

Influence of Social Media on Body Image Perception among Female Students of Gauhati University

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Abstract

The world of social media is very fast-paced, characterized by continuous circulation of information and rapid shifts in online trends. People consume content of various kinds, often leading to communication and networking at an accelerated pace that exerts great influence on their social behaviour, self-identity, intellectual awareness and cultural practices in today's society. It is the transient nature of the digital world that pushes newer narratives every now and then, one of which is surely, unrealistic beauty standards for all genders, especially young women. Body image perception is the subjective evaluation of one's own physical appearance, which includes their thoughts, attitude and feelings towards their body. The study focuses on two main objectives, firstly, to study the influence of social media use on body image perceptions among the female students of Gauhati University; and secondly, to understand the positive uses of social media for self-image. Here, descriptive survey method is used by employing a self-structured questionnaire with 25 items on a sample of 115 female students in the Five Year Integrated Master's Programme and Post-graduation Programme of Gauhati University, Assam. The study discusses about social media usage and behaviour patterns among individuals, their perception of body image as influenced by the content they consume, its psychological and social costs, and also, positive uses of social media for self-image. At last, the investigators from their personal experiences suggest some coping mechanism for minimizing the negative influences of social media use on body image perceptions.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Image Perception, Female Students, Body Positivity

1. INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary digital landscape, social media platforms have evolved into formidable instruments for communication, entertainment, and self-articulation, significantly influencing the beliefs, perspectives, and actions of individuals—particularly teenagers and young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook enable users to disseminate and engage with strikingly visual content that often focuses on physical appearance. As a result, social media has surfaced as one of the most potent forces of socialization, shaping how individuals perceive and feel about their bodies.

Body image is a multidimensional construct comprising both perceptual and attitudinal components. The perceptual component involves the individual's accuracy in estimating their actual body dimensions, including size, shape, and proportions. Meanwhile, the attitudinal component encompasses subjective

evaluations, emotions, cognition, and beliefs that individuals hold regarding their bodies, such as satisfaction, dissatisfaction, appreciation, or internalization of societal beauty ideals (Mölbart, et al., 2018). Young women, being among the most engaged social media users, are particularly susceptible to internalizing unrealistic standards and participating in comparisons that can diminish self-esteem and body satisfaction.

Multiple psychological theories elucidate this dynamic. Festinger's Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals assess themselves by contrasting with others, a process magnified by the continuous stream of idealized images online (Festinger, 1954). Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory and Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication explain that individuals acquire behaviours and attitudes by observing others, including those in media, and that this acquisition is influenced by personal, behavioural, and environmental interactions (Bandura, 2009). As users emulate influencers or peers who personify societal ideals, these theories illuminate the internalization of beauty norms and associated dissatisfaction. The Tripartite Influence Model (1999) further specifies parents, peers, and media as the three fundamental sociocultural sources shaping body image through two mediators—internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparison (Thompson, et al., 2002). Likewise, Objectification Theory contends that women are socialized to internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies, leading to self-objectification and habitual body surveillance, which contribute to anxiety, body shame, and disordered eating (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Internet exposure was associated with internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and drive for thinness in this sample of adolescent girls (Tiggemann, et al., 2020).

Despite these challenges, social media also presents the potential for empowerment and positive change. When users engage with body-positive content and supportive communities, they can experience heightened self-acceptance and resilience. The Body Positivity Movement promoted by hashtags like #BodyPositivity, #SelfLove, and #RealBody, challenges unrealistic beauty standards and celebrates body diversity. Experimental studies demonstrate that exposure to body-positive content can uplift mood, enhance body appreciation, and diminish the harmful effects of idealized imagery (Cohen, et al., 2019; Tiggemann, et al., 2020).

2. NEED OF THE STUDY

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the repercussions of social media on body image perception demand heightened attention. The pressure to conform to some largely accepted beauty standards can result in negative self-perception, lower self-esteem, and even mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Therefore, it is paramount for female students to develop critical media literacy skills that enable them to navigate social media with greater discernment. Ultimately, the relationship between social media and body image perception is complex and multifaceted; understanding this dynamic can lead to more informed discussions and interventions that benefit female students, enabling them to engage with social media in a healthier, more constructive manner.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

On the basis of the need of the study, the following objectives can be outlined:

- a) To study the influence of social media use on body image perceptions among the female students of Gauhati University; and,
- b) To understand the positive uses of social media for self-image and body positivity.

4. DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study is delimited to the female students in Five Year Integrated Master's Programme and Post-graduation Programme of Gauhati University, Assam.

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

For the present study, the investigators have adopted descriptive survey method on the female students of Gauhati University.

5.1 Population: The present study encompasses all the female students of various departments of Gauhati University enrolled in Five Year Integrated Master's Programme and Post-graduation Programme.

5.2 Sample: A sample of 115 female students is selected for the present study using random sampling technique.

5.3 Tools for Data Collection: For the fulfilment of Objective no. (a), the investigators have used a structured questionnaire with 25 closed-ended questions on social media usage and behaviour patterns among individuals, their perception of body image as influenced by the content they consume, its psychological and social costs. For the fulfilment of Objective no. (b), the investigators have used both the primary data collected from the questionnaire as well as secondary data from websites and journals.

5.4 Procedure for Data Collection: For administering the self-structured questionnaire, a Google form was prepared and distributed to the sample students of the concerned institution.

5.5 Statistical Treatment of Data: Data analysis is carried out using simple percentage analysis and graphically represented wherever required.

6. DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The present study titled, 'Influence of Social Media on Body Image Perception among Female Students of Gauhati University' aims to examine the patterns of social media usage and its influence on the body image perceptions of female students. The study also aims to understand the positive uses of social media for self-image. The findings of the study are discussed according to the mentioned objectives.

6.1 Analysis and Interpretation of Objective No. (a): To study the influence of social media use on body image perceptions among the female students of Gauhati University.

For Objective No. (a), the data is analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentage analysis to interpret the responses collected through the structured questionnaire. The results are presented below according to the three sections of the tool.

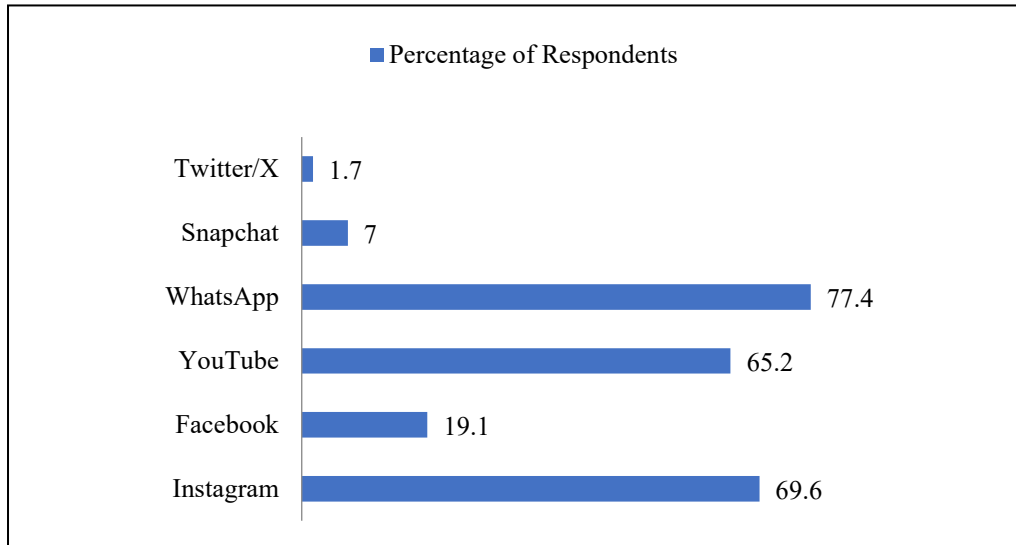
6.1.1 Analysis of Demographic Information of the Respondents

The demographic details of the respondents included name, age, department, semester of study, and area of residence. The majority of respondents (55.65%) are in the age group of 21–23 years, followed by in the 18–20 age group (41.74%) and 24 and above age group (2.61%). The majority (42.6%) of the participants hail from urban areas, followed by (34.8%) from rural areas and (22.6%) from semi-urban areas. This indicates that the sample largely represented young urban female students.

6.1.2 Analysis of Social Media Usage and Behaviour Patterns

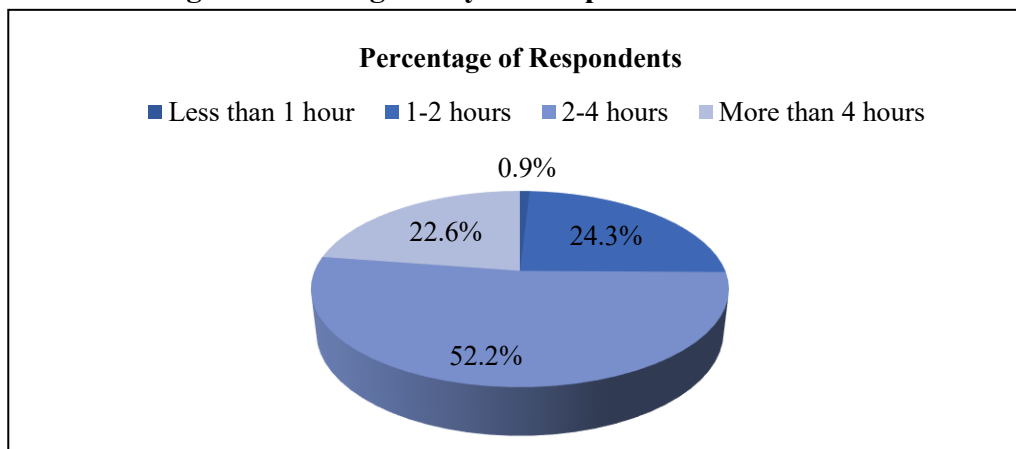
This section explores the nature and extent of social media use among female students, including the platforms they use, time spent, purposes, and behaviour patterns influenced by social media. The analysis of social media usage and behaviour patterns data is presented below.

Figure 1: Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents.



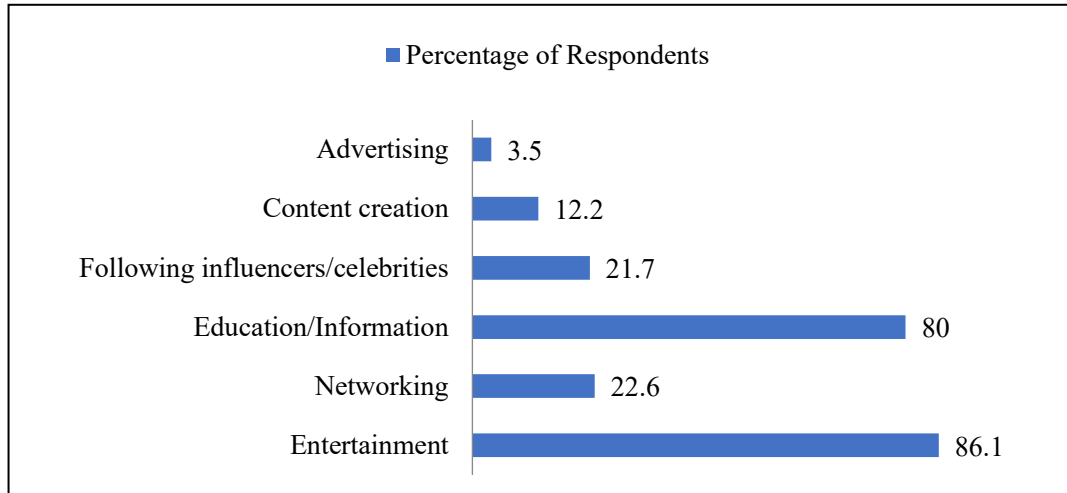
The data show that WhatsApp (77.4%), Instagram (69.6%) and YouTube (65.2%) are the most commonly used platforms among female students, followed by Facebook (19.1%). Only (7%) and (1.7%) of the respondents reported using Snapchat and Twitter/X respectively, indicating its lower popularity among the group.

Figure 2: Average Daily Time Spent on Social Media.



Majority of the respondents (52.2%) spend between 2–4 hours, followed by (24.3%) 1–2 hours and (22.6%) more than 4 hours daily on social media, while only (0.9%) spend less than 1 hour a day. This suggests that the majority of female students are moderate to heavy social media users.

Figure 3: Purpose of Using Social Media



Most respondents use social media for entertainment (86.1%) and educational/information purposes (80%). Networking (22.6%) and following influencers /celebrities (21.7%) are also common reasons, whereas only (12.2%) and (3.5%) use it for content creation and advertising respectively, indicating that social media served primarily as a leisure and information-sharing tool.

Table 1: Behavioural Patterns and Influence of Social Media

Sl. no.	Behavioural Statement	Always (%)	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely/Never (%)
1.	Upload photos /videos	13.9	47.8	34.8	3.5
2.	Use filters or editing apps before uploading	2.61	12.17	49.57	35.65
3.	Tried dieting/exercising after social media influence	2.6	15.7	40	41.7
4.	Skipped meals due to body image concerns	0.9	5.2	20.9	73
5.	Considered cosmetic surgery or beauty treatment	0	3.5	11.3	85.2
6.	Feel more confident after receiving likes/comments	17.4	17.4	42.6	22.6
7.	Avoid posting due to body dissatisfaction	8.7	19.1	11.3	60.9

A majority (47.8%) and (49.57%) of respondents reported that they often upload their own photos/videos on social media and sometimes uses filters before uploading photos respectively. (41.7%) of respondents has rarely/never tried diet or exercise routines influenced by social media content, while (40%) has sometimes tried. About (42.6%) sometimes feel confident after receiving likes or comments on their posts while (22.6%) rarely/never feel confident. However, (73%) rarely/never skip meals; (85.2%) rarely/never consider cosmetic surgery and (60.9%) never avoid posting their pictures due to body dissatisfaction, suggesting that although social media affects self-perception, it does not necessarily lead to extreme physical changes in behaviour for most students.

6.1.3 ANALYSIS OF BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION OF THE RESPONDENTS

This section examines how social media affects the way female students perceive their own bodies, self-worth, and confidence. The analysis of body image perception data is presented below.

Table 2: Distribution of Responses on Body Image Perception

Sl. no.	Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1.	I compare my looks with people I see on social media.	2.6	16.5	28.7	29.6	22.6
2.	Social media encourages me to appreciate diverse body types.	13.9	33.9	27.8	17.4	7
3.	Following fitness or fashion pages makes me more self-critical.	2.61	20.87	35.65	31.3	9.57
4.	I am satisfied with my skin tone, hair, and physical features.	26.95	40.86	23.47	7.82	0.9
5.	Negative comments on my appearance affect my confidence.	7.82	24.34	24.34	31.3	12.2
6.	I have unfollowed pages that make me feel insecure.	6.08	26.08	26.08	29.56	12.2
7.	My confidence decreases if my photos get less engagement.	0	13.9	17.4	45.2	23.5
8.	I buy beauty/skincare products promoted by influencers.	5.22	10.43	27.83	34.78	21.74
9.	I follow accounts promoting body positivity/self-love.	18.26	46.96	21.74	9.56	3.48
10.	I avoid group photos due to comparison fear.	0.9	5.2	10.4	48.7	34.8
11.	I have changed clothing style to match online beauty trends.	0	10.4	29.6	38.3	21.7
12.	I have spent money on editing apps or subscriptions.	0.9	1.73	3.47	35.7	58.2
13.	I feel pressured to spend on grooming/fashion to “fit in.”	2.60	8.7	23.48	38.26	26.96
14.	Social media spreads awareness of unrealistic beauty standards.	19.1	43.5	30.4	6.1	0.9
15.	I feel confident seeing body positivity campaigns online.	18.3	40	26.1	13	2.6

The analysis reveals that (28.7%) of respondents remained neutral and (52.2%) reported that they do not compare their looks with people they see on social media, also majority (83.5%) of respondents do not avoid group photos due to comparison fear indicating a low level of self-comparison. (68.7%) of respondents reported that their confidence level does not decrease if their photos get less engagement.

About (47.8%) acknowledged that social media promotes appreciation of diverse body types. Majority (40.87%) of respondents disagreed that following fitness or fashion pages makes them more self-critical while (35.65%) remained neutral. About (41.76%) of respondents reported that they have not unfollowed pages that make them feel insecure while (32.16%) have unfollowed. More than half (67.81%) are satisfied with their own physical features, and (43.5%) feel unaffected by negative comments on their appearance. About (56.52%) of respondents do not buy beauty/skincare products promoted by influencers and (60%) have not changed their clothing style to match online beauty trends. Majority (93.9%) of respondents does not spend money on editing apps or subscriptions and (65.22%) do not feel pressured to spend on grooming/fashion to “fit in”. On a positive note, (65.22%) followed accounts promoting body positivity; (58.3%) of respondents agreed that they feel confident seeing body positivity campaigns online and (62.6%) agreed that social media helps spread awareness about unrealistic beauty standards.

6.2 DISCUSSION

The descriptive and percentage analysis reveals that (49.57%) of respondents moderately uses beauty filters before uploading their photos. Although high confidence linked to likes/comments are found, but, majority of the respondents show low tendencies for comparison, also low tendencies for unhealthy and unnatural practices. The findings of the study reveal that although social media affects self-perception, it does not necessarily lead to extreme physical changes in behaviour for most students. Majority of the students also recognize the importance of body positivity movements and diversity campaigns that encourage self-acceptance. Thus, social media exerts more constructive effects than detrimental effects on the body image perception of female students. However, sometimes social media acts as a dual influence—it enhances confidence and awareness for some users while fostering insecurity and comparison for other users.

6.2.1 Analysis of Objective no. (b): To understand the positive uses of social media for self-image and body positivity.

By far, it is understood that the content that people consume on a daily basis has both physical as well as psycho-emotional impact on their lifestyle. However, in this segment the investigators, through insights drawn from different contemporary research papers and articles, focuses on the positive uses of social media for self-image as well as its positive impact on body image perception among young women.

Cohen, et al., (2021) suggests that the body-positive movement has emerged, promoting acceptance, appreciation, and respect for all body types. It seeks to shift the focus from appearance to body functionality and health. Central to this movement is the dissemination of content tagged with hashtags like #bodypositive and #bodypositivity. These posts increase the visibility of bodies traditionally excluded from mainstream media while fostering online communities that promote mutual support and acceptance. In another study, **Cohen, et al., (2019)** found that their findings aligns with social comparison theories, suggesting that body-positive content may shift the focus of appearance-related comparisons in a way that fosters self-acceptance rather than reinforcing unattainable beauty ideals. By this, it is understood that most of the harm from social media comes from comparison-based exposure i.e. seeing modern-day influencers and content creators picturing a perfect life, a perfect physique and upholding unrealistic beauty standards.

A randomized controlled trial by **Tiggemann, et al., (2020)** exposed young women to three kinds of Instagram content- Thin-ideal (models, influencers), Body-positive (diverse, realistic bodies) and

Appearance-neutral (landscapes, art) and found that those who saw body-positive posts showed higher body appreciation, lower appearance anxiety and more positive mood.

Therefore, it can be summarized as-

1. Social media acts as a platform for representation and visibility, where people from different cultures and backgrounds, having versatile looks and appearances, share their experiences and opinions that have immense power to influence, inspire as well as be critiqued. Social media exposes young women to a broader and more inclusive range of body types, skin tones, and identities that traditional media often ignores. This expanded representation helps dismantle the old “thin, white, flawless” beauty ideal and replaces it with diverse standards of beauty.
2. Social media promotes self-expression and identity development and lets young women control their self-presentation through photos, captions, stories, and creative content. By curating their online identity, they explore who they are and what they stand for, fostering self-confidence and self-concept clarity.
3. Social media connects young women with others who share similar experiences, from body acceptance to mental health or recovery journeys. Social connectedness reduces social comparison and fosters emotional resilience. Self-help groups for women struggling with cancer, Alopecia, depression, PTSD, obesity, eating disorders, skin abnormalities, post-partum depression, and so on, creates this sense of belonging and shared vulnerability helps them feel less alone and more validated in their experiences.
4. Social media gives access to mental health educators, psychologists, and body image researchers who share resources, tips, and coping strategies. This content helps young women understand body image scientifically and compassionately.
5. The world of Social media is full of opinions; some let down people, while some uplift their confidence. Receiving likes, supportive comments, or affirmations on authentic or self-love posts can boost confidence and self-worth, especially for young women still developing self-image. Many people express that they have befriended online strangers who continuously encourage and support their online presence than most people in their real lives, be it starting a small business, making content, stating an opinion, or creating awareness in general.
6. Social media has become a significant platform for the promotion of inclusive beauty ideals through the rise of body-positive movements and digital campaigns. Initiatives such as #RealBeauty spearheaded by Dove, Allen Solly’s “Own Your Shape” campaign by Ogilvy India, the plus-size fashion brand aLL (India) launched #SizeHappy in 202, etc. have played a crucial role in challenging conventional beauty norms and redefining societal perceptions of women’s bodies.

Thus, social media allows women to rewrite the definition of beauty collectively by valuing confidence, kindness, and individuality. This cultural shift encourages young women to see beauty as diverse and inclusive, improving how they perceive themselves.

7. SUGGESTIONS

It is important in today’s world of social media to protect one’s digital experience. Interventions promoting media literacy, healthy lifestyle habits, and self-care practices are essential to enhance positive body image and self-esteem among college students. Creating a supportive environment for open discussion of body image concerns can further promote their psychological well-being (Basistha, Ali and Paul, 2023). There can be different coping mechanisms for minimizing the negative influences

of social media on body image perceptions:

1. **Media literacy and awareness:** One of the most effective ways to reduce the harmful impact of social media on body image is by strengthening media literacy among students. For example, media literacy programs conducted in schools and universities have been found to significantly decrease body dissatisfaction and improve self-esteem among young women (McLean, et al., 2016). Workshops, classroom discussions, or university campaigns that highlight the difference between “real bodies” and “digitally altered images” can empower female students to approach social media content more critically.
2. **Practicing Healthy Social Media Habits:** Spending excessive time online often leads to constant social comparison, which intensifies dissatisfaction with one’s own appearance. Setting daily screen-time limits, using apps that track or restrict time spent on platforms like Instagram, and taking regular “social media breaks” are effective practices. Young adults who reduced social media use to 30 minutes per day for three weeks reported lower levels of loneliness and depression, as well as higher body satisfaction (Hunt, et al., 2018). For instance, students might designate specific “offline hours” in the evening or engage in alternative activities such as yoga, reading, or socializing in person, which promote a more balanced lifestyle.
3. **Strengthening Social Support Systems:** Support from friends, family, and peers plays a crucial role in buffering the negative effects of social media. Open conversations about body image challenges can reduce isolation and foster collective resilience. Universities can facilitate peer-support groups, group counseling sessions, or awareness discussions on body image and media influence.
4. **Institutional and Educational Interventions:** Finally, universities themselves can take proactive steps by implementing institutional interventions. Introducing modules or workshops on ‘Digital Well-being and Body Image,’ organizing talks by psychologists, or hosting campaigns on “Real Beauty and Self-Confidence” can foster a supportive academic culture.
5. **Curating Positive and Inclusive Online Spaces:** Some platforms and creators promote body positivity, inclusivity, and self-acceptance. Following pages or influencers who emphasize diverse body types, natural beauty, and self-confidence can create a more supportive digital environment.

Educational institutions should conduct nutritional awareness programs to encourage young adults to adopt healthy lifestyle habits and understand the importance of maintaining a positive body image through scientific and safe practices. Additionally, mass media initiatives highlighting healthy nutrition and the risks of unhealthy weight control behaviours are essential to address the growing issue of malnutrition in India (Rashmi, et al., 2016).

8. CONCLUSION

Body image encompasses an individual’s assessment, thoughts, and emotions regarding their body look and function. Unlike conventional media, users on social platforms actively create, modify, and compare content related to appearance, utilizing filters and editing tools that heighten the pressure to conform to socially constructed ideals. Educational and psychological initiatives that promote media literacy, critical thinking, and mindful digital engagement have proven effective in alleviating social media’s adverse effects. By cultivating self-awareness, digital accountability, and resilience, such programs assist young women in navigating online environments positively and developing healthier body image perceptions. Empowering women to engage critically with digital media enables them to redefine beauty, resist societal pressures, and act as agents of change advocating for inclusivity and confidence.

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