

Framing Beauty: How Instagram Influencers Shape Appearance Anxiety and Body Positivity Among Adolescents

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Abstract

The research examines how Instagram content influences teenage users' beauty standards and self-esteem, utilizing the theoretical framework of framing theory. The research examines two case studies of influencers to either enhance or reduce appearance anxiety through their content by comparing Kim Kardashian's idealized body standards with Danae Mercer Ricci's body positivity approach. The research analyzed 40 Instagram posts (20 from each influencer) through inductive coding to identify recurring visual elements, textual content, and audience engagement patterns. The research shows that edited and filtered content creates unattainable beauty standards, which leads to self-comparison. However, unedited body-positive content promotes self-acceptance and emotional strength. Body positivity content may inadvertently create new standards for appearance, even though it aims to encourage acceptance. The research demonstrates the necessity for platform algorithm changes, media literacy education, and digital citizenship development to create healthier online spaces for young people.

Keywords

Framing theory, Instagram, appearance anxiety, body positivity, teenage users.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have become essential tools through which young people interact and express themselves in the modern world. Studies indicate that around 79% of 13- to 14-year-olds and 84% of 15- to 17-year-olds have accounts on media platforms such as Instagram, which is widely popular among this demographic [1]. Young individuals often use these platforms to capture and share selfies to showcase their identities and get acceptance from their peers [1].

On Instagram, beauty ideals, such as being slim and having flawless skin, are prominently framed through highly edited photos that receive more likes, comments, and shares [2]. The visual reinforcement of appearance norms through platform dynamics reflects how media shape users' perceptions of beauty. Framing theory offers a compelling framework for analyzing such appearance-related media practices, as it examines how media highlight certain aspects of reality to influence interpretation [3].

Teenagers are at a juncture in their growth, shaping their identity and being accepted by peers. Social media constantly exposes teenagers to comparisons with others and judgments based on appearance [4]. This behavior may lead young people to compare themselves to carefully edited images, leading to unrealistic expectations of themselves, resulting in stress, dissatisfaction with appearance, sensitivity to feedback and judgment on appearance, negative self-esteem, and low mood [5]. To reverse that, some influencers are launching a rising body positivity movement that fights against traditional media-imposed beauty standards. The movement promotes self-love by encouraging people of all genders to accept different body shapes and sizes while stressing the value of being authentic and confident in oneself [6]. Although the

content of body positivity has been proven to have positive effects on women's emotions, body satisfaction, and body appreciation, there are still some controversies regarding it [6]. Some scholars point out that although its original intention was to challenge narrow aesthetic standards, the content of body positivity itself may still overly focus on appearance and emphasize body display [7]. In addition, the current mainstream body-positive accounts are mostly concentrated on white women, with limited coverage of teenagers, non-white groups, and marginalized groups, and related research is also relatively scarce [8].

This paper analyzes two competing appearance-related frames on Instagram: one that reinforces idealized beauty standards and another that promotes body positivity. Using framing theory as the guiding framework, the study compares content from two influencers to examine how these frames are constructed and received. The discussion draws on three bodies of literature: (1) the foundations of framing theory, (2) the framing of idealized appearance on Instagram, and (3) the framing of anti-appearance anxiety. The aim is to explore how digital platforms can contribute to healthier body image norms for youth.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The outline of framing theory

Framing theory originated in political science and journalism. It examines the process through which different interpretations emerge regarding the same issue based on its presentation. According to Entman [3], framing means choosing specific elements of perceived reality while making them more prominent in communication to achieve a particular interpretation or evaluation.

Building on this, Chong and Druckman [9] divide framing into two forms: communication and thought frames. The first part describes the methods through which media representatives and politicians, along with other opinion leaders, emphasize specific perspectives. The second part explains how people process and evaluate received information in their minds. Certain dominant frames can reshape social values by determining what people accept as valid, ethical, and significant [9].

According to Hallahan [10], framing attributes involve selectively highlighting specific features of an object, whether these features are positive, negative, or disruptive to the mainstream. The idea of a perfect appearance and anti-appearance anxiety can be classified as framing attributes; one highlights the attributes of thinness and a flawless body that should be pursued. The other emphasizes real, natural, and diverse bodily features. While both frames shape public understanding of what a body should be, they do so by emphasizing fundamentally different sets of attributes.

2.2. The framing of ideal appearance and perfect body image

On visual-dominated social media platforms like Instagram, perfect photo content is widely promoted and highly visible, partly because it tends to receive more likes and can even generate revenue for content creators [2]. When users engage with these platforms, they often adapt to the platform's algorithmic recommendation system and its underlying framing structure, which tend to favor specific aesthetic standards, idealized lifestyles, and body images.

Boursier et al. [1] examined 578 Italian teenagers to analyze how social media usage affects appearance-related anxiety. Their study revealed that teenagers who frequently use edited selfies to enhance self-confidence are more likely to develop problematic social media usage patterns. This excessive engagement reinforces appearance-based self-comparisons and contributes to negative body image. Furthermore, the authors emphasized that appearance-focused features on social platforms promote constant comparison, foster self-doubt, and ultimately exacerbate appearance anxiety [1].

A study by Üstündağ et al. [11], which surveyed 364 Turkish adolescents aged 15 to 18, explored whether social appearance anxiety affects their level of concern about their appearance on social media. The results showed that social appearance anxiety significantly predicted a high level of concern about one's appearance among adolescents on social media [11]. When the level of appearance anxiety increased, adolescents were more likely to use photo editing software and pay more attention to the effect of photo posting, thus getting trapped in managing a better-looking social image [11].

Another study by Ryding et al. [2] involved 290 participants to determine the impact of various Instagram usage patterns on mental health outcomes. The study evaluated three types of Instagram use, which included active use through posting and interacting, passive use through browsing, and problematic use through compulsive checking, while assessing appearance anxiety, together with self-esteem depression and general anxiety. Research has shown that passive use of Instagram increases appearance anxiety, which has adverse psychological health effects [2].

In summary, framing theory provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the generation mechanism of appearance anxiety on social media. It reveals how platforms guide young people to form a single understanding of beauty through content presentation, value emphasis, and social interaction, thereby influencing their emotions, behaviors, and values.

2.3. The framing of anti-appearance anxiety

In recent years, with the spread of the "body positivity" movement on global social media, more and more users have begun to challenge the single appearance standard in mainstream media [12]. These contents constitute a counter-framing of the aesthetic framework of thinness as beauty, constructing a diverse and self-accepting new body narrative for users [12].

Cohen et al. [6] researched 640 Instagram accounts regarding appearance-related posts and found that these contents intentionally focused on self-acceptance and anti-anxiety. Some influencers even post their display of obese bodies to tell young generations to love themselves and build a healthy attitude toward appearance. These contents illustrate how social media is framed in the opposite way. It structurally changes the audience's measurement standards of traditional beauty, guiding people to shift from a single aesthetic standard to identifying with their own body, accepting themselves and a healthy body [6]. Cohen et al. [6] show that positive body content can help protect the value of users, making it easier for teens or women to handle stress and escape from comparing themselves to others.

Lazuka et al. [13] analyzed 246 #BodyPositivity posts from ordinary Instagram users, aiming to assess whether these contents truly disseminate diverse body images and positive body views. The research found that these posts indeed more frequently present non-mainstream body features such as stretch marks and unedited photos (Lazuka et al., 2020). Over one-third of the content conveys the concept of broad beauty, and about a quarter involves self-acceptance and body appreciation [13]. However, the study also pointed out that some content still contains praise for slimming, promotion of weight loss products, or sexualized displays, reflecting the contradictory expressions of the "body positivity" movement on mass platforms [13].

Trekels and Eggermont [4] found that teens are not passive viewers of social media. Instead, they can notice both ideal beauty messages and body-positive content. The teenagers also have the ability to find a balance between them. Research has shown that when adolescents are able to simultaneously recognize the benefits and costs of becoming beautiful and maintaining cognitive balance, appearance anxiety is significantly reduced [4]. This study provides evidence that information about anti-appearance anxiety can be an important resource for adolescents to regulate cognition and emotions, especially in the context of peer communication.

In summary, although social media has a significant framing effect in creating appearance anxiety, users are constantly reconstructing the beauty discourse system on the platform through reverse content production, such as expressions of physical positivity and self-care. This process reflects how adolescents can use framing theory to create a healthy online environment, providing theoretical support and empirical evidence for understanding the anti-appearance anxiety movement in social media. However, how to ensure the anti-framing not transfer to a new form of appearance pressure, such as performative self-love standards, remains an important issue for future research [7].

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how appearance-related content is framed on Instagram. Following Elo and Kyngäs's [14] inductive content analysis model, the study involves analyzing the content, coding and categorizing the content, and interpreting it. Two influencers on Instagram were selected for comparison: Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian) and Danae Mercer Ricci (@danaemercer). Through her global fashion and beauty influence, Kim Kardashian frequently shares idealized body images and highly edited visual content. Danae Mercer uses her platform to advocate body positivity with unedited photos, which helps people develop self-acceptance. Their significant followings and opposing aesthetic perspectives provide a strong basis for a framing comparison.

This paper checks 40 Instagram posts (20 from each influencer) between January to May 2025, retrieved manually from their public accounts. The content selection criteria include: 1) relevance to body image or appearance-related themes (e.g., use of hashtags like #selflove, #bodyconfidence, or visual presentation of edited/perfect bodies); 2) measurable engagement levels (likes, comments, and shares), to ensure the posts analyzed are both representative and impactful.

The research applied thematic coding to analyze recurring language, visual methods, and audience responses. The study employed framing theory, as outlined by Entman [3], to analyze its findings on appearance-related anxiety and anti-appearance anxiety movements, aiming to determine how Instagram's visual framing influences dominant beauty standards among adolescent users. One limitation of this study is that it focuses on only two influencers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader user populations.

4. Media Review

In order to further understand the operation of the framework theory in real-life social media content, this section selected two representative bloggers on Instagram to showcase opposite framework strategies: one is a representative who reinforces mainstream beauty standards through exquisite content and may trigger appearance anxiety (Kim Kardashian), and the other is an advocate for active body movement, who opposes traditional aesthetics through content and advocates diversity and self-acceptance (Danae Mercer Ricci). By comparing the themes, language, comments, and image styles of the two, it can be demonstrated how social platforms can influence users, especially teenage users, to build up value between the perfect appearance and accepting oneself.

The first influencer, Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian), has over 350 million followers, and her Instagram content has long revolved around fashion, makeup, body shaping, and luxury living. Her photos are almost all carefully arranged, with perfect makeup, clothing that highlights curves, light and shadow optimization, and filter processing [15]. User comments are mostly focused on "perfect figure" and "how perfect a woman you are," etc. According to media reports, the Kardashian sisters reshaped the definition of women's "ideal figure" in a powerful way - slender black hair and a perfect figure have become mainstream beauty standards [16].

As long as you walk into any place where women in their twenties gather, you can see the universal influence of this aesthetic [16]. Some media have also reported that although she has expanded her representation of women's bodies, others believe that she has set beauty standards that are difficult to naturally achieve, which may fuel the pursuit of rapid weight loss and unhealthy eating habits [17]. All of these may have a negative impact on women's body image [17].

In contrast, Danae (@danaemercer) advocates for self-acceptance and body confidence on Instagram: she encourages women to embrace themselves without shame, emphasizing that everyone's body is unique and worth cherishing. Danae reveals common posing and filter effects on social media by displaying comparative photos, reminding viewers not to be misled by unrealistic beauty standards. She even posts her pregnancy photos and shares stories of childbirth. In short, Danae often posts encouraging texts and pictures to remind people to cherish the present and enjoy the beautiful moments in life. Media such as Women's Health interviewed her stories and praised them as inspiring and motivating [18]. There are also media reports that she sincerely influences and helps others love themselves through her own story [19]. Under the framing theory, her content not only challenges the mainstream beauty framework but also weakens the appearance anxiety that teenagers may experience during their social media usage.

Overall, the framing paths presented by the two bloggers represent two trends of reinforcement and confrontation of appearance anxiety on social platforms. The content constructed by Kardashian uses visual and linguistic cues to make people's appearance the core criterion for measuring value, while Danae strives to reconstruct the evaluation system using reverse narrative.

Influencer	Hashtags/themes	comments
@kimkardashian	Seldom use hashtags Professionally edited visuals showcasing flawless skin, hourglass curves, and styled poses in SKIMS/gala/bikini themes.	luxury queen; gorgeous; beautiful figure; dream figure; flawless; I wish I looked like this; role model; perfect. Part of the links: https://www.instagram.com/p/DH_dcP5ppZx/?img_index=1 https://www.instagram.com/p/DHLz3ehJA6o/?img_index=1
@danaemercer	#SelfLove, #BodyPositivity, #Selfacceptance, #Socialmediavsreality, daily pregnant photos without editing.	this made me cry in a good way; you're helping me accept my body; so much respect for your honesty. https://www.instagram.com/p/DJcFgKptIHc/?img_index=1 https://www.instagram.com/p/DI9N-A0NeQA/?img_index=1

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines social media platforms, particularly Instagram, through algorithms that reinforce the framing of edited and perfect appearances, triggering anxiety in teenage users. By analyzing two influencers, Kim Kardashian and Danae Mercer, the article compares the themes, comments, and media coverage surrounding both influencers. Kim Kardashian emphasizes a slim, sexy, and flawless body image; her posts align with the algorithms, causing followers to mimic her pictures. For example, comments like "perfect figure" or "I wish I could look like this" can always be found in her posts. Such a repeated presentation of a narrow beauty frame

reinforces selective perception [3]. It aligns with the findings of Boursier [1] and Ryding [2], which state that teenagers are affected by algorithms and high amounts of positive comments, leading them to experience anxiety when trying to post edited photos. In contrast, Danae Mercer presents her wrinkles and shares unedited photos of herself, expressing her attitude toward beauty. Her posts receive positive comments about self-love and self-acceptance. This also demonstrates that the concept of body positivity can help establish women's self-esteem and inner security [6] [13]. However, many people understand that awareness does not equate to problem-solving, and emphasizing self-love may create new pressures regarding appearance for those who are not yet prepared for self-acceptance [7].

In conclusion, when helping teenagers address their anxiety, several suggestions should be considered for the future. Firstly, the platform should optimize its algorithm mechanism, diversify recommendations, and prioritize content that showcases authentic and diverse body images, breaking the monopoly of a single aesthetic standard while promoting the development of a healthy aesthetic ecosystem. Secondly, schools should enhance media literacy education and psychological support during middle school and college years, guiding students to understand the construction mechanism of the content framework theory on social media, improving their ability to identify media content, and fostering critical thinking. Lastly, society should promote the construction of digital citizenship, equipping teenagers with value judgment standards in virtual spaces that align with those in the real world.

Overall, this study validates the application of media framing theory in explaining the spread of appearance anxiety and anti-anxiety content among teenagers. It reveals the interactive mechanism between algorithms and content construction and demonstrates the potential for users to autonomously reconstruct aesthetic discourse, providing theoretical support and practical inspiration for future discussions on the responsibility of social platforms, user resistance mechanisms, and the construction of digital ethics.

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