



Comparing Ourselves Online: A Study of Social Media's Role in Self-Perception

საკუთარი თავის შედარება ინტერნეტში: სოციალური მედიის როლის კვლევა თვითაღქმაში



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Abstract

Introduction: Social media platforms play a central role in shaping how young people evaluate their appearance. Exposure to appearance-focused content is strongly linked to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem. This study examines the relationship between social media use, body image, and self-perception among young adults in Georgia. **Methods:** A two-phase, mixed-methods approach was conducted. Phase 1 involved seven semi-structured qualitative interviews (five users, one influencer, and one psychologist) analyzed thematically using MAXQDA. Phase 2 deployed an online survey targeting active social media users in Georgia (N=120), with descriptive statistics computed in SPSS. **Results:** Qualitative findings highlighted appearance comparison, filtered self-presentation, and online validation as primary drivers of body image shifts, with women reporting more frequent, emotionally charged comparisons. The survey confirmed these patterns quantitatively: 78% of respondents were aged 18–28 and 78% were female. Over 75% spent more than four hours daily on social media, primarily Instagram (80%) and TikTok (69%). Overall, 83% reported comparing their appearance to others online, and 47% stated social media strongly impacted their body satisfaction. Fitness content (44%) and influencer posts (42%) were the primary triggers of dissatisfaction, while 52% frequently compared life achievements. Additionally, 43% felt less confident after platform use, and body reshaping (49%) emerged as the most influential photo modification. Positively, 56% followed body-positive creators and 76% acknowledged that digital breaks improved mental well-being, though few implemented them consistently. **Conclusion:** Social media significantly influences body image among young Georgians through appearance comparison and curated content. Because cognitive awareness alone does not prevent negative impacts, fostering a healthier digital environment requires a combination of platform-level policy changes, media literacy education, and personal coping mechanisms.

Keywords: Social Media, Body Image, Self-Perception, Social Comparison Theory, Appearance Comparison, Filters and Editing Apps, Young Adults, Digital Well-Being.

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აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი: სოციალური მედია ცენტრალურ როლს ასრულებს ახალგაზრდების მიერ საკუთარი გარეგნობის შეფასებაში. გარეგნობაზე ორიენტირებული კონტენტის მოხმარება პირდაპირ უკავშირდება სხეულით უკმაყოფილებასა და დაბალ თვითშეფასებას. წინამდებარე კვლევა შეისწავლის სოციალური მედიის გამოყენების კავშირს სხეულის იმიჯსა და თვითაღქმასთან ქართველ ახალგაზრდებში. **მეთოდოლოგია:** კვლევა განხორციელდა ორეტაპიანი, შერეული მიდგომით. პირველ ეტაპზე ჩატარდა შვიდი ნახევრად სტრუქტურირებული თვისებრივი ინტერვიუ (ხუთი მომხმარებელი, ერთი ინფლუენსერი და ერთი ფსიქოლოგი), რომლებიც თემატურად დამუშავდა MAXQDA-ში. მეორე ეტაპზე, შემუშავებული რაოდენობრივი კითხვარი (Google Forms/SPSS) შეავსო საქართველოში მცხოვრებმა 120-მა აქტიურმა მომხმარებელმა. **შედეგები:** თვისებრივმა ანალიზმა აჩვენა, რომ გარეგნობის შედარება, გაფილტრული თვითპრეზენტაცია და ონლაინ აღიარება სხეულის აღქმის ცვლილების მთავარი დრაივერებია (ქალებში უფრო მაღალი ემოციური ინტენსივობით). რაოდენობრივმა მონაცემებმა ეს ტენდენციები დაადასტურა: რესპონდენტთა 78%-ს 18–28 წლის ახალგაზრდები და 78%-ს ქალები შეადგენდნენ. მონაწილეთა >75% დღეში 4 საათზე მეტს ატარებს სოციალურ ქსელებში, ძირითადად Instagram-სა (80%) და TikTok-ზე (69%). გამოკითხულთა 83% საკუთარ გარეგნობას სხვებს ადარებს, ხოლო 47%-ისთვის ეს გავლენას ახდენს სხეულით უკმაყოფილებაზე. უკმაყოფილების მთავარ ტრიგერებად ფიტნეს-კონტენტი (44%) და ცნობილების/ინფლუენსერების პოსტები (42%) დასახელდა; 52% კი ხშირად ადარებს თავის ცხოვრებისეულ მიღწევებს სხვებისას. ამასთან, 43% პლატფორმების მოხმარების შემდეგ ნაკლებად თავდაჯერებულია, ხოლო ფოტოების რედაქტირებას შორის სხეულის ფორმების შეცვლამ (49%) ყველაზე დიდი გავლენა აჩვენა. პოზიტიური კუთხით, 56% თვალს ადევნებს „body-positive“ კონტენტს და 76% აღიარებს, რომ ციფრული შესვენება უმჯობესებს მენტალურ მდგომარეობას, თუმცა ამას იშვიათად აკეთებენ. **დასკვნა:** სოციალურ მედიას გაზომვადი გავლენა აქვს ქართველი ახალგაზრდების სხეულის აღქმაზე. რადგან მხოლოდ პრობლემის გაცნობიერება საკმარისი არ არის, ჯანსაღი ციფრული გარემოს შესაქმნელად აუცილებელია პლატფორმების დონის რეგულაციების, მედიაინჟინერებისა და ინდივიდუალური გამკლავების სტრატეგიების კომბინირება.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: სოციალური მედია, სხეულის იმიჯი, თვითაღქმა, სოციალური შედარების თეორია, გარეგნობის შედარება, ფილტრები და რედაქტირების აპლიკაციები, ახალგაზრდები, ციფრული კეთილდღეობა.

რეკომენდირებული ციტირება: მამნიაშვილი გ, ლაფერაშვილი ს. (2026). საკუთარი თავის შედარება ინტერნეტში: სოციალური მედიის როლის კვლევა თვითაღქმაში. *ჯანდაცვის პოლიტიკა, ეკონომიკა და სოციოლოგია*, 10 (2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52340/healthecosoc.2026.10.02.12>

Introduction

In the last ten years, social media has become one of the strongest forces that shape how people see themselves and others. Visual platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook are now spaces of constant visual contact. On these platforms users are consumers of appearance-focused content and creators of it at the same time. The platforms were first designed for communication, but a large amount of research shows that they also play an important role in shaping body image and self-perception, especially among teenagers and young adults (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2024).

According to the Pew Research Center (2024), more than 90% of teenagers and young adults use at least one visual, image-based platform every day. They often post selfies, edit photos with filters and compare their appearance with friends and influencers who show idealized images. Research shows that this constant exposure to filtered content contributes to unrealistic beauty standards, dissatisfaction with one's own body, low self-esteem and, in some cases, disordered eating behavior (Perloff, 2022). At the same time, body-positive movements on social media have created new possibilities for a healthier relationship with the body,

although some researchers warn that this type of content can become commercial rather than authentic (National Body Confidence Coalition, 2023).

This study examines the relationship between social media use and body image among young adults in Georgia. It uses an online survey that builds on an earlier qualitative phase of seven in-depth interviews with social media users, an influencer and a psychologist. The objectives of the study were to:

- Examine how often and how intensively young Georgian social media users interact with visual platforms and appearance-related content;
- Measure how often users compare their appearance with others online, and how this comparison is connected to body satisfaction;
- Identify the types of content (fitness, beauty, celebrity, lifestyle) that are most strongly linked to body dissatisfaction;
- Analyze the role of filters, editing tools and online validation (likes and comments) in shaping self-perception;
- Evaluate how aware respondents are of social media's influence on their self-image, and which coping strategies they use.

These objectives follow the structure of the earlier qualitative phase of the research. In that phase, seven in-depth interviews suggested that comparison, filtered self-presentation and online validation were the three behaviors most closely linked to changes in how participants saw their own bodies. The survey reported here was designed to test whether these patterns also appear in a larger and more varied group of respondents, and to measure how common they are in numbers rather than only in personal accounts.

Theoretical background

Several psychological theories help to explain how social media affects body image. Social Comparison Theory states that people evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and their appearance with others (Festinger, 1954). On visual platforms this process becomes stronger, because users see selected and idealized images again and again. They compare themselves not with average people around them, but with influencers who present the "best" version of themselves (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Self-Discrepancy Theory suggests that psychological discomfort appears when there is a gap between a person's actual self and their ideal self (Higgins, 1987). Constant exposure to idealized images on social media can make this gap wider. As a result, some people start to eat less than they need, exercise too much, or use filters in order to come closer to a standard of beauty that does not exist in real life.

Objectification Theory offers a social and cultural explanation. It argues that women in particular learn to see themselves as objects that other people evaluate on the basis of appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Social media supports this process, because it rewards appearance-based content with visibility and engagement. Taken together, these three theories suggest that social media does not simply reflect the beauty standards that already exist in society. It also reshapes them through repeated comparison, filtered self-presentation and frequent exposure to appearance-related content.

Secondary data

Before the primary research was carried out, secondary data were reviewed in order to place the Georgian results in a wider context. According to the Pew Research Center (2024), about 63% of teenagers use TikTok every day, 61% use Instagram, 55% use Snapchat and 50% use Facebook. All of these platforms are highly visual, which makes them the most relevant environment for body image concerns.

Data from Common Sense Media (2023) show that image-based platforms are also connected with negative feelings about appearance. About 32% of Instagram users and 31% of TikTok users report negative feelings about themselves at least once a week. The rates are slightly lower for Snapchat (28%) and Facebook (22%). The same sources show a clear gender difference. Girls report weekly negative feelings much more often than boys on every platform, and the largest gap appears on Instagram, where 40% of girls report such feelings compared with 25% of boys (Table 1).

Table 1. Daily platform use and weekly negative feelings about appearance among teenagers (secondary data)

Platform	Daily use	Negative feelings (all users)	Girls	Boys
TikTok	63%	31%	38%	24%
Instagram	61%	32%	40%	25%
Snapchat	55%	28%	32%	21%
Facebook	50%	22%	28%	18%

Source: Pew Research Center (2024); Common Sense Media (2023).

These secondary results are useful for two reasons. First, they show that the patterns found in this study are not limited to Georgia, but appear in much larger international samples. Second, they support the decision to pay special attention to gender differences and to the most visual platforms in the primary research that follows.

Methodology

This study used a two-phase, mixed-methods approach. The qualitative interview phase was carried out first. Its aim was to explore in depth how social media users describe and explain their own experience of body image and self-perception. The quantitative survey phase followed. Its aim was to test whether the themes from the interviews also appear in a larger and more varied group of respondents, and to measure how common these themes are.

Qualitative Phase

Sampling and sampling units: Seven participants were interviewed. Five of them were general social media users: three women aged 23–25 and two men aged 20–21, mostly university students. One participant was a social media influencer who is active on TikTok, and one was a psychologist. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. The two participants with a professional or public position, the psychologist and the influencer, were included on purpose, so that the topic could be viewed from more than one side.

Data Collection: The interviews were conducted individually by call. Each interview lasted about 20-30 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol of 15 core questions in four sections: daily habits and social media use; personal feelings and self-perception; social comparison; and the wider view of society. The questions for the psychologist and the influencer were adapted to their professional position. Follow-up questions were added in several interviews in order to bring participants back to body image, because the first interviews showed that some of them started to speak about the general effects of social media on lifestyle instead of appearance.

Analysis: All interview recordings were transcribed. The transcripts, including the interviews with the psychologist and the influencer, were imported into MAXQDA as separate documents. A coding scheme of 20 codes was developed from the interview questions and from the objectives of the study. This scheme was then applied to all transcripts in order to find repeated themes. The coded segments were reviewed by participant type (general users, the psychologist, the influencer), both separately and in comparison with each other.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase used a structured questionnaire to test the themes from the interviews on a larger scale. These themes were appearance comparison, emotional reactions to appearance-related content, the use of filters and editing tools, and self-reported awareness and coping strategies.

Sample Size: The general population of this study consisted of active social media users, with a particular focus on young adults. Teenagers and older users were also included, so that age groups could be compared. A sample-size calculator was used with a 95% confidence level, which is the most conservative estimate. On this basis, the recommended minimum sample was about 120 completed responses. With $n = 120$, a reported percentage has a margin of error of about $\pm 9\%$.

Data Collection and Sampling Unit: Data were collected with a structured questionnaire that was administered online through Google Forms. The survey link was distributed through different groups, groups for prospective students and personal networks on Facebook. A non-probability, convenience sampling

method was used. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personal identifying information was collected. A filter question at the beginning of the survey excluded respondents who were not active users. After exclusions 120 valid responses were kept for analysis.

The questionnaire contained 26 items in several sections: demographic information (age and gender); social media usage patterns (platforms used, daily time spent, main motivation for use); appearance comparison and body image impact; engagement with appearance-related content and coping strategies; use of filters and editing tools; and self-reported awareness of social media's influence on self-perception. Most items used a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," or a similar ordinal scale from "never" to "always." The questionnaire also included several multiple-response and single-choice questions.

Data Analysis: The responses were exported from Google Forms and entered into SPSS for analysis. Multiple-response questions, for example platforms used and types of content affecting body image, were coded with a multi-variable system and analyzed as multiple response sets. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages, were used to summarize the results for each item. For ten Likert-type and frequency-scale items with a complete five-category breakdown, the mean, median, mode and standard deviation were also calculated with standard ordinal coding (1 = lowest agreement or frequency, 5 = highest).

Qualitative Findings

This section summarizes the themes that emerged from the seven interviews. These themes were used both to design the survey questionnaire and to interpret its results. For reference, the participants are identified as P1 (female, 25, student), P2 (female, 25, cook), P3 (male, 20, student), P4 (male, 21, student), P5 (female, 23, master's student), P6 (female, 22, TikTok influencer) and P7 (psychologist).

Daily Habits and Platform Use

All participants said that they check social media immediately after waking up and then many times during the day. Most of them described this habit as automatic rather than planned. Instagram and TikTok were the most used platforms among the general users, while YouTube was especially popular with the male participants for information and sports content. P3 said that he opens the apps "without realizing" it. This shows a passive, habitual pattern of use rather than a conscious decision to look for specific content each time.

Beauty Ideals and Body Image

The female participants described beauty in terms of smooth skin, a slim body and facial symmetry. Several of them said that they knew such images were usually edited or filtered, but they still found them influential. P1 gave the trend towards smaller noses as a specific example of a standard that made her more critical of her own features. The male participants described a broader and more flexible standard, based on fitness and strength rather than on appearance in the narrow sense. They were also more likely to connect body image with physical ability than with comparison to an ideal look. P7, the psychologist, noted that online beauty standards change very quickly, sometimes within hours, and she said that this makes them especially difficult for young people to follow.

Emotional Reactions to Content

Negative emotional reactions, such as jealousy, insecurity and sadness, were common among the female participants after they viewed content about extreme thinness, cosmetic procedures or dramatic weight-loss transformations. P3 described feeling discouraged after seeing people who had changed their weight or appearance significantly. At the same time, participants also described positive reactions to relatable or body-positive content. One female participant said that she felt more confident about her own body after seeing a post that normalized stretch marks. The male participants more often described fitness content as motivating rather than as a source of insecurity, and they saw comparison as self-improvement rather than as a sign that they were not good enough.

Filters, Editing, and Authenticity

Most female participants said that they use filters or editing tools regularly before posting. Two of them explained that they had become used to their edited appearance, so their unedited photos now felt less

satisfactory in comparison. The male participants were more critical of filters. They described them as distorting reality and creating unrealistic expectations, especially for teenagers. P7, the psychologist, said that heavy photo editing can increase dissatisfaction with a person's real appearance, because people become emotionally attached to an idealized, edited version of themselves. P6, the influencer, took a different position. She said that she avoids filters on purpose in order to keep a sense of authenticity with her audience. However, she also described pressure to look a certain way in public content, including comments about her appearance that made her think about cosmetic surgery.

Social Comparison: Appearance and Achievement

Comparison was a consistent theme in all interviews, and it appeared in two related forms. The first form was appearance-based comparison, for example comparing weight, facial features or body shape with influencers or friends. This was described mainly by the female participants as an automatic reaction that happened even when they recognized the images as edited or artificial. The second form was achievement-based comparison, for example comparing career progress, property or relationships with people of the same age. This was described by both male and female participants, and for some of them it was a stronger source of self-doubt than appearance comparison. One participant said that she felt she was "not doing enough" in her life after seeing friends post about buying property or reaching career goals. This shows that social comparison on these platforms goes well beyond looks.

Coping, Awareness, and Expert Perspectives

Participants described several coping strategies. The most common ones were adjusting the recommendation algorithm by marking unwanted content as "not interested," unfollowing accounts that caused negative feelings, and deliberately avoiding certain types of content. Opinions about a complete break from social media were mixed. Some participants believed that a break would improve their well-being, while others considered it unrealistic, because these platforms are central to daily communication. P7, the psychologist, supported temporary breaks, but she warned that they usually give only short-term relief, because users normally return to their previous habits when the break ends. She also noted from her own practice that more than 70% of the teenagers she has worked with report comparing their bodies with others online. The influencer described the emotional cost of public visibility, including hurtful comments about her appearance, together with a deliberate effort to show authenticity to her audience instead of a filtered ideal. Across the interviews, most participants described themselves as more confident and less affected than was expected, but they still believed that social media affects other people.

Quantitative Findings

Demographic Profile

From the sample, the majority were young adults. In total, 56% were aged 18–22, 23% were aged 23–28 and 13% were under 18 (Table 2). The sample was mainly female (78%), with 20% male and 2% identifying as other (Table 3). Women are more often exposed to appearance-related content and pressure online, so this distribution is consistent with the focus of the study on body image. The male respondents still provided useful information, which made a basic comparison between the two groups possible.

Table 2. Age distribution of respondents (n = 120)

Age range	%	N
Under 18	13%	15
18–22	56%	67
23–28	23%	27
29–35	8%	9
35–45	1%	1
45 and above	1%	1

Source: Own research data

Table 3. Gender distribution of respondents (n = 120)

Gender	%	N
Female	78%	94
Male	20%	24
Other	2%	2

Source: Own research data

Social Media Usage Patterns and Motivation

Daily use of social media was high across the whole sample. The largest group, 28%, spend 4–6 hours per day on social media. They are followed by 24% who spend 6–8 hours and 23% who spend more than 8 hours per day (Table 4). Only 4% use social media for 1–2 hours or less. These results show that social media occupies a large part of the daily routine of the respondents.

Instagram was the most used platform (80%), followed by TikTok (69%) and YouTube (36%). Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter/X and Snapchat were used much less often (Table 5). Instagram and TikTok are highly visual platforms based on images and short videos, so their users are frequently exposed to appearance-focused content.

Table 4. Daily time spent on social media (n = 120)

Time per day	%	N
Less than 1–2 hours	4%	5
2–4 hours	20%	24
4–6 hours	28%	34
6–8 hours	24%	29
More than 8 hours	23%	28

Source: Own research data

Table 5. Most used social media platforms (multiple response, n = 120)

Platform	%	N
Instagram	80%	96
TikTok	69%	83
YouTube	36%	43
Facebook	24%	29
Pinterest	13%	16
Twitter/X	2%	2
Snapchat	1%	1

Source: Own research data. N = number of respondents selecting each platform; totals exceed 120 because respondents could select more than one.

Respondents were also asked about their main reason for using social media. Entertainment was the most frequent answer (37%), followed by social connection (25%) and staying informed (18%). Only 14% named inspiration and aesthetics, and just 6% named self-presentation (Table 6). This result is important for interpreting the rest of the data. Most respondents do not open these platforms in order to present themselves or to look for beauty content. They open them for entertainment, and the appearance-related content that affects their self-perception.

Table 6. Main motivation for using social media (n = 120)

Main motivation	%	N
Entertainment	37%	45
Social connection	25%	30
Staying informed	18%	21
Inspiration and aesthetics	14%	17
Self-presentation	6%	7

Source: Own research data

Appearance Comparison and Body Image Impact

Appearance comparison was common in the sample. In total, 40% of respondents said that they sometimes compare their appearance with people they see online, 34% do this often and 9% always. Only 4% never compare themselves with others online (Table 7). When respondents were asked how strongly social media affects their body satisfaction, 35% reported a strong effect and 12% a very strong effect, while only 7% reported no effect at all.

Fitness and gym content was the type most often connected with body dissatisfaction (44%). It was followed by celebrity and influencer content (42%), weight-loss journey content (29%), beauty and skincare content (28%), fashion content (23%) and lifestyle content (18%). Only 5% reported no influence from such content (Table 8). A large share of respondents, 39%, agreed that they feel less confident about their body after using social media, and a further 3% strongly agreed, while 33% remained neutral.

Table 7. Frequency of appearance comparison with others online (n = 120)

Frequency	%	N
Never	4%	5
Rarely	13%	15
Sometimes	40%	48
Often	34%	41
Always	9%	11

Source: Own research data

Table 8. Content most associated with body dissatisfaction (multiple response, n = 120)

Content type	%	N
Fitness / gym content	44%	53
Celebrity / influencer content	42%	50
Weight-loss journey content	29%	35
Beauty / skincare content	28%	34
Fashion content	23%	27
Lifestyle content	18%	22
None of the above	5%	6

Source: Own research data. N = number of respondents selecting each content type; totals exceed 120 because respondents could select more than one.

Comparison Beyond Appearance

Comparison on social media was not limited to physical appearance. When respondents were asked how often they compare their life achievements with influencers, 44% answered often and 8% answered always. A further 27% do this sometimes and 15% rarely, while only 7% never compare their achievements with others online (Table 9). The level of achievement comparison is therefore almost the same as the level of appearance comparison in this sample.

Engagement with appearance-related content was also frequent. In total, 37% of respondents engage with this type of content sometimes and 34% often, while 20% rarely and 8% never engage with it. Only 2% always do so. This means that about seven respondents out of ten meet appearance-related content at least sometimes, even though most of them use social media mainly for entertainment.

Table 9. Frequency of comparing life achievements with influencers (n = 120)

Frequency	%	N
Never	7%	8
Rarely	15%	18
Sometimes	27%	32
Often	44%	53
Always	8%	9

Source: Own research data

Filters, Editing, and Self-Esteem

The use of filters and editing tools was widespread. In total, 33% of respondents sometimes edit their photos before posting and 29% do this often, while 5% always edit. Only 17% rarely edit and another 17% never edit their photos. Among the types of edited content, body reshaping had the greatest influence on respondents (49%), followed by skin editing (18%) and face smoothing (14%). A notable share, 18%, reported no influence from any type of editing (Table 10). At the same time, 42% agreed and 15% strongly agreed that filters make them feel more confident about their appearance online. This points to a double role: filters work as a source of short-term confidence and, according to the interviews described above, also as a source of longer-term dissatisfaction with the real, unedited appearance.

Exposure to filtered and edited images was also connected with lower self-esteem, although the answers here were more mixed. In total, 26% agreed and 1% strongly agreed that seeing filtered images lowers their self-esteem, while 31% remained neutral and 26% disagreed. Unrealistic beauty standards had a clearer effect on mood: 33% of respondents feel strongly affected and 21% very strongly affected, while only 14% reported no effect on their mood at all.

Table 10. Type of edited content with the greatest effect on respondents (n = 120)

Edited content type	%	N
Body reshaping	49%	59
Skin editing	18%	22
Face-smoothing filters	14%	17
No influence	18%	22

Source: Own research data

Coping Strategies, Breaks, and Online Validation

The respondents showed a mixture of avoidance, validation-seeking and self-regulation. Just over half of them (51%) admitted that they delete or archive posts which do not receive enough likes or engagement. This behavior shows how important online validation still is. More than half (56%) follow influencers who promote body positivity. In terms of deliberate avoidance, 31% agreed and 7% strongly agreed that they avoid content which makes them feel insecure about their body, while 30% remained neutral.

Breaks from social media were taken only occasionally. In total, 34% take breaks sometimes and 30% rarely, while 18% never take a break at all. Despite this, a large majority recognized the value of breaks: 46% agreed and 30% strongly agreed that taking breaks improves their mental well-being. There is therefore a clear gap between what respondents know and what they actually do.

Awareness of the impact of social media on self-esteem was high in general. In total, 38% described themselves as "very aware" and 9% as "extremely aware," while only 4% reported no awareness at all (Table 11). However, 39% reported that they often think about changing something in their appearance after using social media, and 42% agreed, with a further 32% strongly agreeing, that their self-perception would be different without social media. This suggests that awareness alone does not remove the emotional impact.

Respondents were also asked which type of content improves their mood most often. Humorous content was named most frequently (43%), followed by aesthetic lifestyle posts (19%), educational content (15%), body-positive content (14%) and fitness motivation posts (9%) (Table 12). Humorous and aesthetic content therefore improves mood for most users, while body-positive content is helpful but less common.

Table 11. Awareness of social media's impact on self-esteem (n = 120)

Level of awareness	%	N
Not at all aware	4%	5
Slightly aware	17%	20
Moderately aware	32%	38
Very aware	38%	46
Extremely aware	9%	11

Source: Own research data

Table 12. Type of content that most improves respondents' mood (n = 120)

Content type	%	N
Humorous content	43%	52
Aesthetic lifestyle posts	19%	22
Educational content	15%	18
Body-positive content	14%	17
Fitness motivation posts	9%	11

Source: Own research data

To add more detail to the percentages reported above, the mean, median, mode and standard deviation were calculated for the ten survey items that had a complete five-category response breakdown. Standard ordinal coding was used, where 1 is the lowest agreement or frequency and 5 is the highest (Table 13). Two patterns are visible. First, the items about appearance comparison, mood and awareness are grouped around the middle of the scale, with means between 3.0 and 3.4. This means that these experiences are common but not extreme across the sample. Second, the standard deviations differ considerably between items. The item "unrealistic beauty standards affect my mood" has the widest spread (SD = 1.32), which suggests a divided sample: some respondents are hardly affected while others are strongly affected. The items on appearance comparison and engagement with appearance-related content are more tightly grouped (SD around 0.95–0.96), which indicates a more uniform experience. The item on taking breaks has the lowest mean (2.52), which confirms that breaks are still a rare behavior even though respondents value them highly.

Table 13. Descriptive statistics for key Likert-scale and frequency-scale items (n = 120)

Item	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Appearance comparison frequency (1=Never ... 5=Always)	3.32	3.00	3	0.95
Strength of social media's effect on body satisfaction (1=Not at all ... 5=Very strongly)	3.29	3.00	4	1.08
Feel less confident about body after use (1=Strongly disagree ... 5=Strongly agree)	3.13	3.00	4	1.00
Filtered images lower self-esteem (1=Strongly disagree ... 5=Strongly agree)	2.68	3.00	3	1.06
Unrealistic beauty standards affect mood (1=Not at all ... 5=Very strongly)	3.35	4.00	4	1.32
Compare life achievements to influencers (1=Never ... 5=Always)	3.31	4.00	4	1.04
Engagement with appearance-related content (1=Never ... 5=Always)	3.02	3.00	3	0.96
Intentionally avoid insecurity-triggering content (1=Strongly disagree ... 5=Strongly agree)	3.02	3.00	4	1.10
Frequency of taking breaks from social media (1=Never ... 5=Always)	2.52	3.00	3	1.03
Awareness of social media's impact on self-esteem (1=Not at all aware ... 5=Extremely aware)	3.32	3.00	4	1.00

Source: Own research data.

Discussion

Appearance Comparison and Social Comparison Theory

The results show that appearance comparison is a normal part of social media use among young Georgians. More than four fifths of respondents compare their appearance with others online at least sometimes, and more than 40% do this often or always. The mean comparison score is 3.32 (SD = 0.95) on the five-point scale. The standard deviation is relatively small, which means that comparison is a common experience of moderate intensity rather than an extreme experience limited to a small group. This result supports Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the finding of Fardouly et al. (2015) that comparison on visual platforms happens more often, and against more idealized targets, than in offline or text-based situations. Fitness and gym content and celebrity or influencer content were the strongest triggers. This matches the interviews, where participants described pressure after seeing "perfect" bodies of fitness influencers and public figures, even when they knew that these images were selected or edited.

Comparison Beyond Appearance

One of the clearest results of this study is that comparison is not limited to appearance. About 52% of respondents compare their life achievements with influencers often or always, and only 7% never do this. The mean score for achievement comparison (3.31) is almost identical to the mean score for appearance comparison (3.32). The interviews point in the same direction. Several participants said that comparison of career progress, property or relationships was even more stressful for them than comparison of physical appearance. One participant described the feeling that she was "not doing enough" in her life after seeing friends post about buying property or reaching career goals. This suggests that these platforms create a broader form of social evaluation, in which body image is only one part of a wider comparison of lifestyle and success. Programs that focus only on body image may therefore deal with only one part of the problem.

Filters, Editing, and the Self-Discrepancy Gap

Filters and editing tools have a contradictory position in the self-perception of respondents. A majority said that filters increase their confidence when they post: 42% agreed and 15% strongly agreed. At the same time, a similar share connected filtered and edited images with lower self-esteem (mean = 2.68, SD = 1.06), and body reshaping was named as the most influential and most problematic type of editing. This pattern fits Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987). Filters allow users to reduce the gap between their actual and their ideal appearance for a short time, but this relief does not last, because the edited image becomes a new and higher standard. The finding that more than 42% of respondents feel less confident about their body after using social media (mean = 3.13, SD = 1.00) supports the idea that editing controls appearance anxiety in the short term but strengthens it over a longer period.

Gender Patterns and Objectification

78% of respondents were female, although the survey was distributed through general networks and was not targeted at women. Second, the qualitative interviews showed a clear difference. The female participants described more frequent appearance comparison and stronger emotional reactions to idealized content, while the male participants connected body image more often with fitness and strength than with insecurity from comparison. Third, the secondary data support the same pattern, because girls report weekly negative feelings about their appearance far more often than boys on every major platform (Table 1). This gender difference is consistent with Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which argues that women are more likely to see their own bodies from the position of an outside observer.

Age Patterns and Online Validation

The research also reported age-related patterns in the survey data. Younger respondents spent more time on strongly visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, while slightly older respondents reported more balanced use that also included Facebook and YouTube. Younger users appeared more sensitive to engagement metrics, but they were also more active in adjusting their feed and the recommendation algorithm. The behavior of the whole sample supports the importance of online feedback: 51% of respondents delete or archive posts that do not receive enough likes. The interviews add an emotional dimension to this number, because participants described anxiety or relief depending on the reaction to their posts.

The Dual Role of Social Media

The results do not show that social media is only harmful. More than half of respondents (56%) follow influencers who promote body positivity. Humorous content (43%) and aesthetic lifestyle content (19%) were named most often as the content that improves mood, and body-positive content was named by 14%. In the interviews, one participant described feeling more confident about her own body after seeing a post that normalized stretch marks, and several male participants described fitness content as motivating rather than discouraging. It is also relevant that entertainment was the main reason for using social media (37%), while self-presentation was the least frequent reason (6%). These results suggest that the effect of social media on body image depends strongly on what users choose to follow and on how they manage their feed. Social media works as a source of pressure and as a space for entertainment and support at the same time.

Conclusions

This study combined qualitative interviews, secondary data and an online survey in order to describe how social media use is related to body image and self-perception among young adults in Georgia.

The main findings are the following:

- Social media use is intensive among young Georgians. More than 75% of respondents spend over four hours a day on visual platforms, mainly Instagram and TikTok, although most of them use these platforms for entertainment (37%) rather than for self-presentation (6%);
- Appearance comparison is a routine behavior. More than four fifths of respondents compare themselves with others online at least sometimes, and fitness or gym content and celebrity or influencer content are the strongest triggers;
- Comparison goes beyond appearance. About 52% of respondents compare their life achievements with influencers often or always, at almost the same level as appearance comparison;

- Filters and editing tools have a double effect. They increase confidence in the short term, but they also contribute to longer-term dissatisfaction with the real appearance, especially through body reshaping;
- A significant share of respondents (over 40%) feel less confident about their body after normal social media use, and a similar share believe that their self-perception would be different without social media;
- Awareness of the influence of social media is high, but it does not lead consistently to protective behavior, such as taking regular breaks;
- Coping strategies such as following body-positive influencers (56%) and avoiding triggering content (over 30%) are common but only partial. They exist together with validation-seeking behavior, such as deleting posts that receive few likes (51%);
- Both the interviews and the secondary data indicate that women and girls experience stronger appearance-related pressure than men and boys.

These findings suggest that measures which only raise awareness are not likely to be sufficient, because most respondents are already aware. A combined approach is needed:

- Digital and media literacy education, especially for teenagers and young adults, that goes further than the statement that images are edited and builds practical skills for managing what the recommendation feed shows;
- Support for body-positive and authentic content creators, because respondents and interview participants who followed such accounts described more balanced emotional reactions;

The sample was collected through convenience sampling and is skewed towards young female respondents, so these findings should be read as indicative rather than fully representative of the Georgian population. Future research with a larger and more balanced sample, and with a longitudinal design, would help to clarify how these patterns develop and change over time. A larger qualitative phase, with more male participants, would also make the comparison between genders more reliable.

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