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The Instagram Age: Consumerism, Body Politics And Beauty Standards

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Abstract

This article explores the sociological understanding popular media platform Instagram and its relationship with the consuming behavior, identity formation, social acceptance and gender enforcing norms affecting women. In the contemporary global age, the presentation of femininity in everyday life is highly affected under the media representation. Instagram beauty influencers are often referred to as trend setters and it is seen that women face a lot of difficulty in their everyday presentation of self and to feel connected or to become the part of the larger tribe. The objectives of this research are to determine whether self-presentation influences excessive social media use through its association with fear of negative evaluation and to assess the impact of social comparison on excessive social media use via its relationship with self-esteem. This study shows how social media beauty influencers often create problems in everyday life of the women in accepting their real self. This research adopts a qualitative technique, using purposive sampling the researcher has interviewed 20 women from the age group of 18 to 25 who are active users of Instagram. A detailed narratives has been collected from women using unstructured interviews to get deeper understanding. The paper also explores the discourse conveyed by social media influencers, focusing on five most watched women influencer on hair, body and dress. Based on the study we can unravel a deeper understanding of media influence on adolescent identity formation.

Keywords: Hyper reality, Consumption, Instagram age, Body politics, Femininity, Beauty, Stress, Gender performativity,

Introduction

1. Definition of Instagram Social Media

Instagram is a social media platform very popular among the youngsters as well as middle aged people because the features on Instagram are very complete and easy to use, Instagram is also very effective in exchanging information through user content. In addition, this platform allows its users to describe their posts or react to other users' posts in text by adding searchable keywords, also defined as hashtags (Gulamali & Persson, 2016). Instagram as a photo-sharing social media has basics in its use according to Landsverk (2014) the use of Instagram includes: a. Feed, to view posts uploaded by friends who have been followed, b. Popular "tab" is used to view the most liked photos at any time, c. News and updates, to bring up notifications on our Instagram that generate Instagram user information. d. Like and comment. Like or

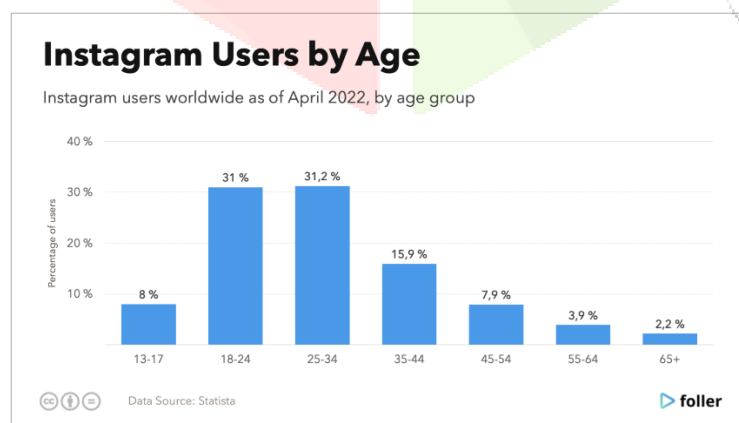
comment on Instagram is an appreciation and appreciation for Instagram users, e. Your Profile, can be seen on the square icon, on the profile stored photo archives that users have uploaded. f. Posting, when uploading photos, can be edited with the features provided by Instagram (Utari,2017). Misinformation is information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading (Chan, 2024; Treen et al., 2020), and the likelihood that people would accept such information as a fact is referred to as a belief in misinformation. Social media is critical in disseminating misinformation (Enders et al., 2021; Guess et al., 2019). In contrast to traditional news media, which favors fact-checking through the gatekeeping process in newsrooms, social media is conducive to gathering and disseminating a variety of information without being constrained by editing or cross-checking customs (Kozyreva et al., 2020; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015). In other words, social media facilitates the spread of misinformation and misleading messages to the general public because they give unrestricted access to information creation and sharing.

1.1 Instagram and Consumer Behaviour

In India, Instagram boasts the largest user base globally, with 413.85 million users as of February 2025. This represents a significant portion of the country's population and reflects Instagram's popularity and reach within India. A large portion of these users are young adults, with the 18-24 age group being the largest. India with its suitable demography offers Instagram to create a large fan base here. In India, where the number of internet users is pegged at half a billion, 26 million new female users were added in a period of a year, as of November 2019. Indeed, the rate of increase in female internet users is higher than that of their male counterparts: in 2018-2019, the number of female users grew by 27 percent, higher than the 22-percent rise for males.

Traditionally, Indians have tried to capture western food, dress, language and beauty standards. The beauty industries have a large consumer in India often limiting women to select appropriate choice of lifestyle. It is seen that women consume Instagram beauty contents like they are addicted to it. Instagram creates addiction of hyperreal images, visual imagery often creating emotional stimulations among the young women. Women spend hours in watching Instagram “Reels” and ends up learning distorted view of reality from the media. Data shows that Instagram serve as a good marketing platform for beauty products gaining high profits for the beauty companies. Big companies hire young media influencers to advertise their beauty products in an appealing way which attracts and compels young women in buying and posting a story about it to gain social acceptance from the larger population.

1.2 Consumption pattern of Instagram



2. Instagram use and self-comparison

Instagram, a virtual world often lacks the capabilities of offering real images which is natural. Instagram communications are casual, informal and many a times conventionally beautiful creating and constructing a feminist discourse. The adolescent spends a vital amount of their day scrolling through reels, posts and beauty blogs which are attractive and changes over time the mode of thinking, behaving and acting. Crossing traditional media's gatekeeping processes, Instagram is highly casual in nature where influencers can sell everything to gain up followers. With the increasing rate of population and unemployment in India often leads youngsters to select the easy way of earning money, where less effort

is needed in return of higher gains and popularity. Women who are passive users and do not take part in this job spend most of their leisure times consuming this free flow content, often thinking themselves different and feel unnoticed in the virtual community. Though there are channels and pages where we can see some influencers working over body positive movements, motivating curvy bodies, dark skin colour and traits which were considered as not normative to the beauty standards set up by our society. But after proper research it can be seen this body positive movements are a huge fail, often curvy bodies are shown in a very appealing and sexual way which is far from reality which in turn creates a feeling of guilt inside the growing body concerned adolescents. As 18 to 24, is a growing age where we learn, adapt and construct our identity everyday media plays a huge role in creating our everyday story from dress, fashion, size and beauty. Women often face discomfort to post their original photos without filter and edits. Everything is changed in their real selves so that they can also become part of the wider tribe. Self-doubts can have adverse mental health effects and can hamper a woman's family and other social life. Studies have shown Instagram usage and compulsive buying behaviour in women mainly dresses, makeup, skin care etc. Women are seen to pay a huge amount from their income in this unnecessary buying often leading mismatch between their income and expenditure. As growing women, who is confused about the bodily and social changes Instagram often offers a harder way of selection as there are pool of choices and differences. Instagram posts are curated in such a way that it many a times offers a wrong visualisation of women body and beauty. Creating pictures with pouted lips, showing body parts using so many filters to look eye catching can be commonly seen in Instagram. Women tend to spent a vast amount of their important time in creating and editing these posts and gets a sense of reward within themselves when they are followed or liked in Instagram. Social comparison is another significant factor contributing to excessive social media use.

2.1. Social media and self -worth

Social networking sites have started being seen as platforms for self-presentation as well as spaces where others can interact with one's presented self in turn validating or negatively affecting one's self-image (Vogel & Rose). This in-turn affects an individual's self-esteem (Balcetis, Cole, Chelberg, & Alicke, 2013). These factors contribute to our understanding of SNSs as acting as not only detriments to one's self-concept but also spaces that help it grow. Since the development of masculinity and femininity is culturally different, its presentation on SNSs varies as well (Consalvo, 1997; Rose, et al., 2012). Mackson, Brochu and Schneider (2019) studied the association between Instagram and its users' psychological well-being. Results revealed that people with Instagram accounts have lower levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, and higher levels of self-esteem, than people with no Instagram account. Krause, Baum, Baumann, and Krasnova (2019) studied the effects of social networking site use on one's self-esteem. Results indicate that using SNS to compare oneself with others leads to decrease in user's self-esteem. On the other hand, receiving positive feedback leads to a rise in the user's self-esteem. Social media often serves as place where we can showcase our talent and gain affirmation. They get a special platform through Instagram and Facebook to showcase their talent, often earning money through cooking and make up videos. The women who were unable to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer or singer gets a platform for almost free of cost to show their talent to wider society and gain value and worth for it. Research has shown media has given women an opportunity for women to earn while sitting at home and not going outside, media has made women literacy and opportunities increase. Women from rural and rugged climates can now reach and gain information about the world through media and internet. Researches also have shown that women get to read news and stay connected to vital information around them with the help of Instagram. After grasping the studies related to media and women, I through this paper present the research gap in which I studied the current day issues of too much Instagram use among women during their working and non- working hours and its result on their understanding of a feminine discourse. The research paper evaluates the vast literature around social gender construction and reinforcing of norms with the use of Instagram among women. The paper also explored the consequences of beauty and body positive influencers among women and the affect of reel culture on their knowledge about the real world.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Gender is performed not through a singular act but through ritualized repetition. This repetition gives gender its illusion of stability; the repeated performance of gender in accordance with social norms (men ought to speak like this, women ought to dress like this) reproduces and reinscribes those norms, making them seem legitimate and fixed (Allen, 2025). As Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Thinking through visuals in a culture-specific manner also necessitates understanding the gendered nature of the body as a figurative, formal, social, political and cultural symbol. Unlike the unmarked ‘universal’ body, the female body is thus marked by its gender identity as a social construct, where, following Simone de Beauvoir (‘one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one’) Judith Butler (1990) highlights the ‘compulsion of becoming’ a woman (p. 10-12). In this sense, returning to the idea of the body as a symbol and carrier of symbols, in her influential (and controversial) work on symbolism, through a ‘two bodies’ formulation (1970, p. 72), Mary Douglas explains the duality through which the physical body expresses situations and positions in ways appropriate to social categories. Douglas therefore showed how the figure of the woman and the female body operates as a signifier mythicised through its social and cultural symbolism.

3.2 Feminist media research has come a long way since its beginnings in the 1970s. Earlier research focused on under representation to women in media and stereotyping of women. Early feminist research focused more on Freudian psychoanalytic theory on the role gender in positioning the audience in relation to media content. More research has been done in the past on the role of media in reinforcing patriarchal ideology to suppress women. Gradually, gender research has made advances by drawing heavily from Feminist theory and feminist research. Today, gender research has a new approach and is examining how media are related to gender by underlining the concept gender construction. Along with looking at the way media represents women and women’s issues, and looking at the way institutional structures of power discriminate against women in the media production process, feminist media theorists are also interested in how audiences consume media content. Society Theories audience was developed in the Birmingham School by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. While they focused on working class audience’s reception of media content, feminist media scholars have used these ideas to see firstly what messages are people (both men and women) taking away from watching media, and secondly, how women consume media.

3.3 Gender theorist Judith Butler (1990) uses the metaphor of the theatre and performance to describe human behaviour. She theorises that all humans behave based on the models of behaviour they are taught and that gender itself is a performance or an act that all people are actors who enact our gender roles repeatedly and thus turn it into reality. She views gender as what we do and how we behave, rather than of what we are. She explains that gender is a cultural and societal construction that is enforced within the disciplinary framework of society and family, and that we are forced to perform the predetermined and stylised behaviours that through repetition become considered as natural, biological, or normal. She calls this Performativity. How can this theory be applied to media? On social media, we all “perform” our identity in various ways. The pictures we post, the people we choose to ‘friend’, the jokes and articles we share, all these make up our social media profile, and our personality. People, who may not know us in our “real” lives, may form an impression of who we are based on how we “perform” our self on social media.

3.4 Continuing our understanding of the self in cyberspace, Donna Haraway’s (1991) work on human-machine interaction and her notion of the cyborg as a “creature in a post-gender world” is an important framework that is used in studying digital spaces from a feminist perspective. Through this cyborg imagery, Haraway makes the case that technology allows women and in fact, all alienated groups to escape the confines of not only the physical, but also of traditional notions of identity. In doing so, she challenges traditional Marxist-feminist notions of gender, equality, and identity and argues for a new feminism that is based on ‘affinities.’

3.5 Over the years, it was hoped that digital media would transcend the limitations of race and gender identities, leading to a more homogenised online presence. To the contrary, today, users exhibit and perform their racial and gender identities quite emphatically in digital spaces. This departure from the expectation, additionally, disrupts how only a few privileged people could curate their public personas in exclusive ways. In fact, the widespread availability of affordable smartphones in the modern era has empowered millions to visually construct digital identities as an integral part of their everyday lives ([Hobson,2016](#)). Visuality of digital lives has emerged as a political and social phenomenon whose production is not just strategic, but also culture-specific ([Creech, 2020](#))

4. Methodology

The data for this paper has been drawn from women in the age of 18 to 24, keeping this age as a vital period for women's development in her career, personality and self-esteem. The age 18 to 24 also, showed massive users of Instagram in their daily life. The data has been collected using a purposive sampling method, from 20 users. The research questions were made in accordance with the following objectives-

4.1 The time women spend in Instagram.

4.2 what kind of content are mostly preferred by women.

4.3 How much women actively follow influencers on women body and beauty.

4.4 The effects of influencer culture on creation of changing feminist discourse.

4.5 Instagram use and bodily discomforts among women.

4.6 The role of Instagram in maintaining gender norms for body and beauty.

The researcher collected data through the online surveys and the use of questionnaire, with both open and close ended questions. The research also collected narratives from some women about their emotions and feelings about Instagram posts, blogs, reels in their way of thinking and adapting. The researcher has also explored the five popular Instagram influencers on Instagram producing contents about beauty and bodies. The researcher has gone through posts, reels, comments, photos and profiles of influencers.

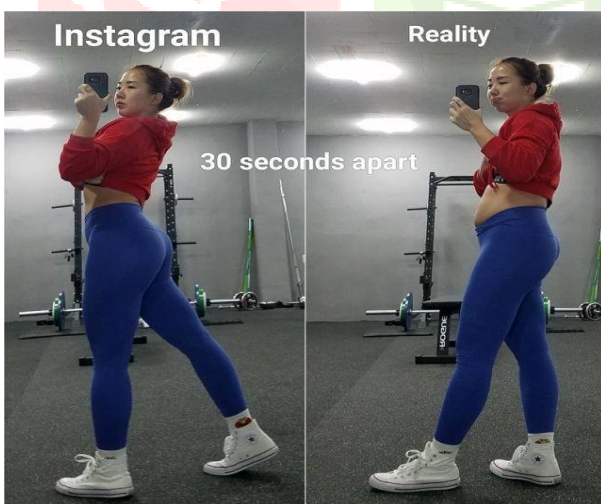
The researcher has tried to interpret women feelings about their gender, identity and body and their everyday actions in facing and performing to the real world. The researcher also conducted telephonic interviews which were unstructured in nature to get a deeper understanding of underlying thinking, perceiving and acting.

5. Data Analysis

Women have come a long way in their struggle but there is much more needed to take it to the same level with other genders. Traditionally, women have lived a much harder life and with a long struggle here we stand with new problems for analysis and evaluations. Much researches have been produced on women and their positive and negative correlation with media. lesser researches are seen in India regarding media and its free flow content in shaping of gender identities focusing on body comparisons, feeling of worthy and social acceptance. The research data collected through this paper shows that women are a very heavy users of Instagram, they rely on Instagram as a place where they can communicate, share feelings, get knowledge and remake their understanding of appropriation of gender behaviours. Women share a community feeling in Instagram they post, get inspired by friends, change their lifestyle according to the social bubble they have made in Instagram. Women follow influencers who cater their needs.

The Data analysis based on narratives collected from women:

- 5.1 Miss Y, claimed that she spends five hours from her hectic work schedule in scrolling Instagram does not matter wherever she is. She follows influencers on skin care, makeup, and dressing channels and keep herself updated to it. Sometimes, she feels ashamed of the old dresses she has which cannot be posted on Instagram because she claims it is not insta worthy. She also visits shops and buys products mentioned by her influencers. Miss Y, is many a times guilty of not following the skin care routine she saw on Instagram the last week. Miss Y, post stories about her coffee, evening dress, dinner make up products so that she can receive likes and sleep peacefully that still people are liking her posts. Miss Y, also feels that her friends are jealous of her because they do not have aesthetic profile like her and they do not have much followers. Her friends often tell her to re share their stories so that her friends can also develop a good amount of followers and viewers for the story they put. Miss Y, sometimes feel irritated about influencers showing cleavage, nudity and lustful pictures to gain followers and popularity.
- 5.2 Mrs Z, claims that her husband blindly watches women influencers dancing on reel songs, watching her husband watching lustful videos often make her sad. She spends a lot of time in watching herself and feeling guilty about not to be in a proper shape. She uses Instagram very less, because she thinks that she is not modern enough to handle Instagram posts and usage of filters. She is mocked by her friends for posting pictures and not actually understanding how to post and what kind of posts makes you look smarter. Mrs Z, fear her audience and only post picture of her face because she thinks that is only in shape and insta worthy and bring her likes. After posting a selfie she realises she is beautiful, which makes her day good and lightens up her mood. She does not carve for too many followers but she wants to be socially active so that her friends can know what is happening to her life after all. Mrs Z, says that she loved her body earlier and was never so conscious about it, but following a body influencer has made her go to the gym also as mentioned she says her husband like fit women. She recently posted a picture something liked this put below which gained her friends and husbands attention. She also gained some followers and she wants to continue her gym classes so that she can post from the gym and gain popularity among her friends and family as well. She has also hired a personal trainer so that she can change her body immediately and do not waste much time on it because she is a full- time school teacher.



5.3 Miss T, a full-time influencer has a beautifully created profile which has more than 20k followers. She considers herself very proud and have a high self - esteem and positive outlook towards her life. She loves promoting beauty brands, making lively videos and reaching her friends, friends of friends and her family, distant families also loving her videos. Mrs T, is a very beautiful young woman and men follow her like god. She has full of men commenting on her posts often good and sometimes sexual or harassing comments can also be seen. She makes mostly lipstick videos where her lips are focused in light and filters which makes them exceptionally attractive and sexual as well. She earns a

good amount of money it seems to her stories she posts everyday like #living the best life. Many women buy lipsticks from the brand recommended by her, and her every post has a lot of views and likes which is exceptionally strange. Some comments claimed that her lips are so attractive that men desire to buy such lips, which seemed normal in the comments and people laughed on it as a casual comment.

After understanding and evaluating the contents, it can be concluded that it is not easy today as well to become and perform as women. Earlier our socialisation was somehow was limited to the families, neighbours, school, and peers. Now media, public mass media like Instagram creates its own discourse regarding the ways of acting, thinking and behaving in society. What I can call as “Instagram Age” is a new phenomenon among the younger population today. The unlimited and free source of variety of

information in Instagram brings a social revolution in women behaviour. Women are adjusting everyday to the values put up by Instagram, she is comparing her self – worth through Instagram likes and followers. Increasing number of followers make her happy and control her emotions and self-appearance. In a study investigating Instagram and its relationship with narcissism and contextual age, the authors reported a positive correlation between high levels of social activity such as traveling, attending sporting events, visiting friends, and the desire to use Instagram as a tool for documentation and self-representation. Their results showed that women are more likely than males to be active on Instagram. Furthermore, in a significant analysis and discussion on visual content from 172 female influencers on Instagram, the authors found that most influencers consistently pose in ways that highlight body parts; wear tight, short, and revealing clothing; and make gestures such as gently pulling their hair, touching their parted lips, and simulating undressing. This study reported that these influencers employ Instagram as a platform to be discovered, gain more followers, and obtain more likes. While extensive research has examined the proliferation of sexualized imagery and self-representation and its effects on posing in ways that highlight body parts, most of these studies use conventional methods such as surveys and manual labeling.

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