has provoked controversy over its psychological and social impact, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Lau et al., 2024; Lin, 2023). The app frequently exposes people to idealised beauty norms, and over 40 per cent of its users are aged 16-24 years of age, the app can contribute to SAA, the fear of negative evaluation based on physical appearance (Zhang & Zhou, 2024).

The recent movements like the "Make Peace with Your Make-up Free" challenge point to the increased discussion of facial anxiety, authenticity, and online beauty standards among the general population. To elaborate, the example of the topic Make Peace with Your Make-Up Free in China, where users are invited to share their no make-up videos to overcome appearance anxiety. A quantitative study discovered that participants who reported that their emotional outcomes were positive, many of them did not experience a significant reduction in social appearance anxiety, and the anxiety in some of them even increased (Tian et al., 2024). According to an experimental study by Seekis and Kennedy (2023), beauty-based TikTok video exposure enhanced face-specific appearance shame and anxiety and decreased the negative effects of self-compassion-oriented videos.

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These dynamics have been explored in studies conducted in the past. Engaging in social comparison and addiction on TikTok were significant predictors of low self-esteem among adolescents aged 18 to 21 (Marshella et al., 2025). Similarly, Nasidi et al. (2024) found that the mediating role of social comparison exists between TikTok use and self-esteem, and the negative effects are stronger in females. Rahmalia et al. (2025) have determined that TikTok intensive use mediates the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and self-esteem among adolescents. Additionally, Katsiroumpa et al. (2025) established that problematic TikTok use is associated with stress, poor body image, and low self-esteem in samples around the world.

As is the case with the Pakistani context, where TikTok has been one of the most popular apps among the youth in the age of 15 to 30 years, the same tendencies have also been noticed. According to Safdar et al. (2024), increased TikTok (additionally, among young Pakistani females) usage was associated with increased social anxiety, poorer sleep and harsher self-assessment. According to Andlib and Fatima (2025), overuse of the visually oriented apps such as TikTok and Instagram is linked with depressive symptoms and poor self-esteem in Pakistani university students. Similarly, Jain et al. (2025) described an association between TikTok usage, body dissatisfaction and psychological discontent among young adults in urban areas.

In addition to Pakistan, Chinese and Indonesian research also demonstrates the two sides of TikTok. Limniou et al. (2025) have discovered that active TikTok use was positively linked with self-expression and negatively associated with appearance satisfaction. Conversely, Wang et al. (2025) found that exposure to idealised images in the app algorithm would arouse appearance anxiety and dependence symptoms. The meta-analytic data also suggest that excessive use of visual social media has an inverse effect on global self-esteem (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and sociometer theory (Leary, 2005) can be applied to establish the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem. High SAA people are also most likely to make upward comparisons with idealised beauty content, which results in low self-esteem (Merino et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2024). TikTok can, however, also provide defensive avenues, self-expression, and creativity as well as social validation that will boost confidence, albeit in the short run (Hendrikse & Limniou, 2024). Such a duality is complicated, emphasizing that such specific research must be context-specific.

Though the international evidence points to the psychological impact of using TikTok, not yet much has been conducted about the connection between SAA and self-esteem among Pakistani TikTok users, especially those between the ages of 15 and 30 years. The appearance, gender, and modesty cultural norms might affect the way the self-evaluation processes occur online. The current study will investigate the relationship between social appearance concern and self-esteem among TikTok users aged 15-30 years in Pakistan, which will further enhance the investigation into the notion of digital well-being in the context of the South Asian youth culture.

The current study also investigates the predictive role of social appearance anxiety for self-esteem and time spent on TikTok. Furthermore, it also examines the gender difference in social appearance anxiety and self-esteem. Due to the excessive use of social media, it is essential to study the potential effects of social media use on young people. Undoubtedly, it is the era of the digital world, and youth have easy access to all social media sources, which starts even at a very early age. During the stages of personality development, such influences have a profound impact on the youth's psychological functioning. It helps to understand the relational effects of social media use on different personality domains and psychological functioning. Through the findings of the present study, the psychological implications of social media use can be better understood in relation to the self-esteem of young people.

Objectives

The study was designed to:

1. Measure the relationship between SAA and self-esteem in young TikTok users.
2. Investigate the predictive role of SAA for self-esteem and time spent on TikTok in youth.
3. Measure the differences in SAA and self-esteem in relation to the gender of TikTok users.

Methodology

The study examines the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem among students using TikTok. The research design was a correlational research design that sought to find out the relationship between the two psychological constructs. To select a sample of 200 TikTok users aged 15-30 years (100 males and 100 females), the purposive sampling method was used. Employed/ unemployed people of the urban and rural districts of Gujrat who represent different socioeconomic strata participated in this study. Inclusion criteria required that participants actively use the TikTok application for watching, creating, sharing, or downloading videos. Individuals with visual impairments or those unable to complete the survey independently were excluded from participation.

Instruments

Demographic form

It consists of age, gender, socioeconomic status, area of residence (urban/rural), education level, and average daily time spent on TikTok.

Table I

Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables (N=200)

Variable	Category	f	%
Age	15-20	84	42.0
	21-25	61	30.5
	26-30	55	27.5
Gender	Male	100	100.0
	Female	100	100.0
Residence	Urban	104	52.0
	Rural	96	48.0
Socioeconomic status	Elite class	52	26.0
	Middle class	93	46.5
	Lower class	55	27.5
Occupational status	Student	119	59.5
	Employed	43	21.5
	Unemployed	38	19.0
Area of Interest	Shoot videos	78	39.0
	Watch videos	69	34.5
	Only sharing and downloading	53	26.5
Time spent on TikTok	1 hour or less per day	65	32.5
	1-2 hours per day	61	30.5
	3 hours per day	74	37.0

Table I presents the demographics of the sample (N = 200). Participants were evenly split by gender, mostly from urban areas, and primarily aged 15–20 years, with middle-class backgrounds predominating. Most were students, engaged in shooting or watching videos on TikTok, and daily usage ranged from 1 hour to 3 hours or more.

Social Appearance Anxiety Scale

The Social Appearance Anxiety Scale, developed by Hart et al. (2008), has 16 items assessed on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely). Item 1 is scored in reverse. Scores vary from 16 to 80, with higher levels indicating higher SAA. The SAAS shows high internal consistency, given by a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, developed by Rosenberg in 1965, comprises 10 items assessed using a 4-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 4 (Strongly disagree). Items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 are scored in reverse. Elevated test results signify increased self-esteem. The scale indicates a strong Cronbach's alpha of .80.

Procedure

The purposive sampling technique was used for data collection. Follow the ethical principle, they were given consent to participate in data collection and informed about the purpose of the study, its objectives and privacy protection. In relation to filling out the questionnaires, the participants were instructed. They would remain anonymous and volunteer. It took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete the surveys.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher ensured ethical principles. The original scale authors gave permission, and all the participants provided informed consent before cooperating. Anonymity and confidentiality were highly observed, and the information was utilised only to carry out research. These participants were assured of their right to pull out any time they liked, and they were further informed that there were no physical or psychological risks of the study.

Data Analyses

Data analysis was done with the help of SPSS Statistics 29.0. These were descriptive statistics, Spearman rank-order correlation, multiple regression analysis and Mann-Whitney U-test.

Results

The following study aimed to investigate the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem among TikTok users. The second aim was to examine the predictors of social appearance anxiety on self-esteem and the time spent on TikTok. Lastly, the research examined the gender difference in social appearance anxiety and self-esteem among TikTok users.

Table 2

Internal Consistency and Descriptive Statistics of SAAS and RSES

Scale	No. of items	α	M	SD
SAAS	16	.91	45.32	10.57
RSES	10	.80	22.14	4.68

Note: SAAS=Social Appearance Anxiety Scale; SES=Rosenberg Self-esteem scale

Table 2 demonstrated excellent reliability in SAAS ($\alpha = .91$) and RSES ($\alpha = .80$). The reported means and standard deviations indicate the central tendency and variability of responses for each scale, supporting their suitability for use in the current sample.

Table 3

Correlation between Social Appearance Anxiety and Self-Esteem (N=200)

Variable	1	2
Social Appearance Anxiety	-	-.611**
Self-esteem		-

Note: p < .01

Table 3 presents the correlation between SAA and self-esteem. The results indicate a significant negative relationship between the two variables, $r(200) = -.611$, $p < .01$, suggesting that higher levels of SAA are related to lower levels of self-esteem.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Esteem and Time Spent on TikTok (N = 200)

Dependent variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	F	R	R ²
Self-Esteem	Social Appearance Anxiety	-.065	.006	-.616**	121.2	.616	.380
Time Spent on TikTok	Social Appearance Anxiety	.028	.002	.739**	237.8	.739	.546

Note. β = standardized regression weight; R = multiple correlation; R² = variance explained; F = model variance; p < .01.



Table 4 presents the results of multiple regression analyses predicting self-esteem and time spent on TikTok. SAA significantly predicted self-esteem ($\beta = -.616$, $p < .01$), accounting for 38% of the variance, indicating that higher appearance anxiety is related to lower self-esteem. It also significantly predicted time spent on TikTok ($\beta = .739$, $p < .01$), explaining 54% of the variance, suggesting that users with greater appearance concerns engage more frequently with the social media platform.

Table 5

Gender Differences in SAA and Self-Esteem (N = 200)

Variable	Mean Rank Male (N = 74)	Mean Rank Female (N = 76)	Z	U	p
Social Appearance Anxiety	62.26	138.74	-9.361	1176.00	.000
Self-Esteem	132.42	68.58	-7.914	1808.00	.000

Table 5 shows that females reported higher social appearance anxiety (Mean Rank = 138.74) as compared to males (62.26), $Z = -9.361$, $U = 1176.00$, $p < .001$, while males reported higher self-esteem (132.42) than females (68.58), $Z = -7.914$, $U = 1808.00$, $p < .001$, indicating significant gender differences on both variables.

Discussion

The psychological impact of social media use in youth is becoming a crucial fact to understand in the digital era. This research explored the association between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem among TikTok users in Pakistan, examining how appearance anxiety predicts self-esteem, time spent on the social platforms, and demographic variations. Similar to prior research, the results found that there is a strong negative correlation between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem, meaning that the greater the appearance-related anxiety, the less the self-esteem. This is consistent with the previous research that showed the prevalence of appearance-related issues and lowered self-esteem due to frequent social media use and exposure to idealised images (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Nnamchi et al., 2024). Although Esponja et al. (2025) reported a positive correlation in a different context, both studies underscore the robust link between appearance-related anxiety and self-evaluation. Comparable global trends have been observed, with social comparison on platforms such as Instagram negatively impacting body image and self-esteem (Taylor & Armes, 2024), suggesting that TikTok operates through similar mechanisms.

Further analyses showed that SAA significantly predicts both self-esteem and time spent on TikTok. Higher levels of appearance anxiety were associated with lower self-esteem, accounting for a substantial portion of its variance, and with increased engagement on the platform. Generally, many times individuals become sensitive to their appearance, but this is in the normal range unless it starts affecting their self-image through their perception of their appearance. Use of social media can be a source of reassurance for them, and they turn towards excessive use of social media when they are oversensitive towards their appearance (Jiménez-García et al., 2025; Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023; Steinsbekk et al., 2021; Aggarwal, 2020). Sometimes social media usage becomes a diversion from their anxieties related to their perceived personal deficiencies.

Findings indicate higher SAA in females as compared to males. On the other hand, they reported low self-esteem as compared to male participants. Cultural practices somehow justify the results. Females generally face more familial and social pressure in Pakistani culture than males. Such practices are more common in rural settings, and males are typically treated as dominant and responsible figures at home, which enhances their self-esteem as compared to females. Further, these findings are in line with some recent empirical evidence suggesting that females are more inclined towards specific standards of beauty and compare them with their ideals and may compare themselves with online beauty representations (Abdelaziz et al., 2023; Termizi & Herwan, 2021). Limniou (2025) reported that females are more affected by social platforms like TikTok and are inspired by beauty-related content. They intend to engage in beauty-related activities presented on TikTok, and many times, this may have an adverse effect on their self-perception and self-evaluation. Hence, their self-esteem becomes influenced by social media use.

Findings also highlighted that the younger group (15–20 years) of TikTok users tends to experience more SAA than the older group. Inversely, they reported low self-esteem as compared to the older group of youth. These findings are supported by Conte et al. (2025) and Nasidi et al. (2024). Similarly, participants from a lower social class experienced more SAA and low self-esteem. Financial problems may hinder their easy access to social platforms and approach towards the use of beauty-related items. When they are unable to adapt to the lifestyles presented on social media platforms, they may start perceiving themselves as low-worth individuals (Alamer et al., 2025).

Limitations

Online data collection may sometimes trigger less reliable information or incomplete information as compared to direct data collection procedures. Another prominent drawback of the study was the small number of datasets, which may be dealt with in future studies in order to increase the generalizability of findings. Responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, and incomplete surveys were excluded during data cleaning. Additionally, the measures used were not culturally adapted, relying on foreign norms, and all data were self-reported, preventing independent verification.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings emphasise that SAA not only undermines self-esteem but also predicts behavioural engagement on TikTok. The platform's visual, appearance-driven culture fosters social comparison, reinforcing psychological vulnerability. Longitudinal or experimental studies on the mediating factors related to self-objectification, social comparison orientation, and body dissatisfaction should be conducted in the future to identify causal relationships. Digital literacy, self-compassion, and body neutrality interventions can be useful in mitigating the opposite impact of appearance anxiety on self-confidence and online behaviour.

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