



The Digital Mirror: Self-Concept Clarity and Body Image in the Highly Visual Social Media Era

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Article Citation:

Arsheena Manzoor¹, Neha Jain², Sakina Altaf³, Touseef Rizvi⁴, "The Digital Mirror: Self-Concept Clarity and Body Image in the Highly Visual Social Media Era", International Journal of Recent Trends in Multidisciplinary Research, July-August 2026, Vol 6(04), 338-346.



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Abstract: Highly visual social media (HVSM) platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat immerse young people in a continuous stream of idealized, curated appearance content. While quantitative research consistently links HVSM use to body dissatisfaction, comparatively little qualitative work has examined how individual differences in self-concept clarity (SCC) shape these experiences, and almost none has done so outside Western settings. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022), this study explored how 15 college students (aged 18–25) in India experienced HVSM in relation to body image and self-concept clarity. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed inductively, yielding four themes: (1) The Digital Mirror: Negotiating Appearance Through Visual Comparison; (2) Curating the Self: Between Authenticity and Performance; (3) Knowing Who I Am: Self-Concept Clarity as a Psychological Filter; and (4) Reclaiming the Self: Resisting and Redefining Digital Beauty Ideals. Findings suggest that HVSM did not exert a uniform influence on body image; rather, its effects were mediated by the clarity and stability of participants' self-concept. Participants with clearer self-concepts engaged critically with idealized content and maintained psychological distance from it, whereas those experiencing identity uncertainty were more vulnerable to comparison and internalization. These findings extend Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the Identity Disruption Model (Vartanian et al., 2018) to a non-Western cultural context and suggest that interventions strengthening self-concept clarity, alongside critical media literacy, may buffer the adverse body image effects of appearance-focused social media among Indian youth.

Key Words: self-concept clarity, body image, social media, social comparison, qualitative research, reflexive thematic analysis, emerging adulthood, India.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed how young people communicate, construct identities, and evaluate themselves. Highly visual social media (HVSM) platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Pinterest) are particularly influential because they prioritize image- and video-based content over text (Perloff, 2014), encouraging users to create idealized self-representations while exposing them to a continuous stream of curated images of others. Appearance has consequently become a central currency of online interaction, heightening the salience of physical attractiveness in everyday social comparison (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Emerging adulthood constitutes a developmental period in which identity formation and body image remain highly malleable (Arnett, 2000). Social media is deeply embedded in this process, offering constant opportunities for feedback, validation, and comparison, while also exposing users to appearance ideals that are frequently enhanced through filters and algorithmic curation (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020). A substantial body of research links social media use to poorer body image

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and heightened appearance anxiety (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Importantly, evidence increasingly suggests that it is not time spent online but specific activities (viewing appearance-focused content, following influencers, posting and editing selfies, and engaging in appearance comparisons) that predict body image disturbance (Fardouly et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) offers a useful lens for these processes: social media intensifies individuals' inherent tendency to evaluate themselves against others by supplying an unprecedented volume of idealized, selectively presented, yet ostensibly relatable images (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Objectification theory further suggests that repeated exposure to appearance-focused environments leads individuals to internalize an observer's perspective of their own bodies, resulting in habitual self-surveillance. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

However, individuals do not respond uniformly to appearance-focused content. One construct that may account for this variability, yet has received comparatively limited qualitative attention, is self-concept clarity (SCC), the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly defined, internally consistent, and stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996). Individuals high in SCC hold a coherent understanding of who they are and depend less on external validation for self-worth; those low in SCC experience greater identity uncertainty and rely more heavily on social feedback and appearance-related approval (Campbell et al., 1996). Quantitative work grounded in the Identity Disruption Model (Vartanian, Hayward, Smyth, Paxton, & Touyz, 2018) shows that low SCC is associated with a stronger tendency toward appearance-based social comparison and greater internalization of appearance ideals, which in turn predicts body dissatisfaction (Vartanian & Dey, 2013; Butzer & Kuiper, 2006). Whether and how this protective or vulnerability-conferring role of SCC plays out in the lived, everyday experience of HVSM use, particularly outside Western cultural contexts, remains poorly understood.

Three gaps motivate the present study. First, most existing research relies on cross-sectional surveys that quantify relationships between variables but offer limited insight into how individuals make sense of their experiences (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016). Second, qualitative work at the intersection of HVSM, body image, and SCC specifically remains scarce, despite the capacity of qualitative approaches to illuminate meanings and contextual factors that standardized measures overlook (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Third, the literature is overwhelmingly Western, whereas cultural norms surrounding body image, gender, and identity vary considerably across contexts; very little is known about how these processes unfold among young adults in South Asia, where rapid digitalization intersects with culturally specific constructions of gender and appearance (Ganesan et al., 2018). Addressing these gaps, the present study used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to explore how emerging adults in India experience HVSM in relation to body image and self-concept clarity, attending, in particular, to how self-concept clarity shapes vulnerability, resistance, coping, and meaning-making within this digital environment.

Research Questions

1. How do emerging adults in India experience and make sense of highly visual social media in relation to their body image and appearance-based self-evaluation?
2. How does self-concept clarity shape the ways emerging adults in India interpret, internalize, resist, or negotiate appearance-focused content and social comparison on highly visual social media platforms?

Research Objectives

1. To explore Indian emerging adults' lived experiences of engaging with highly visual social media and its perceived influence on body image, appearance ideals, and social comparison processes.
2. To examine the role of self-concept clarity in shaping emerging adults' responses to visual social media content, including vulnerability, resistance and coping within the Indian context.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individuals actively create meaning through their interactions with the social world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This orientation was suited to the aim of understanding participants' subjective experiences of HVSM and its relationship to body image and self-perception, rather than measuring predetermined variables.

Participant	Gender	Age	State
P1	Female	22	Uttar Pradesh
P2	Female	21	Jammu and Kashmir
P3	Female	22	Uttar Pradesh
P4	Female	23	Kerala
P5	Female	19	Madhya Pradesh
P6	Male	20	West Bengal
P7	Male	25	Jammu and Kashmir
P8	Male	18	Delhi
P9	Female	24	Delhi
P10	Male	21	Kerala

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P11	Female	23	Maharashtra
P12	Male	23	Punjab
P13	Female	18	Ladakh
P14	Female	25	Gujarat
P15	Male	19	Puducherry

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to obtain rich, relevant accounts of the phenomenon under study. The sample comprised emerging adults from India, enrolled in various higher educational institutions, all active users of at least one HVSM platform (Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat) who reported regular engagement with image- or video-based content. Inclusion criteria required participants to be (a) aged 18–25, (b) currently enrolled in a college or university, and (c) active users of HVSM. Recruitment sought participants from diverse academic disciplines to capture a range of experiences.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 15 participants, including gender, age, and state of residence. The sample comprised 9 women and 6 men, aged 18–25 years ($M = 21.53$), drawn from 7 states and 4 union territories across India, reflecting the study's aim of capturing a range of experiences across academic and regional contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews (37–64 minutes), which allowed participants to describe their experiences while permitting flexibility to pursue emerging ideas (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview schedule, informed by literature on body image, social comparison, self-concept clarity, and social media use, explored four domains: (a) patterns and motivations of social media use; (b) experiences of body image and appearance-related self-evaluation; (c) engagement in social comparison and responses to idealized content; and (d) perceptions of self-concept clarity, identity stability, internalization, resistance, or negotiation of appearance-focused content. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; transcripts that alternated between English and Hindi/Urdu were translated into English while preserving contextual meaning.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022), selected for its theoretical flexibility and its fit with an interpretivist orientation that treats themes as actively generated through the interaction between researcher and data rather than as objectively "emerging." Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six recursive phases: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) systematic generation of initial codes; (3) construction of candidate themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes against the coded extracts and full dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final analytic narrative. The first three co-authors independently coded the same transcripts before meeting to discuss and refine interpretations: an exercise aimed at deepening understanding rather than reaching consensus, consistent with RTA's rejection of inter-rater reliability as a marker of quality (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding was supported by QDA Miner Lite. Reflexive memo-writing was used throughout to document evolving interpretations and analytic decisions.

Trustworthiness of the study was established following Lincoln and Guba's criteria (1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative coding, and reflexive discussion among researchers. Dependability was supported by a detailed audit trail documenting methodological decisions and theme development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo-writing that allowed researchers to examine their assumptions and interpretive influence. Rich, contextualized description of participants' accounts was provided throughout to support transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were observed throughout. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty; written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Identifying information was removed during transcription and pseudonyms (participant codes) were assigned. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

3. Findings

Four themes were constructed from the dataset: (1) The Digital Mirror: Negotiating Appearance Through Visual Comparison; (2) Curating the Self: Between Authenticity and Performance; (3) Knowing Who I Am: Self-Concept Clarity as a Psychological Filter; and (4) Reclaiming the Self: Resisting and Redefining Digital Beauty Ideals. The first two themes describe how participants *viewed* and *presented* themselves within HVSM environments; the third explains why these experiences differed so markedly between participants; and the fourth describes how participants pushed back against the pressures the first three themes identify.

Theme 1: The Digital Mirror – Negotiating Appearance Through Visual Comparison

HVSM emerged as a digital mirror through which participants continually interpreted and evaluated their appearance.

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Unlike a physical mirror that simply reflects one's image, this digital mirror presented an endless stream of carefully curated bodies, faces, lifestyles, and beauty ideals against which participants measured themselves. Rather than viewing their appearance independently, participants described understanding themselves in relation to what they encountered online, yet this process was neither uniform nor passive. The extent to which participants internalized these ideals depended on whom they compared themselves to, the context in which they viewed social media, and the meaning they attached to what they saw.

1.1 Perfect Bodies Become Everyday Standards

Participants consistently described HVSM as a space dominated by idealized appearances. Repeated exposure to polished images gradually transformed exceptional beauty into what felt like an ordinary, expected standard, so that online representations came to function as an implicit benchmark against which participants judged their own appearance:

"Duniya mein sab perfect hai... jitna bhi Instagram pe content hai... sabka body perfect hota hai, perfect face hai, perfect hair hai... phir lagta hai ki hum mein aisa nahi hai." (P3)

(Everything in the world is perfect... all the content on Instagram... everyone has a perfect body, a perfect face, perfect hair... and then you feel like you don't have any of that.)

"Agar models ya bohot polished-looking influencers dikh jayein, toh phir main apne andar woh sab cheezein dhoondhne lagti hoon jo mujhe improve karni chahiye." (P5)

(Whenever I see models or really polished-looking influencers, I start looking for all the things in myself that I feel I need to improve.)

Importantly, participants rarely suggested that these standards were consciously accepted as realistic. Rather than stemming from a belief that the images were authentic, the influence appeared to come from repeatedly encountering them until they became familiar reference points for self-evaluation. HVSM thus functioned not merely as a platform for viewing attractive people but as a cultural environment in which idealized attractiveness became increasingly ordinary.

1.2 Comparison as an Automatic Way of Seeing Oneself

Participants' narratives suggested that appearance comparison had become an almost automatic psychological response to social media use, occurring spontaneously while scrolling rather than through deliberate decision. For some, comparison centered on models and influencers representing idealized beauty:

"Mostly top models se compare karti hoon... Rationally mujhe pata hota hai ke ye fair comparison nahi hai, lekin phir bhi ho jata hai... ye comparisons mujhe horrible feel karwate hain... Lekin saath hi saath mujhe lagta hai ke mujhe khud par kaam karna chahiye." (P9)

(I mostly compare myself to top models... Rationally, I know it's not a fair comparison, but it happens anyway... these comparisons make me feel horrible... But at the same time, I feel like I ought to work on myself.)

For others, comparison extended beyond physical features to clothing, grooming, and overall presentation:

"Kabhi kabhi... samne wala is looking much pretty... uska attire bahut achha hai... we should go and take such attire." (P2)
(Sometimes... the person in front of me is looking so pretty... their outfit is really good... and I feel like we should go and get an outfit just like that.)

Comparison did not produce exclusively negative outcomes. Although participants frequently described insecurity or inadequacy, comparison also motivated some to improve aspects of their appearance, health, or lifestyle, functioning simultaneously as a source of self-criticism and self-improvement. This duality suggests that appearance comparison is better understood as an ongoing process of self-evaluation than as a purely negative consequence of social media use.

1.3 The Reflection Changes: Comparison Depends on Context

Although comparison was widespread, its emotional impact was not constant. One participant explained that the emotional consequences of scrolling depended largely on what her algorithm presented on a given day:

"Kabhi confident feel hoti hoon aur kabhi less confident. Ye kaafi had tak depend karta hai ke us din mera algorithm kya dikha raha hai." (P5)

(Sometimes I feel confident, and sometimes less confident. It largely depends on what my algorithm is showing me on any given day.)

Another described how her pre-existing mood intensified the influence of online content:

"If I am already sad... and the feeds are also of the sad moods... that affects much more... If I am happy... accordingly mood changes." (P13)

(If I'm already sad... and my feed is full of sad stuff too... it affects me a lot more... If I'm happy... my mood changes accordingly.)

These accounts suggest that HVSM did not independently determine body image experiences; participants actively interacted with digital content through the lens of their existing emotions and circumstances. Several participants also demonstrated a growing awareness that social media presented curated rather than authentic realities, and this awareness appeared to weaken the mirror's power:

"Log sirf apni achi side dikhate hain... bohot si photos filtered, edited ya carefully curated hoti hain... jo online dikhta hai woh poori reality nahi hoti." (P8)

(People only show their good side... so many photos are filtered, edited, or carefully curated... what you see online isn't

the full reality.)

"Har ek mein kuch na kuch fault toh hota hi hai... influencers... apni reality dikhte hain... itna perfect hai nahi... usse thoda sa confidence milta hi hai." (P14)

(Everyone has some fault or the other... when influencers... show their real side... that it isn't actually that perfect... it definitely gives you a bit of a confidence boost.)

Theme summary. Collectively, these findings suggest that HVSM functions as a digital mirror through which participants continuously interpreted their appearance in relation to idealized others: idealized images became normative reference points, comparison emerged as an almost automatic cognitive habit, and emotional responses varied with algorithmic exposure and personal context. At the same time, participants were not passive recipients of these ideals; awareness of the curated nature of online content enabled some to question and occasionally resist the standards reflected back to them. Body image emerged not as a fixed perception but as a dynamic, context-dependent experience constructed through everyday engagement with HVSM.

Theme 2: Curating the Self – Between Authenticity and Performance

Whereas Theme 1 focused on how participants viewed themselves through the digital mirror, this theme captures how they presented themselves within it. Across interviews, participants described social media as a space where identity was consciously managed rather than passively expressed. Posting photographs, choosing content, and deciding what to reveal involved ongoing negotiations between authenticity, impression management, privacy, and social expectation. While some participants invested considerable effort in constructing a desirable online image, others deliberately resisted excessive curation, preferring what they perceived as a more authentic self-presentation.

2.1 Presenting the "Best" Rather Than the "Whole" Self

For many participants, posting was not spontaneous but a carefully considered process involving selecting photographs, reviewing multiple images, and deciding which version of themselves best represented how they wished to appear:

"If I am posting like one or two pictures... the number of pictures in my gallery would be like 70 to 80... then I'll delete all the unnecessary poses... and I'll only post three or four." (P4)

"Social media par usually wahi moments dikhte hain jo zyada happy, pretty ya put-together hote hain. Real life mein main hamesha utni happy nahi hoti jitna online lagti hoon. Toh social media par jo version hota hai, woh mera part hai, lekin complete reality nahi." (P11)

(On social media, usually only those moments are shown that are happier, pretty, or put-together. In real life, I am not always as happy as I seem online. So the version on social media is a part of me, but not the complete reality.)

Rather than interpreting this behavior simply as vanity, participants described it as an effort to present a version of themselves with which they felt comfortable. These accounts suggest participants did not perceive their online identities as false; instead, they distinguished between partial and complete authenticity: profiles that represented genuine aspects of the self without capturing the full complexity of everyday life.

2.2 Authenticity as Resistance to Digital Performance

In contrast, some participants deliberately rejected extensive impression management, treating authenticity as a value through which they resisted the pressure to construct idealized online identities:

"I am a very simple person, I like to show myself what I am... I do not use filters... sometimes only black and white filter because I like the aesthetic." (P7)

"Jo online hoon main waise hi offline milungi... main apni life bahut private rakhti hoon." (P1)

(The way I am online is how you will find me offline... I keep my life very private.)

Authenticity did not imply complete transparency; rather, participants distinguished between selectively sharing experiences and intentionally misrepresenting themselves, so that privacy itself became a form of authenticity. Several participants also criticized what they perceived as increasingly artificial online representations:

"People love to post only photos from certain angles... they are hiding the other side... fake representations... if people started presenting their raw versions... people will accept reality a bit more." (P12)

2.3 Managing Identity Within Social Expectations

Although participants valued authenticity, they also recognized social media as inherently social, requiring a balance between personal expression and anticipated audience response:

"Posting behavior... sometimes I follow trends... but I keep posting 80% with what I am." (P9)

"I follow trends... from a strategic point of view... that makes me visible to people... I should also share my opinion... so people can understand my understanding as well." (P6)

This adaptation was not necessarily experienced as inauthentic; participants viewed it as a pragmatic way of communicating effectively within digital environments. At the same time, participants remained attentive to the ethical implications of self-presentation:

"You have to present yourself in a way that people understand online, but that doesn't mean changing who you are. It's more about expressing yourself appropriately for that space." (P8)

Theme summary. Online self-presentation was neither wholly authentic nor entirely performative. Participants continuously negotiated how much of themselves to reveal, what to conceal, and how to balance authenticity with the expectations of digital

audiences, with authenticity understood not as total disclosure but as consistency with personal values, alongside an appropriate degree of privacy.

Theme 3: Knowing Who I Am – Self-Concept Clarity as a Psychological Filter

While participants were exposed to broadly similar HVSM environments, their experiences of appearance comparison and body image differed considerably. These differences appeared shaped less by the quantity of social media use than by the degree of certainty participants felt about who they were. Participants with a relatively stable sense of self appeared better able to critically evaluate online content and resist appearance-based comparison; those who described themselves as still "figuring themselves out" appeared more vulnerable to comparison and self-doubt. Self-concept clarity thus emerged not as a determinant of whether social media influenced body image, but as a psychological filter shaping how visual content was interpreted.

3.1 A Stable Sense of Self Creates Psychological Distance

Several participants described relatively stable core beliefs about who they were, allowing them to critically evaluate online content rather than automatically internalizing it:

"Change is the nature... trends change... but certain objectives like the moral values, those remain very stable." (P7)

"It's very easy because I have a lot of time to introspect... studying psychology... I used to think a lot about myself... it's been a journey of six, seven or eight years." (P4)

For these participants, social media did not disappear as an influence but became something that could be observed and evaluated rather than absorbed uncritically. This psychological distance was most explicitly articulated by one participant, who described building a metaphorical "wall" between himself and social media:

"Having understood what social media does to you, I've built a wall. Whenever I switch to Instagram... this is something that comes to me, does not pass through this wall." (P15)

The "wall" metaphor illustrates an active psychological boundary rather than passive avoidance; participants with greater self-concept clarity engaged with social media while regulating its influence.

3.2 Identity Uncertainty Amplifies Appearance-Based Comparison

Participants who described greater identity uncertainty also reported stronger emotional reactions to appearance-focused content, with the self appearing more open to revision through external feedback:

"Sach kahun toh ye question difficult hai... jab choti age se focus appearance par hi hota hai, toh apne aap ko us se bahar sochna mushkil lagta hai... abhi tak main ye claim nahi kar sakti ke mujhe poori tarah pata hai ke main as a person kaun hoon. Woh cheez abhi bhi figure out kar rahi hoon." (P14) (To be honest, this question is difficult... when the focus has been on appearance since a young age, thinking of yourself beyond that feels hard... as of now, I cannot claim that I fully know who I am as a person. That thing, I am still figuring out.)

Prolonged attention to appearance appeared to constrain broader identity development, making it difficult to construct a sense of self grounded in qualities other than physical appearance. Participants experiencing this uncertainty also described greater susceptibility to comparison, with impact fluctuating according to how secure they already felt:

"Jab main khud ko le kar secure feel kar rahi hoti hoon... social media ka effect kaafi kam ho jata hai... Lekin jab already thodi unsure hoti hoon, toh phir comparisons aur negative thoughts zyada impact karte hain." (P5)

(When I am feeling secure about myself... the effect of social media becomes quite low... But when I am already a bit unsure, then comparisons and negative thoughts impact me more.)

Rather than exerting a fixed influence, social media appeared to amplify pre-existing uncertainty, so that moments of self-doubt made appearance-based comparisons more emotionally salient.

3.3 Self-Concept Clarity Enables Critical Rather Than Passive Engagement

Importantly, participants with stronger self-concept clarity did not necessarily reject social media; instead, they engaged with it more selectively and critically, questioning its authenticity and implications rather than accepting content at face value: "It's important to look beyond the body and also look for a higher cause... Do not stay with a very surface-level cause that you want to look good." (P6)

Even participants who occasionally followed online trends did so selectively rather than allowing trends to redefine their sense of self: "I keep posting 80% with what I am." (P9)

Theme summary. Self-concept clarity emerged as a key psychological process shaping engagement with HVSM. Rather than determining whether participants used social media or encountered appearance-focused content, it shaped how those experiences were interpreted and internalized, with clearer self-concepts enabling critical evaluation and psychological distance, and identity uncertainty amplifying comparison, insecurity, and fluctuating self-evaluation.

Theme 4: Reclaiming the Self – Resisting and Redefining Digital Beauty Ideals

Despite recognizing the powerful influence of HVSM, participants did not portray themselves as passive recipients of appearance ideals. Instead, they described a range of ways in which they questioned, resisted, and redefined dominant beauty narratives, extending beyond simply avoiding comparison to consciously redefining what constituted beauty, authenticity, confidence, and personal worth.

4.1 Recognizing That the Digital Ideal Is Constructed

One of the most consistent forms of resistance involved recognizing that social media presented curated rather than objective reality. Participants referred to filters, editing, favorable angles, selective posting, and algorithmic amplification as reasons online appearances should not be accepted uncritically:

"Log sirf apni achi side dikhate hain... bohot si photos filtered, edited ya carefully curated hoti hain. Jo online dikhta hai woh poori reality nahi hoti." (P8)

(People only show their good side... so many photos are filtered, edited, or carefully curated. What you see online isn't the full reality.)

"Not everything online reflects reality, and I think people forget that." (P4)

Rather than eliminating comparison altogether, recognizing the constructed nature of digital images enabled participants to reinterpret them more critically; awareness itself became a form of resistance.

4.2 Grounding Self-Worth Beyond Appearance

Participants also described deliberately locating self-worth outside physical appearance, highlighting values such as learning, personal growth, compassion, relationships, morality, and authenticity instead:

"Certain objectives like the moral values... those remain very stable." (P7) "Appearance matters to some extent, but it's not everything. I think the way you treat people and the kind of person you are is much more important." (P11)

These accounts suggest that participants resisted appearance-based evaluation not by denying the importance of appearance altogether, but by consciously broadening the basis on which they understood themselves and others.

4.3 Imagining More Authentic Digital Spaces

Resistance was not limited to individual coping strategies; participants also envisioned alternative forms of social media that would promote healthier understandings of bodies and identity:

"Main definitely zyada filter-less bodies dekhna chahti hoon... natural bodies, imperfections, aur realistic looks dekhane chahiye... Is se social media thoda healthier space ban sakta hai." (P5)

(I definitely want to see more unfiltered bodies... we should see natural bodies, imperfections, and realistic looks... This could make social media a somewhat healthier space.)

"Body shame nahi hona chahiye." (P10)

(There shouldn't be any body shaming)

"Every body type and skin tone... should be appreciated... fake representations... should change." (P12)

Perhaps the broadest redefinition came from one participant, who admired individuals who challenged conventional beauty standards rather than reinforcing them:

"There are people with disabilities... who showcase themselves... I really admire those people... people should encourage such individuals." (P6)

Theme summary. Participants actively reimagined what appearance and identity could mean within digital spaces, grounding self-worth in values beyond appearance and advocating for more authentic, inclusive online representation.

4. Discussion

This study explored how emerging adults in India experience HVSM in relation to body image, and how self-concept clarity shapes that experience. The four themes describe a single underlying process: HVSM acted as a digital mirror that normalized idealized appearance and invited near-automatic comparison; participants negotiated this pressure through curated, value-guided self-presentation rather than either full authenticity or full performance; self-concept clarity determined how appearance content was interpreted and internalized; and participants retained real agency to question and redefine the beauty standards being offered to them.

These findings align closely with existing theory and evidence. The normalization of idealized appearance and near-automatic comparison reflect Social Comparison Theory as extended to digital contexts (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), and support evidence that specific appearance-focused activities (rather than time online per se) drive body image outcomes (Fardouly et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020). That comparison produced both insecurity and self-improvement motivation echoes work showing upward comparison can be inspiring as well as distressing, depending on how the target is construed (Meier, Gilbert, Börner, & Possler, 2020). Participants' distinction between "partial" and "complete" authenticity mirrors research showing self-presentation is rarely wholly authentic or wholly performative (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020), and their preference for unfiltered, value-consistent posting is consistent with survey evidence linking authentic self-presentation to higher self-concept clarity (Fullwood, James, & Chen-Wilson, 2016).

The clearest contribution of this study is a qualitative elaboration of how self-concept clarity operates, not simply as a trait that reduces comparison frequency, but as an interpretive filter shaping what participants used appearance for in the first place. This extends the Identity Disruption Model (Vartanian, Hayward, Smyth, Paxton, & Touyz, 2018) and related findings that low self-concept clarity increases reliance on external appearance standards for self-definition (Vartanian & Dey, 2013; Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Lin et al., 2021): participants low in clarity did not merely compare more, but described appearance as the only available framework through which to understand themselves, while participants high in clarity actively evaluated content against a stable internal reference point (the "wall" metaphor). Participants' capacity to recognize curation as constructed, and to reframe it critically, parallels evidence that media literacy buffers the effects of idealized images (McLean, Paxton, &

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Wertheim, 2016) and that explicit "reality" framing reduces negative comparison (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020), though this protective effect still appeared to depend on participants' underlying self-concept clarity rather than awareness alone.

Finally, because most existing research in this area is Western or East Asian (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016) and Indian work has been largely quantitative and single-variable (Ganesan, Ravishankar, & Ramalingam, 2018), this study extends these mechanisms to an under-studied Indian context, while also surfacing culturally specific features: code-switched narration of appearance distress, and grounding of self-worth in moral and relational values rather than individual self-esteem alone.

5. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the use of a purposive sample limited to emerging adults restricts the generalizability of these results to individuals outside this specific age group. Second, interviews were retrospective and self-reported, relying on participants' capacity to accurately recall and articulate their social media experiences and psychological states. Third, translation of code-switched Hindi/Urdu-English transcripts, while conducted carefully, may have altered subtle connotative meaning. Fourth, the cross-sectional, single-timepoint design cannot capture how SCC and body image experiences may change over time or in response to specific social media content. Finally, as is appropriate within a reflexive thematic analysis framework, the themes reported here reflect an interpretive, co-constructed account rather than a claim to objective or exhaustive truth (Braun & Clarke, 2022); a different research team could reasonably generate a different, equally valid analysis from the same dataset.

6. Conclusion

This study found that highly visual social media functioned as a "digital mirror" through which emerging adults in India continuously evaluated their appearance, while self-concept clarity shaped whether this process led to critical distance and resistance or to heightened vulnerability and internalization. Rather than treating social media's influence on body image as fixed or uniform, these findings position self-concept clarity as a key interpretive resource, one that determines not only how much individuals compare themselves to others online but what kind of self is available to be affirmed, threatened, or redefined by that comparison. Practically, these findings suggest that interventions aimed at strengthening self-concept clarity, alongside critical media literacy that makes the curated nature of online content explicit, may be a valuable, complementary avenue for protecting body image among emerging adults in India, extending beyond approaches that target social media use or exposure alone. Future research should examine these processes longitudinally and through mixed-methods designs that combine standardized measures of self-concept clarity and body image with qualitative accounts of meaning-making, in order to test whether the interpretive patterns identified here predict body image outcomes over time.

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