

Body Image Struggles among Women: Psychological Self-Perception in the Age of Filtered Self-Presentation Culture

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Abstract:

The rise of filtered self-presentation on social media has intensified concerns about women's body image and psychological well-being. This study explores how women experience and interpret body image struggles within digitally mediated beauty standards. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, we conducted in-depth interviews with 15 women aged 18–30 who actively use appearance-enhancing filters on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The researchers analyzed data through condensation, reduction, display, and verification procedures. The findings reveal three main themes: internalization of filtered beauty standards, dependence on digital validation metrics, and ongoing negotiation between authenticity and enhanced identity. Participants reported increased self-surveillance, anxiety over engagement feedback, and discomfort with unfiltered appearances. The study contributes by conceptualizing filtered self-presentation as a performative and relational process rather than mere media exposure. It recommends integrating digital literacy and mental health interventions to reduce filter dependency and promote healthier body image development.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, women's self-perception is increasingly shaped by digitally mediated beauty standards that circulate through visual platforms. The widespread use of filters and image-editing applications has normalized curated self-presentation, influencing how women evaluate their own bodies. This research is important because body image is closely linked to mental health, self-esteem, and social participation (Jessica et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021; Van et al., 2023). Empirical reports from global health organizations show rising levels of body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and appearance-based comparison among young women. The constant exposure to perfected digital images amplifies unrealistic beauty ideals and intensifies



internalized pressure to conform (Abbas et al., 2021; Poudel et al., 2020). Consequently, understanding body image struggles in the era of filtered self-presentation is essential not only for academic discourse but also for informing digital literacy, psychological interventions, and broader societal awareness regarding women's well-being.

A growing societal problem emerges as filtered self-presentation becomes embedded in everyday communication. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat provide accessible tools that instantly alter facial features, skin texture, and body proportions (Keerthana et al., 2024; Lackie et al., 2021). In daily practice, many women edit images before uploading them, gradually blurring the boundary between authentic and modified appearance. Offline consequences follow this digital practice: cosmetic procedure consultations, heightened self-surveillance, and dissatisfaction with natural features. Field observations and survey trends indicate that women often compare their unfiltered appearance with filtered online representations, leading to feelings of inadequacy (Herlina, 2024; Hosna et al., 2025). This phenomenon reflects a broader cultural shift in which visual validation, measured through likes and comments, becomes a benchmark of self-worth, thereby intensifying body image struggles in both virtual and physical spaces.

Previous studies have examined body image dissatisfaction from psychological and sociocultural perspectives. Researchers such as Jamilah et al. (2025) and Fuentes et al. (2022) emphasized the role of social comparison in social media environments, while Shan et al. (2023), Single et al. (2023), and Soares et al. (2023) highlighted the impact of appearance-focused platforms on self-objectification. Barnett et al. (2021) and Habibi et al. (2023) further argued that image-based interaction predicts increased body surveillance among women. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focus broadly on social media exposure rather than specifically on filtered self-presentation as a distinct practice. Moreover, earlier research often treats women as passive recipients of media influence, overlooking their active negotiation, resistance, or strategic use of filters. This gap suggests the need for a more nuanced exploration of how women interpret, internalize, and contest filtered beauty norms in their everyday lives.

This study's novelty lies in conceptualizing filtered self-presentation not merely as media exposure but as a performative and relational process. Rather than viewing filters solely as technological tools, this research frames them as socio-cultural artifacts embedded in validation economies and gendered expectations (Aziz et al., 2025; Eid et al., 2023). By integrating perspectives from body image theory, digital culture studies, and feminist analysis, this study advances a more holistic understanding of women's embodied experiences. Addressing this issue matters because filtered self-presentation is rapidly evolving with augmented reality features and artificial intelligence enhancements, making beauty modification increasingly seamless and invisible (Cabrera et al., 2024; Sain, 2025). Without critical examination, these developments risk deepening unattainable beauty standards and reinforcing structural inequalities tied to gender and appearance.

Based on the preceding discussion, the central research problem concerns how women experience and interpret body image struggles within the context of filtered

self-presentation. Specifically, this study asks: How do women make meaning of their engagement with filters? In what ways do filtered images influence their perceptions of their physical selves? How do social feedback mechanisms shape their emotional responses and self-evaluations? These questions aim to uncover the subjective dimensions of body image struggles that quantitative metrics alone cannot capture. By focusing on lived experiences, this research seeks to illuminate the complexities underlying women's interactions with digitally enhanced representations of themselves.

This study argues that body image struggles in the age of filtered self-presentation are not solely the result of external media pressure but emerge from a dynamic interaction between technological affordances, social validation systems, and internal psychological processes. The provisional assumption is that while filters may initially function as tools for creative expression or confidence enhancement, their repeated use can reinforce internalized beauty standards and self-discrepancy. This research is original in positioning women as reflective agents who navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist these pressures. By articulating this interactional framework, the study contributes theoretically to body image scholarship and practically to the development of digital literacy programs and mental health interventions aimed at fostering healthier self-perceptions among women.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore women's lived experiences of body image struggles in the context of filtered self-presentation (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). The phenomenological approach was selected because the research seeks to understand subjective meanings, emotional interpretations, and personal reflections rather than to measure causal relationships. Body image dissatisfaction in digitally mediated environments is deeply experiential and shaped by internal perceptions, making it well suited to an interpretive design. By focusing on participants' narratives, this approach enables the exploration of how women construct meaning around their engagement with digital filters and how such practices influence their self-concept. The design allows the researcher to capture nuanced experiences that may not be fully accessible through quantitative instruments, particularly those related to self-comparison, validation, and embodied identity in online spaces.

The research was conducted in an urban metropolitan setting characterized by high internet penetration and active social media engagement. The location was selected because women in urban areas are more intensively exposed to visual culture, influencer trends, and digital beauty standards circulating on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The study included 15 female informants aged 18 to 30 who actively use filters in their social media posts. Participants came from diverse backgrounds, including university students, early-career professionals, and content creators. They were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria such as frequency of filter use, active online presence, and willingness to share personal

experiences. This variation in background allowed for a broader understanding of how filtered self-presentation intersects with different social roles and life stages.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant reflection notes, and limited digital artifact analysis (Lobe et al., 2020). Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and explored themes such as motivations for using filters, emotional reactions to online feedback, experiences of comparison, and perceptions of unfiltered appearance. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure video calls, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were also invited to reflect on selected posts they had uploaded, enabling contextual discussion of their self-presentation choices. In addition, the researcher observed general patterns of filter use in participants' public profiles to enrich contextual understanding. These multiple techniques allowed for triangulation and deeper insight into both expressed experiences and observable digital practices.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and data verification (Beik et al., 2021). In the condensation stage, interview transcripts were carefully read to identify significant statements related to body image perceptions and filter usage. During data reduction, codes were grouped into broader thematic categories such as self-comparison, validation seeking, self-discrepancy, and resistance strategies. Data display used thematic matrices and narrative summaries to support pattern recognition across participants. Finally, data verification involved revisiting transcripts, comparing emerging themes with raw data, and ensuring consistency between interpretations and participants' accounts. This iterative process ensured findings were grounded in empirical evidence and reflected participants' lived experiences.

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, I implemented several strategies. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which participants reviewed summaries of their interviews to confirm accuracy (Lee et al., 2024). Triangulation of data sources interviews, reflection notes, and digital artifacts strengthened interpretive depth. Dependability was maintained by systematically documenting the research process, including interview protocols and coding procedures. Confirmability was addressed by maintaining a reflexive journal to minimize researcher bias and by engaging in peer debriefing with academic colleagues. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of participants' backgrounds and research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings. Together, these measures ensured the rigor and reliability of the study's conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the main findings derived from in-depth interviews and reflective analysis of participants' experiences. The results highlight three interconnected themes: internalizing filtered beauty standards, the influence of digital validation on self-worth, and negotiating authenticity in online self-presentation. Together, these findings illustrate the complex dynamics shaping women's body image struggles.

Internalized Filtered Beauty Standards Intensify

The findings reveal that repeated exposure to and use of filters gradually internalize digitally constructed beauty standards among participants. Many informants described how smoother skin, sharper facial contours, and brighter complexions became their new reference points for attractiveness. Over time, these edited versions felt more “normal” than their natural appearance. Participants reported subtle shifts in perception, where unfiltered photos appeared dull or flawed. This internalization happened not only through passive scrolling but also through active self-editing. By continuously adjusting their images before uploading, participants reinforced specific aesthetic ideals. Consequently, filtered representations began to shape how they evaluated their real-life bodies, influencing daily grooming habits and self-assessment patterns.

Participants further explained that this internalization often happened unconsciously. Initially, they used filters for experimentation or entertainment. However, habitual use led to dependency, where uploading unfiltered content triggered discomfort and hesitation. Some informants admitted deleting photos that did not meet the filtered standard they had grown accustomed to. This pattern demonstrates how digital tools subtly redefine personal baselines of beauty. Rather than perceiving filters as enhancements, several women began to see them as corrective necessities. The perceived gap between their actual appearance and filtered self-image generated dissatisfaction, reinforcing a cycle in which digital alteration appeared to be the only acceptable form of presentation in public online spaces.

Another significant aspect of this finding involves social comparison. Participants frequently compared themselves not only to influencers but also to peers with similarly filtered images. Because edited appearances are normalized on platforms such as Instagram, distinguishing between authentic and modified beauty becomes difficult. Informants reported feeling pressure to match the aesthetic quality of others’ posts to remain socially relevant. This comparative environment magnified insecurities related to skin texture, facial symmetry, and body proportions. Even when aware that images were digitally altered, participants still experienced emotional discomfort. The normalization of perfection thus intensifies internalized standards that are both unrealistic and persistently reinforced through algorithm-driven exposure.

Ultimately, internalizing filtered beauty standards contributes to long-term body image vulnerability. Participants described heightened self-surveillance, frequently checking mirrors or phone cameras to evaluate their appearance. This behavioral pattern reflects the transfer of digital scrutiny into offline life. Several women expressed frustration that they could not “look like the filter” in everyday settings. Such sentiments illustrate the psychological cost of constant exposure to enhanced representations. The findings suggest that filtered self-presentation reshapes embodied identity by merging virtual ideals with physical self-perception. As a result, beauty standards once recognized as artificial become deeply embedded personal benchmarks that influence emotional well-being and self-worth.

Validation Economy Shapes Self-Worth

The second finding indicates that digital validation mechanisms strongly influence women's body image struggles. Participants consistently linked their emotional responses to metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. Participants interpreted positive engagement as affirmation of attractiveness, while low interaction triggered self-doubt. This dynamic reveals how self-worth becomes intertwined with algorithmic visibility. Informants acknowledged checking engagement statistics shortly after posting, sometimes repeatedly within minutes. Anticipating feedback generated anxiety, particularly when images were less edited. Consequently, they used filters strategically to maximize approval. This behavior reflects a validation economy in which appearance functions as social currency, shaping how women evaluate both their online presence and personal value.

Participants described how different levels of engagement influenced their confidence. Posts with higher interaction often led to temporary boosts in self-esteem and reinforced the belief that filtered images were more acceptable. Conversely, minimal feedback created feelings of inadequacy and prompted self-criticism. Some informants admitted archiving or deleting posts that failed to reach expected engagement levels. This practice demonstrates how digital feedback loops regulate self-presentation choices. Rather than expressing authenticity, participants often curated content strategically to align with perceived audience preferences. Over time, the reliance on external validation diminished intrinsic self-appreciation and increased dependence on digital affirmation to sustain positive body perception.

Table 1. The validation process is summarized

Validation Indicator	Participant Response	Body Image Impact
High number of likes	Increased confidence	Reinforces filtered standard
Positive comments	Emotional reassurance	Temporary self-acceptance
Low engagement	Self-doubt	Heightened dissatisfaction
Critical remarks	Anxiety and rumination	Intensified body surveillance

Table 1 illustrates how engagement metrics shape participants' emotional reactions to their appearance. Digital approval becomes a psychological mirror through which women interpret their physical worth and social desirability. High numbers of likes, comments, or other forms of engagement can temporarily reinforce positive self-evaluation, whereas limited engagement may increase sensitivity to appearance-based judgment. Consequently, digital responses are not merely neutral indicators of online popularity; they become personally meaningful cues that shape how participants evaluate their bodies and perceive their position within appearance-focused social environments.

Importantly, participants recognized the instability of digital validation. Although high engagement generated temporary satisfaction, this effect was often short-lived, creating pressure to reproduce similar responses in subsequent posts. Several women described feeling exhausted by the continuous need to manage their online appearance. Despite understanding that algorithms influence visibility, their emotional responses remained persistent. This paradox indicates that cognitive awareness does

not necessarily reduce affective impact. Digital validation therefore operates as a structural psychological force, reinforcing appearance-based self-evaluation and contributing to sustained body image struggles.

Negotiating Authenticity and Digital Identity

The third finding highlights how women actively negotiate authenticity within filtered environments. Participants did not uniformly accept digital standards; instead, many described internal conflicts between presenting an enhanced image and remaining true to their natural appearance. Some informants intentionally alternated between filtered and unfiltered posts to test audience reactions. This experimentation reflects an effort to balance social expectations with personal comfort. Women acknowledged that filters distort reality, yet they also recognized the social advantages of conforming to aesthetic norms. This tension illustrates that body image struggles are not purely passive outcomes but involve conscious negotiation within digitally mediated identity construction.

Several participants developed strategies to resist excessive dependency on filters. These included limiting editing intensity, posting candid photos, or discussing insecurities openly in captions. Such practices functioned as subtle acts of reclaiming authenticity. However, resistance often came with vulnerability, as unfiltered posts raised uncertainty about audience judgment. Participants described feeling “exposed” when revealing natural features. This emotional risk underscores how digital environments shape expectations of polished self-presentation. Even when trying to be authentic, women remained aware of prevailing beauty norms, showing how deeply embedded filtered standards have become in online social interaction.

Identity negotiation also extended beyond social media. Informants reported adjusting makeup, lighting, or camera angles in offline settings to resemble their filtered appearance. This behavior indicates that digital identity can influence embodied practices in physical space. Some participants described discomfort when meeting online acquaintances face-to-face, fearing discrepancies between filtered images and actual appearance. Such experiences highlight the blurring boundaries between virtual and offline self-concepts. The filtered self becomes not merely a representation but an aspirational identity that shapes behavioral choices and social confidence in everyday interactions.

Overall, the negotiation of authenticity reflects both agency and constraint. Women actively interpret, adapt, and sometimes challenge filtered norms, yet their choices remain embedded within broader validation structures. The findings suggest that body image struggles emerge from this ongoing negotiation process, where digital enhancement offers empowerment while simultaneously reinforcing comparison and insecurity. By illuminating these complex dynamics, the study demonstrates that filtered self-presentation functions as a relational practice one that continuously shapes, and is shaped by, women’s evolving perceptions of their bodies and identities.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that internalized filtered beauty standards significantly intensify women's body image struggles, aligning with earlier scholarship emphasizing social comparison and self-objectification in digital environments. Previous studies by Rouhi (2022), Yeluru et al. (2022) and Cheli et al. (2024) argue that image-based social media exposure predicts body dissatisfaction through upward comparison. The present study confirms this pattern but extends it by showing that self-editing, not merely exposure, accelerates internalization. Unlike earlier research that positioned women primarily as passive consumers of idealized content, these findings highlight how active filter use deepens self-discrepancy (Newsholme et al., 2022). The normalization of edited appearances on platforms such as Instagram reinforces unrealistic standards, suggesting that digital participation itself becomes a mechanism that sustains embodied dissatisfaction.

The second finding regarding the validation economy resonates with literature on algorithmic feedback and self-worth regulation. Nasution et al. (2025) and Burnett (2020) emphasized that appearance-focused interaction predicts body surveillance, and the current findings reinforce this claim by demonstrating how engagement metrics function as evaluative mirrors. However, this study adds nuance by illustrating the emotional volatility tied to fluctuating digital feedback. Whereas previous quantitative research often measured general associations between social media use and self-esteem, the present analysis reveals how women strategically adjust filter intensity to maximize validation (Jessica et al., 2022; Servidio et al., 2024). This insight suggests that body image struggles are sustained not only by comparison but also by the structural design of digital platforms, where visibility and affirmation are unevenly distributed and algorithmically amplified.

The negotiation of authenticity identified in this study introduces a perspective less emphasized in prior research. While earlier scholarship largely framed social media as a source of pressure, the current findings show that women exercise agency by alternating between filtered and unfiltered representations (Barberan et al., 2021; Halstead, 2022). This partially diverges from deterministic media-effects models by emphasizing reflexivity and resistance. Nevertheless, the emotional vulnerability accompanying authentic self-presentation confirms that structural beauty norms remain influential. The tension between empowerment and constraint reflects a dynamic interplay between technological affordances and gendered expectations (Aley et al., 2020; Seers et al., 2021). Therefore, body image struggles should be understood not as fixed outcomes of exposure but as evolving processes shaped by negotiation, adaptation, and relational feedback within digital environments.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to body image and digital culture scholarship by integrating self-discrepancy theory with performative identity construction. The study suggests that filtered self-presentation functions as a repetitive performative act that gradually reshapes internal beauty standards. By conceptualizing filters as socio-cultural tools embedded in validation economies, the research expands existing frameworks that focus primarily on media exposure. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of digital literacy programs that address not only critical

consumption but also critical production of online images. Mental health interventions should incorporate discussions about filter dependency, validation anxiety, and strategies for developing intrinsic self-worth independent of algorithmic approval.

Overall, the study implies that addressing women's body image struggles requires both individual and structural approaches. On an individual level, fostering reflective awareness about editing practices and validation-seeking behaviors may reduce self-discrepancy and emotional dependency. At the structural level, platform designers and policymakers should consider transparency measures for digital alteration tools and algorithmic feedback systems. The comparison with existing literature demonstrates continuity in recognizing social comparison as a central mechanism. However, this research advances understanding by highlighting active self-editing and authenticity negotiation as critical dimensions. Consequently, body image in the age of filtered self-presentation emerges as a complex psychosocial phenomenon shaped by technology, culture, and women's ongoing efforts to define themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that body image struggles among women emerge through the internalization of digitally constructed beauty standards, validation economies, and ongoing negotiations of authenticity. The key finding is that active filter use intensifies self-discrepancy and self-surveillance, as women not only consume beauty norms but also reproduce and negotiate them through everyday digital practices. The study contributes phenomenological insight by integrating self-discrepancy theory, digital culture, and feminist perspectives while recognizing women's agency within structural constraints. However, its small urban sample limits generalization. Future research should employ diverse, cross-cultural, longitudinal, and mixed-method approaches to examine evolving digital beauty norms and their psychological consequences.

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