

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER CULTURE ON SELF-ESTEEM OF GEN-Z USERS: MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

Iram Zia ^{a*} & Momna Saba ^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Southern Punjab, Multan, Pakistan

*Correspondence to: Ms. Momna Saba, Department of Psychology, University of Southern Punjab, Multan, Pakistan. E-mail: momnasaba@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between social media influencer culture and self-esteem and how social comparison mediates this relationship among generation-z users. To conduct this study cross-sectional correlation research design was used. A survey was conducted on a sample of 426 generation-z participants. To collect the information three tools were used: Parasocial Interaction and Influencer Attributes Scale (Kim & Kim, 2022), the Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) (Gibbson & Buunk 1999) and the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES) (Morris Rosenberg, 1965). Data were analyzed using SPSS descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and mediation analysis was done by using Hayes process macro. Findings of this research shows strong positive correlation between social media influencer culture and social comparison, mediation of social comparison and significant negative correlation between social media influencer culture and self-esteem. Parasocial interactions were positively correlated with social comparison ($r = .351$) and negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r = -.305$). Indirect effects of parasocial interactions on Self-esteem through Social comparison were significant, ($\beta = .022$). The direct and indirect effects of parasocial interactions on Self-esteem were significant which indicated partial mediation of the model. These results suggest that social comparison significantly mediates the parasocial interactions and self-esteem of generation-z users. This study highlights the importance of psychological processes of social comparison through which young users associate their self-esteem and self-evaluation after parasocial interactions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has evolved very quickly in all over the world and changed the communication styles, identity formation, social relationships and validation seeking behaviours of users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Generation-z is very much influenced by social media as compared to other generation as they are digital natives and now in adulthood and adolescent period of their lives. Social media users evaluate their appearance, success, lifestyles, social and personal relationships by the standards represent by social media influencers (Abidin, 2018). Social media use and influence culture influence psychological health of users as they dive in comparisons and self-evaluations by repeated exposures (Perloff, 2021). The very initial purpose to design social media apps were to communicate with long distance relationships in quick, easy and less expensive way, as old means of communication were difficult, expensive and time taking like letters, telegrams, emails and telephones etc. With the invention of smart phones and social media apps communication and information becomes easy globally (Arli, 2017; Lau, 2017). Social media apps shift their focus from only connections and communication to consumerism, collaborations and influencer culture. Individual differences in social media use studied in 387 adolescent participants (Valkenburg, 2022), they conclude that not only social media use but individual differences play crucial

role in affecting users' self-esteem. Kim and Kim (2022), examined the role of psychological wellbeing between social media influencers and social responsibility of followers. Their findings state that increased parasocial interactions encourage followers to adopt influencers lifestyles and standards, this kind of internalization leads towards comparisons. Social media engagement and repeated exposure activate the brain's reward centre and provide a surge of dopamine, it works like addiction and cause harm to users physical and mental health gradually (Kayala et al., 2023). Generation-z have their own digital world to connect and socialize in which they make curated identities, and follow latest trends to seek social validation. This generation have very less real-world social exposure they prefer online work, education, communication, shopping, food delivery and social circle, they heavily rely on online world instead of offline world (Wandhe, 2024). Generation Z makes up 25 percent of the population According to the U.S. Census Bureau, they are the most influenced generation by social media and also the depressed and anxious generation due to continuous exposure to unrealistic and unachievable social media presentations (Jenkins, 2026).

Social media influencer culture is initiated by some people who have the capacity to influence others and expertise in any skill, they convince users to learn that skill as well and utilize later like them. Many influencers are engaged in charity and social work and motivate their followers to contribute in helping others (Hahn & Allison, 2020). Mustafa et al. (2024) explored 249 adolescents who used social media and stated that self-image destroys and users feel inadequate with repeated exposure to idealized images on social media. individuals who known as influencers build huge fan following through social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok etc., they influence users by their social media presentation, and win their trust by daily stories, GRWM (get ready with me), self-care routine posts etc. (Freberg et al., 2011). This culture is the interlinked ecosystem of influencers, audience, brands, products and digital platforms, influencers promote products, companies and services and users trust them more than traditional celebrities (Slate, 2026). Social media influencers post reel moments of their lives and users believe that is their real life, they ignore scripted dialogues, perfect presentation of beauty and lifestyle, retakes and sponsorships. This culture encourages people to adore the flawless life of influencers, encouraging admiration and replication (Parwani, 2025). A quantitative study on 200 university students by Alessi et al. (2025) shows that repeated graphic exposure of social media influencers distorts self and body image in users which leads to decreased self-esteem. Social media influencers are new role models of gen-z as they mold their concept of self, success and beauty, but this repeated exposure led them to inadequacy, jealousy and social comparisons (Casaló et al., 2020). The term parasocial interaction introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), they explain it as one-sided connection and communication between social media influencer and social media users (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Parasocial interactions are only limited to social media platforms, if any influencer disappear followers forgot him/her very quickly (Jarzyna, 2021). Parasocial interactions affect individuals in both positive and negative ways, self-improvements and motivation to work hard are positive and social comparisons, feeling of inferiority, guilt are negative impacts, proved by many empirical researches. Females and youngsters are more prone to comparisons than males and adults. Social media use cause dependence and validation seeking behaviours during identity formation process (Perloff, 2021). A quantitative study on Instagram beauty influencers and Pakistani population conclude that repeated exposure induced sense of identification and internalization in followers (Qamar et al., 2023).

Social comparison is the individual's ability to evaluate their own self, achievements, body image and skills relative to others (Festinger, 1954). In comparison processes individual differences play an important role, people have either fixed mindset or growth mindset. Individuals who have fixed mindset believe that they cannot change or improve their abilities and work efficacy when they surrounded by successful people so they experience feelings of jealousy and inadequacy while people who have growth mindset accept others achievements as challenge and work hard to achieve success and perfection (Dweck, 2007). A study on 60 gen-z students conclude that Instagram is a suitable platform for upward comparison which cause psychological distress through repeated exposure to influencers self-presentation (Shehzad et al., 2025). Individuals when feel inferior than others in appearance, success, wealth and abilities may experience upward social comparison that provokes envy, negative feelings and decrease self-confidence, when people find someone less capable, successful and attractive than them they experience downward social comparison and feel superior, validated and more confident (Cherry, 2026). A cultural context focused longitudinal study was conducted by Noon (2021) that stated that interaction with idealized images cause upward social comparison in young adults and cause body dissatisfaction. Social media influencer

culture promotes social comparison by representing flawless and exaggerated standards of beauty, success, material comforts, relationships, fitness and lifestyle, continuous exposure to influencers content users starts to feel they are useless, ugly and failure. Social media influencers provoke social comparisons which in result affect users' self-esteem (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Individuals overall sense of self-worth or self-value refers to self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is an essential part of individuals mental and physical well-being, it influences behaviors and emotional resilience (Orth & Robins, 2014). Self-esteem and self-acceptance often misunderstood as same concept but studies prove the two different concepts. Self-esteem is self-perception that forms positive or negative concept of self on the basis of traits, qualities and abilities, positive perceptions may increase and negative perceptions decrease self-esteem, while self-acceptance is overall acceptance of strengths and weaknesses of self not specific aspects of self (Ellis, 1994). Individuals with high self-esteem supports growth of self and others, curious about opportunities, accept criticism and manage their emotions in healthy way but who have low self-esteem invest their energies in people pleasing, face self-hate, indecisiveness and difficulties in emotional management (Ackerman, 2018). Individuals develop social self-esteem with perception of others' perceptions about them, social validation and social acceptance, performance self-esteem with academic performance, cognitive abilities, motivation and competence and physical self-esteem with physical appearance, beauty, racial or ethnicity connections (Ibrahim, 2026). Social media influencer culture plays vital role in development of self-esteem in users. Iqbal and Yasmin (2020) examined social media influencers impact on identity formation of young adults. Their results conclude that influencers impact in both positive and negative way, they can develop a sense of community and help in identity formation but if influencers promote unrealistic content, it can damage self-perception and self-worth of followers. Real life is full of ups and downs but reel life is perfect and flawless in every manner so users start to doubt their achievements, appearance and self, this affect also provokes social comparisons in young adults (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2021). A correlational study on 100 Pakistani students find that excessive influencer exposure negatively affect self-esteem, provokes self-criticism and self-doubt (Hassan & Afzal, 2022). Existing researches has explored the relationships between social media use, self-esteem and social comparisons separately or sometimes different populations (Rüther et al., 2023) studied social media influence on body image in female population, Shehzad et al. (2025) and some more authors study only Instagram influencers, so the literature is insufficient to generalize on gen-z population and to find the overall impact of social media influencer culture on self-esteem and social comparison. Therefore, the present study extends existing literature by examining mediation process of social comparison between impacts of social media influencer culture on self-esteem of gen-z users. This study aims to study the relationship between social media influencer culture, social comparison and self-esteem, and the mediation role of social comparison between influencer culture and self-esteem.

Theoretical Framework

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains one-sided digital connections and communications that develop strong feeling of association, familiarity and closeness in followers. Daily stories and engagement posts form a bonding between user and influencer (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Perceived similarity, frequent interactions, giveaway or reply from influencer develop parasocial relationship, bonding feeling of closeness in user that affect self-esteem directly (Kim & Kim, 2022). Mechanism of individuals desire to assess and compare themselves with others in different aspects of life even when comparison is not necessary explained in social comparison theory. Vogel et al, (2014) explored how social media exposure enhance such comparison urges in users. Influencer content mostly based on unrealistic standards of beauty, lifestyles and success that heavily influence gen-z users who are weak in identity formation and socialization (Abidin, 2018). Social comparison theory provides a ground to explore role of social comparison as mediator. Self- Discrepancy Theory proposed by Higgins (1987) that explained difference between individuals' actual self and ideal self, cause emotional and psychological distress. Social media influencer culture develops gaps between actual self and desired self so users specially gen-z users feel detached with reality and attached with digital sensational world by daily exposure (Perloff, 2021). So, self-discrepancy theory accompaniments social comparison theory by highlighting the emotional consequences that arise during comparison processes. Social Identity Theory emphasis on the role of attachment and social groups for development of identity and self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Through social media young users find their idealized inspirational figures and adopt their lifestyles, values and standards (Chae, 2018).

II. METHOD

Participants

This study was conducted by using cross-sectional correlational research design to explore the relationship between social media influencer culture, self-esteem and mediation process of social comparison. 426 Generation-z social media users were used as the sample of this study. Sample size was calculated through G-power and purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample.

Measures

Following measures were used for data collection. **[I]** To measure parasocial Interaction in gen-z users parasocial Interaction and Influencer Attributes Scale was used that developed by Jihye Kim and Minseong Kim (2022). This scale is intended to measure social media followers perceived parasocial interactions with social media influencers. This scale contains six sub dimensions: language similarity, interest similarity, interaction frequency, self-disclosure, psychological well-being, and loyalty. Scoring method of this scale is on seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). High level of scores reported by users indicates more parasocial interaction with social media influencers. Scale's reported psychometric properties explain good reliability ($\alpha > .70$) and construct validity (CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05). **[II]** The Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) was used to measure comparison tendencies in users. This scale was designed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999). This 11 item self-report scale measure general comparison tendencies (e.g., abilities, achievements and opinions etc.) instead context specific tendencies (e.g. appearance, professional comparisons etc.). Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). High scores reported by participants point towards greater tendency of social comparison. Internal consistency of this scale is ($\alpha \approx .78-.85$) that is strong and it has been validated in multiple cultures, including western and non-western samples (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Schneider & Schupp, 2014). **[III]** Morris Rosenberg (1965) develops the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) to measure individual's positive or negative sense of self. This scale contains 10 items that evaluated on a 4-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Five items are positively and five are negatively phrased. Highest scores show high level of self-esteem. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale is highly internal consistent, also showed test-retest reliability and cross-cultural validity (Orth & Robins, 2014; Rosenberg, 1965).

Procedure

Permission to use scales in this research was got via email from the scale's authors. After receiving consent, the scale was employed in the study. Data was collected by using convenient sampling, participants were fully informed about the purpose and nature of the research, and after receiving information they provided written consent. They were told that they have a right to withdraw from the study at any point without any penalties. The confidentiality of their data was ensured. Data were collected across various educational institutes in Punjab from generation-z users. The collected data from these participants were then analyzed using SPSS version 27.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 426)

Characteristics	Category	f	%	M	SD
Gender	Male	220	51.6		
	Female	205	48.1		
Age group	14–29 years	-	-	21.00	1.991
Types of Influencers Followed	Celebrity	51	12.0		
	Lifestyle/Fashion	76	17.8		
	Education	102	23.9		
	Fitness/Beauty	44	10.3		
	Others	68	16.0		
	Multiple	85	20.0		
Most Used Platforms	Instagram	141	33.1		

	TikTok	118	27.7
	YouTube	39	9.2
	Facebook	19	4.5
	Snapchat	28	6.6
	Others	17	4.0
	Multiple	64	15.0
Daily Social Media Usage	<1 hr.	17	4.0
	1-2 hrs.	96	22.5
	2-4 hrs.	169	39.7
	4-6 hrs.	88	20.7
	>6 hrs.	56	13.1
Influencers Followed	0-10	240	56.3
	11-30	32	7.5
	31-50	82	19.2
	51+	72	16.9
Engagement With Influencers	Like Posts	230	54.0
	Comment	19	4.5
	Share	31	7.3
	Save posts	81	19.0
	DM/Interact	10	2.3
	Multiple	55	12.9

Note. f = frequency; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; % = percentage

Table 1 shows the demographic and parasocial interactions relevant characteristics of the sample (N = 426). The participants had a mean age of 21.00 years (SD=1.991). The sample included (51.6%) males and (48.1%) females. Instagram was the most commonly used platform among gen-z (33.1%), followed by TikTok (27.7%). Daily usage of social media platforms (39.7%) participants reported 2-4 hrs., daily engagement, whereas (33.8%) users reported spending more than 4 hours daily. Most commonly followed influencers were educational influencers (23.9%) while (20.0%) multiple and (17.8%) lifestyle/fashion influencers followed by participants. No. of influencers followed and engagement style explains (56.3%) of participants follow 0-10 influencers and (54.0%) like their content.

Table II: Descriptive and Cronbach's Alpha of Scales (N= 426)

Scales	<i>n</i>	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
PSIS	426	0.90	99.70	21.31
INCOM	426	0.76	37.14	6.57
RSES	426	0.73	21.89	4.37

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha

Table no.2 demonstrates Mean, Standard Deviation, and psychometric properties of parasocial interactions, social comparison and Self-esteem. Cronbach's alpha of all the scales is above .70 which indicates very good reliability to be used in the study.

Table III: Pearson Correlation shows the relationship between Social Media Influencer Culture, Social Comparison and Self-esteem (N= 426)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social Media Influencer Culture		.351**	-.305**
2. Social Comparison			.155**
3. Self-Esteem			

** $p < .01$

Table no. 2 demonstrates Pearson correlation coefficient between the study variables, Parasocial interactions, social comparison and Self-esteem. All correlations are statistically significant ($p < .01$), though the direction of this relationship varied. The results indicate that participants who reported strong parasocial interactions are more tend to engage in social comparison. In contrast, parasocial interactions were significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, explains high engagement of parasocial interactions linked with low self-esteem. Social comparison also showed a significantly positive but relatively weak relationship with self-esteem.

Table IV: Mediation Analysis for Social Media Influencer Culture, Social Comparison and Self-Esteem (N=426)

Path	Relationship Tested	B	SE	t	P	LLCI	UCLI
a path $X \rightarrow M$	Parasocial interactions $\rightarrow$ Social comparison	.108	.014	7.71	.000	.081	.136
b path $M \rightarrow Y$	Social comparison $\rightarrow$ Self-esteem	.199	.032	6.33	.000	.137	.261
c path $X \rightarrow Y$ (Direct)	Parasocial interactions $\rightarrow$ Self-esteem	-	.010	-	.000	-	-
$X \rightarrow Y$ (Indirect)	Parasocial interactions $\rightarrow$ Social comparison $\rightarrow$ Self-esteem	.084		8.68		.103	.065
		.022	.004	-	-	.013	.030

Note. β = standardized coefficient; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

The above table of mediation analysis shows significant mediation when the LLCI and ULCI do not contain zero. The results confirmed a significant indirect effect of parasocial interactions on Self-esteem through Social comparison, $\beta = .022$, 95% CI [.013, .030]. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, the mediation effect was significant. While the direct effect of parasocial interactions on Self-esteem remained significant, its coefficient decreased after including the mediator, indicating partial mediation. Thus, idealized expectations partially explain the relationship between parasocial interactions and Self-esteem.

IV. DISCUSSION

This current study aimed to examined the impact of parasocial interactions on the self-esteem of gen-z users through mediation of social comparison processes. The findings of this study demonstrate a strong association between parasocial interactions, self-esteem and social comparisons, followers with repeated engagement in parasocial interactions report increased social comparisons and decreased self-esteem. This study was conducted on 426 gen-z participants. The data were analyzed with SPSS 27. The correlation analysis of this research indicate that all variables were statistically significant ($p < .01$). The results show significant positive relationship between parasocial interactions and social comparison ($r = .351$). This indicates high level of parasocial engagement of users results in social comparisons. Results support the first hypothesis of study that that predicted social media influencer culture encourage social comparison among the generation-z. ($r = -.305$) shows negative correlation between parasocial interactions and self-esteem, point towards increased parasocial interactions can decrease self-esteem. Similarly, previous literature R  ther et al., (2023) offers a strong base for the associations of parasocial interactions of followers, social comparison, and self-esteem. Current study results explain that social media influencer culture promotes social comparison in followers and they experience decrease in self-esteem. This aligns with second hypothesis that parasocial interactions correlate with low levels of self-esteem, social comparison was also a significant mediating factor between influencer culture and self-esteem. Findings suggest that the psychological and emotional impacts of social media influencer culture not only linked with exposure, it causes harm and distress when followers make comparisons and evaluations among influencers and self. These findings align with previous researches concludes that parasocial interactions with social media influencers affect individuals' perceptions and concept of self. Repeated or daily interactions with individuals' favourite influencers can reinforce their parasocial bonding (Kim and Kim, 2022). This exposure induces feelings of similarity, closeness, friendship and familiarity with influences even when the connection is not reciprocal. Current results provide evidence that daily exposure with social media influencers can mold follower's attitudes, self-perception, emotional and psychological health.

Furthermore, social comparison and self-esteem are significantly positively related, which support third hypothesis of this study stated strong social comparisons decrease self-esteem, such as parasocial interaction ($M = 99.71$, $SD = 21.31$), social comparison ($M = 37.15$, $SD = 6.57$), and self-esteem ($M = 21.89$, $SD = 4.37$) demonstrated in the results. Parasocial engagement shows a greater no. of standard deviation that indicates more variation between social media influencer and follower's parasocial relationship. Conversely, social comparison and self-esteem were less inconsistent in research participants. Overall, results explained significant individual differences through all variables. Current study findings explain that social comparison plays a strong mediation role between parasocial interactions and self-esteem. Social comparison, Parasocial interactions and self-esteem were significantly positively correlated. The indirect effect was significant at (95%), confidence interval [.013,.030]. This aligns with (4) which shows social comparison as mediator function among direct relation of parasocial interactions with self-esteem. Past study of (Rüther et al., 2023) also support social comparison's mediation between influencers impact and user's self-esteem. Overall, findings clearly demonstrate the role of parasocial interactions in affecting follower's social comparison process and self-esteem. The verdict encompasses the existing theories of social comparison and self-esteem. Results suggest that parasocial interactions can be impactful in increasing or decreasing social comparison and self-esteem of social media followers. Future studies must consider cultural differences in parasocial interactions for more understanding of its role in social comparison and self-esteem in longitudinal impacts.

V. CONCLUSION

To put it briefly, current study find social media influencer culture and self-esteem were significantly correlated with the substantial moderation of social comparison. The variation in correlation shows positive correlation between social media influencer culture and negative correlation among self-esteem and social media influencer culture. Followers of social media influencers urge to imitate and internalize influencers presented picture because parasocial interactions develop feelings of closeness and similarity in followers. Social comparison enhances self-evaluation process in terms of success, beauty, social validation and wealth due to frequent exposure to influencers content. Therefore, this examination of parasocial interactions, social comparison and self-esteem relationship explains profound association between impacts of social media influencer culture on overall emotional and mental health of followers.

Limitations

In spite of current study's valuable findings, it has few limitations. A sample size of 426 gen-z users may limit the generalization of results. Data was collected through self-report measure which may cause biased results if incorrect information provided by participants. This research not cover cultural variations it may limit generalizability.

Suggestions

Future studies should use large and diverse population samples to cover different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Further studies should explore long term effects of parasocial interactions on user's overall health through longitudinal researches. Furthermore, self-concept, loneliness and eating disorders should also be considered to examine as influencer culture's impacts.

Recommendations

Social media use strategic programs should start in collaboration by mental health professionals and educational institutes for young adults. Emotional and psychological awareness programs initiatives for social media users about negative social comparisons and self-esteem distortions. Social media influencers should create more realistic content to prevent social comparisons and overall emotional and psychological destruction in young users.

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