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The Impact of Instagram on Individuals' Satisfaction with Their Appearance: A Case Study of Female University Students in Tehran

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Abstract

Social media platforms like Instagram facilitate connections among individuals through the sharing of images and videos, substantially augmenting the potential for influencing their audience. An area of particular interest that has evolved in recent years, especially with the growth of the virtual space and the visual-centric content on Instagram, is the level of satisfaction individuals have with their physical appearance, particularly among women. Their contentment with their appearance is intricately linked to the idealized beauty standards championed by Instagram beauty bloggers, often inspiring them to emulate or even contrast with these models. In cases where individuals deviate from Instagram's beauty standards, their definition of beauty still reflects certain parallels with these standards. For instance, they do not necessarily consider excess weight as a criterion for beauty, much like the Instagram models, who serve as symbols of conventional beauty, rarely possess excess weight. This qualitative research studied this subject through interviews with six female university students



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aged 20-30 in Tehran. The study aims to explore the influence of Instagram on their self-perception, satisfaction with their physical appearance, and their notions of beauty and desirable aesthetics. The research process involved a comprehensive review of key concepts and relevant literature, followed by the analysis and comparison of the interview themes. The study's findings, derived from an in-depth examination of these themes and concepts, provide a more profound understanding of the participants' mental constructs within the virtual space, shedding light on the substantial impact of this digital environment on individual mindsets.

Keywords: Instagram, qualitative research method, satisfaction with appearance, virtual space.

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

It has become increasingly clear that social networks have emerged as innovative media platforms capable of supplanting traditional forms of media, including print media. This substitution has not only influenced the perceptions of the audience but has also idealized their notions and preferences. As a result, individuals have begun to seek and emulate their ideal models within the virtual realm. This idealization often encompasses various aspects, including an individual's social status, lifestyle choices, and, notably, their physical appearance.

Big internet corporations take huge financial advantages from providing digital services (Zohouri et al., 2021), giving voice to the voiceless (Zohouri et al., 2020) and even giving much needed expensive counselling services to people who have no financial resources (Nosrati et al., 2020). Among the plethora of social networks that have gained significant prominence in recent years, Instagram stands out as a prominent example. Instagram's distinctive feature of allowing users to effortlessly share videos, photos, and textual content at any time of the day without constraints has rapidly captured the attention of a diverse and extensive audience. This platform facilitates meaningful interactions among individuals, enabling them to share moments and experiences in the form of images, videos, and text. The sharing of content, particularly visual content, on platforms like Instagram generates greater enthusiasm compared to platforms primarily reliant on textual content. Extensive studies have demonstrated the profitability of sharing visual content on Instagram, fostering heightened engagement and interactions among

users (Manovich, 2015). The act of sharing images holds paramount importance to the audience, and the appeal of sharing videos is equally significant. Reports indicate that in 2015, over a span of five months, a staggering 10.5 million images were shared in New York alone, underscoring the profound interest users have in sharing visual concepts and engaging with such content (Ibid).

The choice of social media platforms for engagement often varies between men and women, and it is often driven by the specific topics individuals wish to discuss. Female users tend to gravitate towards platforms that emphasize visual content, while males are more inclined towards text-based media. Notably, platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram have predominantly female user bases (Atanasova, 2016). Consequently, women tend to be more interested in visual content.

Given the enduring importance of beauty in the lives of women throughout history, numerous users, particularly those recognized as beauty bloggers, specialize in aspects of facial and bodily aesthetics, meticulously crafting distinct beauty ideals. In recent years, advancements in cosmetic surgery have led many women to pursue these procedures extensively, often comparing themselves to the global beauty standards propagated by social networks, bloggers, and celebrities (Hassani et al., 2015). Moreover, even when women choose not to conform to these standards, they often establish their own criteria for beauty, which still align with prevailing norms. Instagram, in particular, has enabled individuals to gain significant popularity by simply sharing photos, delivering content that benefits not only investors but also account owners. This content typically centers around daily lifestyle, and its primary supporters are often women. With the introduction of Instagram's Stories feature in 2013, which allowed for more dynamic content sharing, the user base expanded rapidly, reaching 300 million users by 2014. Consequently, Instagram has served the interests of both celebrities and investors (Sarfi et al., 2021), portraying not only an enviable life but also an idealized body and appearance to its users (Frayner, 2021).

Sociologist Katrin Tidenberg from Tallinn University suggests that the traditional role of women in society, historically involving the responsibility for capturing images, might have contributed to their heightened focus on visual content in the virtual space (Atanasova, 2016). The core hypothesis of this article posits that the presentation of visual archetypes for women in recent years has precipitated a transformation in their definitions of beauty and a shift in their

perceptions of appearance. Women's concept of an ideal body is no longer formed in isolation; instead, it is profoundly influenced by social interactions and the virtual space.

The present study evaluates the social networking capability of Instagram and employs qualitative analysis through interviews with six female students aged 20 to 30 in Tehran. The study sample is selected by purposeful sampling, encompassing Iranian women with variations in age, ethnicity, and educational background. The aim of this study is to illustrate the extent of social media's impact on women's deep-seated beliefs, their self-perceptions, and their definitions of the desired appearance.

According to the statistics published by Google Trends between March 6th, 2022 and February 30th, 2023, the interest in the term "body image" among residents of Tehran is notably high. The data shows that on 23-29 of October, 2022, which corresponds to the first week of Aban month in 1400, the term reached its peak search volume, as depicted in Figure 1.

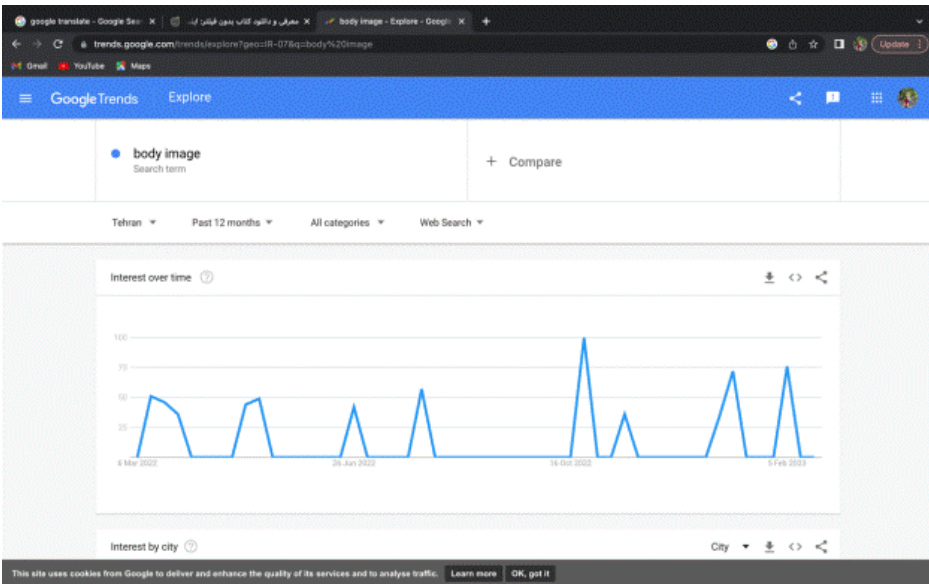


Figure 1. The interest in the term "body image" among residents of Tehran on 23-29 of October, 2022

Considering this chart and the aforementioned discussions, the significance of focusing on the content related to themes of body image, cosmetic procedures, and make-ups holds great popularity among virtual space users and particularly among women. Female in Tehran

are no exception to this trend. Therefore, understanding individuals' perceptions of these concepts and the influence of the virtual space on their understanding and definitions can be extensively examined and studied.

In line with the objectives of this research, the following research questions are presented:

1. What impact has Instagram had on the level of satisfaction of Tehranian female students aged 20 to 30 with their appearance?
2. To what extent does individuals' satisfaction with their appearance align with the patterns presented on Instagram?
3. What are the components of a desirable appearance according to Instagram's definition?
4. In what ways do women appreciate and engage with this content?

Review of the Related Literature

This research emphasizes the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) in understanding the audience's attention to certain types of content, content selection, and enjoying it.

The Uses and Gratification Theory, originated by Katz and Blumler (1974) in the early 1940s, delves into the understanding of why people use specific forms of media, what needs drive their usage, and what gratification they derive from it. Historically, this theory was introduced to comprehend why individuals engaged with various forms of media available at that time in the 1940s (Kasirye, 2022).

In other words, this theory thoroughly addresses the purposes for which individuals use a medium and subsequently engage with its content and enjoy it. The focus of this theory is entirely on the audience and their motivations for following particular content.

Currently, this theory relies on two assumptions regarding media: the first assumption shows that audiences are active participants and contributors to the media due to the content they choose; the second assumption is that users or consumers of media are conscious of the reasons for their choice of a specific medium for consumption (Ibid).

In fact, this theory considers the audience as active and aware, refraining from viewing them as uninformed in their media and content choices. Therefore, according to this theory, audiences actively seek out content related to global aesthetic patterns, beauty standards, as well as content like makeup application, body shaping, and cosmetic procedures, reflecting their own preferences and desires. It can be argued that this content significantly influences them.

In this section, the main concepts of the research will be explained to establish the foundation for the interviews and the literature of the study.

1. Instagram: Instagram is a social media platform used by over one billion people worldwide to share photos, videos, and messages (The Parent's Guide to Instagram, 2016). This social network was launched on October 4 and gained over a million users within a year. By September 15, 2015, it had approximately 400 million active users (Samani & Farahani, 2016).

From 2010 to the present, Instagram has showcased various types of content on its platform, consistently striving to align content with the interests of capital owners. One of these influential concepts that has profoundly impacted the audience and generated substantial profits for capital owners is content related to individuals' bodies and appearance. This content was disseminated by beauty bloggers, makeup artists, plastic surgeons, and body sculptors who endeavored to showcase an exaggerated sense of beauty in their bodies and facial features, encouraging others to emulate them and prompting audiences to aspire to resemble these individuals.

2. Beauty Bloggers: These individuals essentially use their Instagram pages to promote makeup products, up-to-date beauty trends, facial surgeries, body sculpting, and products that eliminate natural facial and bodily irregularities, standardizing and homogenizing appearances. What they do can be understood as a kind of *vicarious consumption* (Shahghasemi, 2021) They generate significant income through advertising products, either through their Instagram accounts or through collaborations with partnering companies. Over the years, the number of beauty bloggers has increased worldwide, with many of the most prominent ones being Iranian.

3. Body Image: The perception individuals have of their bodies and appearances is totally derived from their environmental and mental space they live in. Virtual platforms have considerably influenced this image, to the extent that individuals define their sense of attractiveness and undesirability based on the standards presented to them in this space.

The use of social media is associated with concerns about body image, particularly if users are engaged in specific activities on these platforms, such as making comparisons. While more empirical evidence is needed, existing findings indicate that

interventions addressing body image and media literacy should address the potential impact of social media on users. For example, intervention programs can highlight the idealized nature of images and content uploaded on social media and educate children and adolescents about the potential impact of comparing themselves to such content (Jasmine Fardouly, 2016).

- 4. Ugliness and Beauty:** Ugliness and beauty are perceived based on cultural influences and the interpretations individuals or audiences in different societies assign to them. Nowadays, it seems that standards of ugliness and beauty vary across different communities. Moreover, global criteria and reports that depict the attributes of the most attractive individuals are largely derived from a mental framework, such as considering overly thin faces, taut bodies, and exaggerated slimness as beautiful. However, these criteria can often serve as abstractions or tools for the enrichment of those who promote them.

As Marx hinted in his writings on economic philosophy, the concepts of ugliness and beauty are relative, with ugliness acquiring significance in the absence of wealth or power. He believed that in the modern world, beauty can be commodified (Eco, 2019). Consequently, notions of ugliness and beauty are defined within the context of the criteria tied to wealth and power, and they evolve differently in each era and society.

Research background

Extensive research has been conducted regarding individuals' perceptions of their faces and bodies, as well as their susceptibility to the patterns presented in the virtual space. This includes the significant impact of virtual content, particularly visual media such as Instagram, on shaping individuals' definitions of beauty and their perceptions of their own and the ideal faces and bodies. Several research studies are introduced in the following:

1. The article on Mass Media and Concerns about Body Image by Jasmin Fardouly and Lenny Vartanian discusses the presentation of body images in mass media, highlighting how these images are portrayed, widely shared and expanded over time. They emphasize the role of mass media in shaping body images and setting patterns for virtual users, particularly social media platforms. These platforms often share images of bodies, which are often idealized versions of reality. This process leads individuals into a cycle of idealization, influencing their perceptions and defining superior models. Additionally, these media outlets eliminate or restrict

images conflicting with their constructed standards. Interaction among individuals in this space also involves sharing opinions, which can influence others' perspectives.

2. The article on Idealized Female Faces on Instagram by Gia Tolentino explores the uniformity of beauty ideals for women through similar cosmetic procedures and modeling famous people in the world like Kim Kardashian on platforms like Instagram. It also emphasizes the acceleration of these trends and the similarity of all women to famous models. Based on remarkable statistics, the article highlights the increasing trend of beauty procedures in recent years. Despite the cost and sometimes significant discomfort, they find it bearable because they believe that the beauty is worth pursuing the procedure. Twenty years ago, plastic surgery was a relatively noticeable intervention. It was expensive, invasive, permanent, and usually risky. However, in 2002, the Food and Drug Administration approved the use of Botox, and a few years later, facial fillers also gained the approval of this organization. Initially, the fillers were injected between fine lines and wrinkles on the face, but now they are used for nose and cheek changes.
3. The article on Gender Differences in Body Image Satisfaction written by Mohammad Ismaeil Riahi (2021), delves into the divergent perspectives between women and men regarding their body image satisfaction. This study points out that the level of satisfaction for men and women, as well as the portrayal of it in social contexts and the content they consume, is contingent upon various factors. The issue of satisfaction from body is predominantly prominent among women, a phenomenon largely attributed to societal expectations of the ideal female body and the portrayals perpetuated by the media. The article further emphasizes that women tend to invest more in attaining the ideal body and are driven to attain it more fervently than men.
4. The article on the relationship between media, body image, self-esteem, and the inclination towards cosmetic procedures and makeup by Dr. Majid Moheb et al. investigates individuals' body satisfaction and the correlation between the extent of makeup application by women and their self-esteem. In the media, an immense emphasis is placed on the beauty of women's faces and bodies, captivating women's attention and urging them to adhere to behavioral patterns that these very media outlets have propagated.

Research methodology

Qualitative studies encompass methods employed to examine phenomena in their natural forms, where the researcher does not have any predetermined hypotheses in the subject area. In such research, the aim of the researcher is to explore the "quality" of the phenomenon under study, rather than focusing on "quantity." The term "quality" refers to "what", "how", "when", "how much", etc. therefore, qualitative research focus on the nature, concepts, definitions, metaphors, descriptions, and characteristics of the subjects and topics under investigation (Reza Ali, 2015).

In this study, the effort has been directed towards understanding the impact of virtual space, particularly Instagram, on individuals' perceptions of their appearance (both facial and bodily) and their self-conceptions through interviews. The virtual space has been able to shape individuals' definitions and perspectives regarding beauty and beautiful people.

Qualitative research is used to comprehend and explain complex social phenomena through qualitative data such as data obtained from interviews, participant observation, and documentation. It is rooted in the presence of human factors. In this method, the viewpoints of both the researcher and the researched are mutually considered. It encompasses description and explanation and relies on individuals' statements and observable behaviors for data collection (Ibide).

In this study, due to the significance of the topic of satisfaction from appearance and its implications, such as successive beauty procedures, exaggerated cosmetics, and individuals' fear of being seen without makeup, it is necessary to delve into the realm of virtual space, particularly Instagram. Given its extensive influence on individuals' definitions and their satisfaction with their natural appearance, a qualitative research approach was employed to analyze individuals' interviews and address the themes related to "appearance satisfaction" that are present in their discussions.

This study aimed to investigate the concept of "appearance satisfaction" among female students aged 20-30 in Tehran. This concept has been studied considering the virtual space and the influences it exerts on individuals' perspectives. The data collection strategy involved telephone interviews. Prior to contacting the interviewees, coordinations were made with the interviewees to ensure a suitable time for the telephone conversation. In a message usually sent via Telegram, it would be explained that the interview would take around 10-20 minutes and that it pertains to a class assignment. Then the time

of the phone call would be finalized. After the telephone conversation, initially the research topic would be explained and the interviewees were informed that they could discontinue the interview at any point or refrain from answering any question they wished. Furthermore, their permission was obtained to record the conversation. Subsequently, after inquiring about their personal information the process would proceed by asking further questions. If they did not understand a question, it would be rephrased, and if the researcher did not get the response they aimed for, they would ask a different question to better understand the interviewees' perspective. Due to time constraints and the unavailability of interviewees, the interviews were conducted in a surface-level manner.

The sampling method of this study was purposive. That is, the participants were intentionally selected from among acquaintances that the researcher believed could respond to the questions. The selection criteria were a combination of factors such as ease of access, being of the same type, and maximizing diversity. In a purposive manner, individuals who were accessible and all of whom were students residing in Tehran and fell within the age range of 20-30 were selected. However, the selection process was such that the students were from various fields of study and the age range of 20-30, ensuring a wide distribution, and considering the focus of the researcher on women, only female students were interviewed.

Measurement refers to the determination of the number of objects or events according to specific rules by which the variables related to them are measured. For instance, in the study of social issues in Tehran, the unit of measurement is "social issues in Tehran city," which are probed with specific questions and subjected to measurement (Atf, 2017). In this article, the sample is consisted of six female students aged 20-30 in Tehran.

Research findings

After conducting telephone interviews with six resident students in Tehran, the interview were transcribed and thoroughly studied. Additionally, during the interviews, notes were taken of the tone and response patterns of the interviewees. Subsequently, a table was created for analyzing the interviews and based on the derived themes and subthemes, separate diagrams were drawn for each participant. Eventually, a final diagram was synthesized with five main concepts that encompassed all the subthemes. These five concepts are showed in Figure 2, and the detailed explanations for each one is provided below:

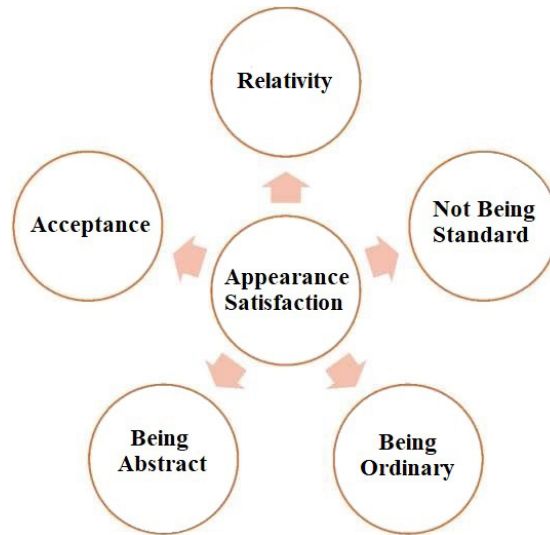


Figure 2. Five main concepts being encompassed all the subthemes

- **Relativity:** as mentioned in the main research concepts, signifies that beauty is entirely relative and varies across different times and societies. This relativity also exists among individuals, as what may be a fashionable makeup style in the virtual space can be considered unattractive by many. Differences in individuals' perspectives on beauty can lead to encountering diverse tastes. The interviewees pointed out that beauty is not an absolute concept, and beauty bloggers and cosmetics companies strive to present it as absolute, encouraging people to resemble each other. Accordingly, many extreme and exaggerated procedures become normal to individuals to make them distinct from others and transform their bodies according to the established global patterns. Paradoxically, beauty is a matter of personal taste, and considering the diversity of people on Earth, it's safe to say that there are varying preferences. In contrast to the global industry's approach, which aims to make people conform to a uniform standard, the interviewees acknowledged that the perception of external beauty is relative, and individuals being satisfied with their appearance can also be influenced by the opinions of those around them, as their reactions reflect an outward view of individuals. According to this part of the interview, "... I hate the extreme procedures and exaggerated makeup. In my opinion, each person should embrace their natural beauty and remain true to themselves without excessively altering each facial feature to conform to a predefined standard of beauty. To

put it simply, we should be ourselves, be unique, be natural, simple, and emphasize recognizing and being content with our differences without undergoing changes.

- **Not Being Standard:** Global standards and criteria provides us with definitions that delineate right from wrong and allow research to distinguish between the ugly and the beautiful. Hence, interviewees express that not conforming to these patterns can lead to their satisfaction. However, it might not align with general satisfaction and global standards. They highlight that these standards are artificial, driven by the interests of capitalists, and do not necessarily endure. These components can differ based on the cultural context of each region. Moreover, it is also mentioned that individuals create their own standards and find contentment within them, even though these standards of appearance may differ from global criteria. It was also mentioned in this section of the interview that “for example I have big eyes which makes me seem trustworthy and friendly or seem funny to children. This is more important to me than having a face like the Kardashians”. It seems that although individuals’ criteria are different from the global criteria, they create their own standards and feel content. Moreover, not following the global models distinct people from others. You might act against the society where certain beauty procedures are trendy. This behavior essentially leads to your unique facial features differing from the recurring beauty standards we encounter on platforms like Instagram.
- **Being Ordinary:** In fact, far from exaggerated makeovers or procedures that make individuals more visible, interviewees expressed that being ordinary generate a sense of contentment with their appearance. Many considered being ordinary synonymous with simplicity. In reality, they believed that accepting oneself as they truly are with flaws and all can lead to greater satisfaction. “Another thing that seems good to me is simplicity and naturalness. That is, not altering your appearance to the point where everyone can tell from a distance and you become similar to everyone else.” As mentioned in this part of the interview, the criterion that individuals embrace, contrary to the established norms in the virtual space, is precisely being natural. Individuals accept that the body of an ordinary person cannot be flawless and they love themselves with all their imperfections.
- **Being Abstract:** Perception of beauty and the notions of Instagram-inspired beauty are abstract concepts, shaping the

minds of individuals. The repetitiveness of components in facial and bodily features that create the mindset of being beautiful is artificial to a large extent. In fact, these mental criteria urge individuals to conform uniformly. The cliché beauty has led many individuals to adopt it, and even today, having a body resembling an hourglass figure, prominent lips, and wide eyebrows are abstract beauty standards that might be interpreted differently in people's minds. Artificial pictures are presented with effects and filters to others.

- **Acceptance:** Being acceptable can stem from the individual themselves or the society they live in. In reality, a set of factors conveys to the individual the sense that their appearance is accepted or that they are moving toward acceptability. In this research, acceptability can refer to an individual's enjoyment of their appearance or the confidence to be present in society without making any changes to their appearance or physique. However, the predominant reference in the interview text regarding acceptability was related to satisfaction. Just as it can be seen in this section of the interview: "Occasionally, I think, I wish a certain point on my face were a certain way or my physique was a bit different, but overall and in most cases, I feel good and satisfied." The interviewee acknowledges that, despite the fact that their face and body might need alterations to conform to the definitions of beauty, they still find satisfaction in their appearance. Interviewees express that having a well-groomed appearance of the face and body is often of greater importance, as individuals must present a fitting appearance in social settings. Although facial beauty is not what they have control over, grooming can still be. It is also mentioned that adapting to the trends, not for global trends but for trends accepted by the society and making one appear more well-groomed, can influence the opinions of those around them. Adapting to the environment and conforming to the culture of that society can lead to a sense of acceptance from oneself and the community. A particular style of dress may be very acceptable in one society, yet not seem so in another. Moreover, the extent to which our appearance and interpretation of it diverge from the virtual world and move closer to reality influences our level of satisfaction. According to the interviews, the virtual space has clearly led individuals to perceive imperfections in their appearance, but they have managed to attenuate these imperfections and accept them as

natural facets of their face and body, or their definition of beauty has shifted entirely. It was mentioned in several interviews that the popularity of various types of surgeries and beauty styles promoted by beauty bloggers may lead to acceptance in society, while they prefer not to conform to those standards.

Conclusion

Instagram, which was launched in October 2010 at the beginning of the decade, has cultivated its own distinct beauty aesthetic. In this aesthetic, the ideal image is one that immediately captivates the viewer on their smartphone screen. Another noteworthy characteristic of this beauty aesthetic is a pervasive human enthusiasm and a sense of general conformity. In essence, the visual standards upheld by Instagram and the broader virtual space have either converged or have been rendered similar through cosmetic procedures. These standards typically feature a youthful visage characterized by smooth skin, prominent cheekbones, captivating cat-like eyes, exaggerated eyelashes resembling a cartoonish aesthetic, a petite and refined nose, and full lips. Additionally, these standards extend to encompass a sculpted and exaggerated body. Consequently, followers of these meticulously constructed ideals often aspire to emulate them or equate conformity with these criteria to personal beauty. It's important to note that the human body frequently undergoes non-conforming adjustments on Instagram. Through effort and diligent practice, individuals modify their appearance to align with these beauty ideals. Beauty practitioners, alongside the virtual world, endeavor to portray a more perfected and idealized version, rooted in the patterns they have helped establish.

In this study, interviews were conducted with six female university students who live in Tehran using purposeful sampling. Subsequently, based on the literary concepts of the research and the conducted interviews, the main themes were examined to understand the complete perspective of the interviewees on their satisfaction with their appearance. The level of satisfaction among interviewees on the virtual platform varied, and the definitions they held of beauty were influenced by Instagram's patterns.

In this research, five main components were found through the interviews: relativity, not being standard, being ordinary, being abstract, and acceptance. Then these themes and sub-themes were explored in two stages, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the interview texts and an analysis of individuals' opinions about their appearance satisfaction in relation to these components. This process

led to the precise identification of each of these components. Overall, it appeared that individuals were aware that global definitions of beauty differ from their facial criteria, and they described these global beauty definitions as compatible with their own. However, they were content with their appearance and their own criteria, and were more interested in being unique and moving against the global artificial and exaggerated standards. In general, the interviewees were satisfied with their appearance, although they acknowledged that this satisfaction is mainly internal and that the fashion and beauty industry worldwide might not consider them beautiful according to its standards.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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