

The Influence of Technology on Contemporary Aesthetic Standards

Luana Copetti

Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná

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ABSTRACT

Throughout time, as a result of literacy and the need to communicate, communication has been present since prehistoric times through cave art and pictorial representations. Human beings have always had this need for sociability. The media is part of this process, being an integral part of everyday life and the social lives of most people, especially through social networks. It influences how we live, what we buy, and how we act, pushing us to follow trends or emulate influencers, all in pursuit of a specific form of happiness, which, in reality, is unattainable. The problem arises when part of the population sacrifices their basic survival needs in order to fit into the standards imposed by the aesthetic industry, which makes billions a year. This industry creates an automatic need, particularly among women, to conform as a means of being accepted by society. These behaviors lead to numerous challenges, all in pursuit of a beauty that, according to philosophy, does not exist. The aim of this research is to understand the motivational causes behind how people are influenced by aesthetic concerns and sentimentality. It seeks to provide reflections that encourage individuals not to compare themselves with others.

Keywords: Literacy; Media; Aesthetics; Beauty; Standardization; Influences.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a society where much of human activity revolves around the aesthetic industry, shaped by constant enhancements that create new structural and artificial processes. The pursuit of perfection drives individuals to relentlessly engage in aesthetic procedures, diets, exercises, and beauty routines, often disregarding their social or economic realities. This quest for perfection is exacerbated by social media platforms, which promote idealized and unattainable beauty standards.

Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok play a central role in shaping these standards, where influencers are paid to endorse an aesthetic that does not necessarily reflect reality. Studies like those by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) and Twenge et al. (2019) show that exposure to this kind of content is directly related to increased body dissatisfaction and decreased self-esteem, particularly among young adults. This happens because these environments promote what Pechêux (2010) calls “imaginary formations,” where preconceived notions of beauty, such as what constitutes a “healthy body” or “beautiful hair,” are constantly reinforced.

The relationship between social media and unrealistic beauty standards raises critical questions about how the media influences self-esteem, mental well-being, and identity formation, especially among young women. Studies suggest that most people consuming such content feel persistent pressure to conform to the standards promoted by digital influencers. For many, this conformity translates into anxiety, personal dissatisfaction, and, in some cases, the pursuit of aesthetic procedures that are not always economically viable or necessary.

Motivation

The aim of this study is to reflect on how social networks and technology affect the human psyche, manipulating perceptions of self-esteem and self-image. The research seeks, through an empirical analysis, to identify the main psychological consequences of this exposure and how it contributes to the perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards. By providing empirical data, this study aims to contribute to future interventions that could mitigate the negative effects of these influences and promote a more critical and healthy view of social media.

Methodology

The main objective of this work is to foster critical thinking about how social networks impact our self-esteem, leading to feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction that were not as prevalent before. People often identify with, and sometimes even change their perspectives, as a result of these influences. This article promotes self-acceptance, emphasizing that everyone is beautiful in their own way.

To contextualize the study, comparisons are drawn between the evolution of humankind and the way we live today, surrounded by numerous technologies, including advancements in literacy and the rise of social media. The details and explanations are supported by the textbook *Literacy and Multilingualism* (Rojo, 2019). The media shapes our way of living and perception of life through others who convince us that purchasing products or undergoing cosmetic surgery is necessary. Social networks, particularly Twitter and Instagram—the main platforms where people tend to hold themselves to unrealistic standards and comparisons—also serve as material for analysis. This work is organized into two chapters. The first chapter addresses literacy and the media, while the second chapter focuses on aesthetics and influences. Finally, conclusions are presented, analyzing social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Twitter (X).

Letters and media: a technological reading of the world

First and foremost, human beings have always sought countless ways to share their ideas, express differences, and communicate. The development of writing has taken place in immeasurable forms over time. Critical thinking and comprehension are integral to the evolution of language, progressing alongside resourcefulness.

As Rojo (2019, p. 11) explains, in 1998, the term 'literacy' gained increased prominence, along with its meaning, extending beyond writing to encompass social structures and the relationships that exist within them. It can be viewed as a state or condition that a social group or individual attains through the appropriation of writing, focusing on the socio-historical aspects of a society's development.

With the rapid advancement of technology, a wide range of meanings have emerged to describe cultural and aesthetic contexts, some of which influence us indirectly at a subconscious level. Consequently, we can consider the concept of multiple literacies across various media, giving rise to the idea of multilearning, which will be explained later. As a result of globalization's evolution, there has been an explosion of media, societal, and cultural shifts, where texts are no longer just written but presented in a multitude of forms. With the expansion of technology, new tools are emerging that enable and intensify a variety of possibilities for discourse and texts, enriching our vocabulary as more texts circulate, generating diverse interpretations—both positive and negative.

In this context, virtual culture arises from the convergence of production, information, distribution, and consumption. It is characterized by modes of circulation that often lack control over messages, news, influences, and ever-changing trends. Consequently, the transmedia relationship emerges, where new demands from readers and the power of producers interact in unpredictable ways. In this model, different media platforms offer distinct content, contrasting with crossmedia, where the same content is shared across various media. These two forms of media amplification have developed to classify these new roles.

The role of the media is to insert literacy and writing into the broader societal framework, perpetuating a cycle that intertwines with consumerism. This cycle persuades society to believe that consumers are free agents with endless choices about the latest and most appealing trends on their screens. However, the media subtly influences the consumer's decisions, shaping their preferences for certain products and choices.

Aesthetics: concepts, established standards and relations with media

Relating the influence of different media and the literacy derived from these interactions with the world, media consumers often become dissatisfied with their bodies, features, and the reflection they see in the mirror. The message conveyed is that, to be considered beautiful, one must buy certain products or undergo specific procedures, as everyone strives to stay 'in fashion.' Unfortunately, the media plays a significant role in shaping the imaginary construction of contemporary aesthetic standards.

The word 'aesthetics,' whether used in everyday life or in the philosophy of art, has, since Ancient Greece, implied a singular value: beauty. However, a new concept of aesthetics has emerged in response to the convergence of art, music, and media, where the virtualization of reality has given rise to a collective surge of images, sensations, and concepts that were previously less significant, but are now increasingly emphasized in digital spaces, amid the hallucinatory transience of information.

Brazil ranks third in global cosmetics consumption, behind only the USA and Japan. Of the 1.7 million cosmetic surgeries performed in the country in 2019, 60% were for aesthetic purposes. Today, the standard of beauty is elusive and only seemingly attainable through procedures and products marketed as promoting 'well-being.' Beauty itself is seen in various ways, often associated with something that has been altered, exaggerating what is normal and natural, as surgeries reshape features that vary from person to person.

According to Maria Rita Kehl, 'Life, confined to the mirror, becomes dangerously devoid of meaning.' By analyzing aesthetic standards portrayed through media like Twitter, we can observe societal pressures and the phenomenon of 'cancel culture,' which also extends to Instagram. On this platform, many users, particularly influencers, appear flawless. Aesthetic procedures are heavily influenced by such media, where the more one resembles those who have undergone cosmetic surgery, the better they are perceived to feel about themselves. Yet, beauty in this digital world is never fully attainable, and the pinnacle of self-esteem is often tied to undergoing some form of surgery or procedure.

This creates an unattainable reality, especially for those with limited financial means, who feel pressured to conform to these beauty ideals to be considered attractive in the eyes of others.

In countless ways, influencers shape people's daily lives, driving them to buy products or undergo procedures that often turn out to be superfluous. The media perpetuates a false sense of happiness, suggesting that by acquiring certain items or completing specific procedures, people can attain this elusive fulfillment. However, as philosophy suggests, this sense of satisfaction is short-lived. When the next product or trend arrives, the cycle begins again—becoming a saturated, never-ending loop in which media networks bombard us with colorful and flashy advertisements. These ads stimulate our minds, turning what was once superfluous into a perceived necessity, falsely promising a life without sadness.

Brands and industries, which finance these advertisements and pay exorbitant sums to bloggers to promote their products, set particular faces and bodies as the 'ideal' standards of beauty, all with the aim of generating significant economic profits. This intense exploitation of the mind creates artificial needs. Psychiatrist Tiago Queiroz, from Hospital das Clínicas, explains that many mental disorders stem from media influence, one of the most prevalent being depression. This arises when people become trapped in non-existent realities or utopian images that act as masks for real life. Our brains begin to crave this perfection, making our reality feel unsatisfactory. Anxiety is another consequence, fueled by information overload and the excessive time spent on social networks. Body image issues, particularly among women, are also prominent, as dissatisfaction grows and temporary gratification from procedures only leads to a desire for more.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his philosophies on liquid modernity, touches on the issues of consumerism and how industries capitalize on the indecisiveness of consumers, particularly in a society that has become increasingly superficial. Regarding social networks, Bauman (2016) argues:

'The difference between a community and a network is that you belong to the community, but the network belongs to you. You can add and remove friends, and control the people you connect with. This makes you feel better, as loneliness is the great threat in these individualistic times' (Bauman, 2016, in an interview with El País).

In one of his memorable observations, Bauman states that 'capitalism continues through creative destruction.' Large companies, with their immense purchasing power, are significant influencers of consumption. Bauman also critiques what he calls 'wasted lives'—the pursuit of pleasing everyone, which inevitably leads to unhappiness. As social beings, we think in diverse ways, making it impossible to be fully integrated into this society and find happiness simultaneously. The utopia of life is non-existent and ultimately unattainable.

By analyzing the images in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, it becomes clear that the world metaphorically revolves around consumption, creating a desire for aesthetic perfection. This often leaves individuals, especially young girls, feeling uncomfortable. The reader's perception of images depicting others imposing beauty standards triggers discomfort in many members of society. The pressure to resemble a famous figure or someone admired makes self-love increasingly difficult in today's world. Observing daily tweets and social media posts reveals that many people don't feel good about themselves; there is a pervasive aesthetic pressure, leaving readers feeling unattractive and insufficient. They feel the need to emulate someone who is idolized for their beauty, leading to an emptiness that takes hold. People are rarely satisfied because there will always be someone who appears better in every aspect.

Fig. 1. Dissatisfaction with your body due to influences from the web



Fig. 2 Illustration of masked happiness on social media



Social networks have become an integral part of our lives, and their influence on our thoughts—whether we feel happy or sad—depends heavily on who we interact with or see online. Instagram, in particular, plays a decisive role in shaping the self-esteem of many individuals. The platform's emphasis on narcissistic perfection only exacerbates the insecurities and complications that society already faces. Moreover, it takes advantage of people's vulnerabilities to promote products, encouraging them to believe they will only look good if they use these products. The problem originates in industries, markets, and retailers, and paradoxically, the solution is also found in the same places. These entities profit from people's pain and sadness, as if possessing everything they see on the internet could fill the void in their lives—created and exploited by those who want to sell and profit from it.

Social networks, including Twitter (X), as shown in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, provide a platform for people to interact and communicate in various ways, allowing for the exchange of diverse experiences and opinions on a given topic. While some individuals may feel inadequate, others use these platforms to express their views as a means of offering support and attempting to help.

Fig. 3 Outrage from some people on Twitter (X)



Fig. 4 Outrage over cosmetic procedures



RESEARCH DESIGN

The main objective of this study is to foster critical thinking about how social networks impact self-esteem, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness that were less prevalent before the rise of these platforms. This study goes beyond merely encouraging self-acceptance by presenting empirical data on the influence of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram and Twitter, on self-image. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This design is selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social implications of beauty standards propagated through social networks. The research aims to substantiate the theoretical framework with empirical evidence.

DATA COLLECTION

A survey was conducted with 150 participants aged 18-35 to explore their patterns of social media usage, self-esteem levels, and perceptions related to body image. The participants were asked how frequently they use social media, what type of content they engage with (e.g., influencers, beauty-related posts), and how this content influences their self-perception.

Survey Structure: The survey included both closed-ended questions (using a Likert scale to measure changes in self-esteem) and open-ended questions to capture participants' emotional and psychological responses to beauty standards on social media.

Sampling: Participants were recruited online using convenience sampling. Demographic data such as age, gender, and education level were collected to examine correlations between these variables and the influence of social media on self-esteem.

A content analysis of 500 Instagram and Twitter posts from beauty and fitness influencers was conducted. These

posts were analyzed to identify recurring themes, such as the promotion of specific beauty products, cosmetic procedures, or idealized body images.

Coding Process: The posts were coded based on key aesthetic themes like cosmetic surgery, body enhancements, fitness routines, and diet plans. Sentiment analysis was also performed on captions and comments to assess the tone and emotional content of these posts.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis: Survey data was analyzed using statistical software to explore the correlation between time spent on social media and self-esteem. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses, and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine relationships between social media exposure and self-esteem.

Qualitative Analysis: Open-ended survey responses were analyzed to identify recurring themes related to the emotional impact of social media on participants. These responses were cross-referenced with the content analysis to link specific types of social media content with reported dissatisfaction.

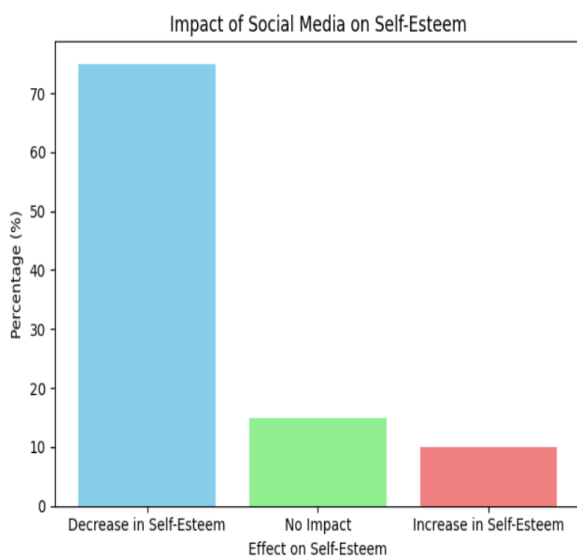
Comparative Analysis: The content analysis findings were compared with survey responses to assess how closely participants' experiences align with the aesthetic trends observed in social media. This allowed the identification of which types of posts have the greatest impact on self-esteem.

RESULTS

The bar chart Fig. 5 displays the percentage of survey participants who reported changes in their self-esteem due to exposure to social media. The data reveal that 75% of participants experienced a decrease in self-esteem, while 15% reported no impact, and only 10% indicated an increase in confidence.

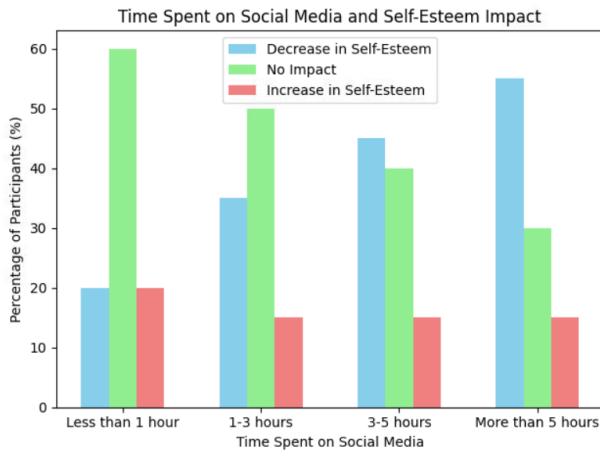
The survey results suggest that social media, particularly platforms like Instagram and Twitter, tend to negatively affect users' self-esteem. A significant majority of participants (75%) reported a decline in self-esteem after viewing beauty-related content, especially posts from influencers that often promote unrealistic beauty standards. Only 10% of participants felt more confident, indicating that the overall impact of social media exposure is predominantly negative.

Fig. 5 Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem



This grouped bar chart Fig. 6 shows how the amount of time spent on social media correlates with self-esteem. As time on social media increases, the percentage of participants reporting a decrease in self-esteem rises (from 20% with less than 1 hour to 55% with more than 5 hours). Meanwhile, the percentage reporting no impact decreases, and those reporting an increase in self-esteem remain relatively low.

Fig. 6 Time Spent on Social Media and Self-Esteem Impact



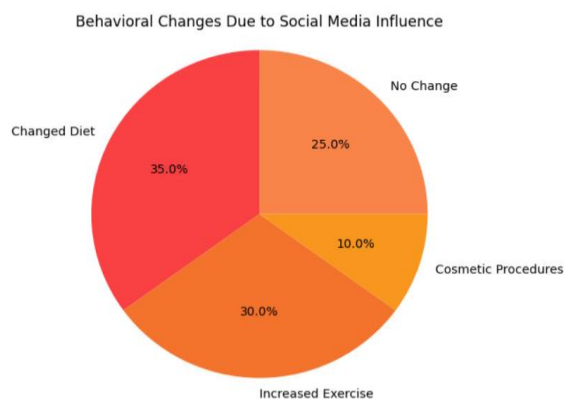
This pie chart Fig. 7 visualizes how social media influences participants' behavior in various aspects of their lives. A significant portion, 35%, reported altering their diet due to social media exposure, underscoring the strong influence that platforms such as Instagram and Twitter have in promoting dietary changes. This could be linked to the frequent sharing of diet plans, meal ideas, and weight-loss programs by influencers and fitness personalities, which can shape users' food choices and perceptions of healthy eating.

Closely following, 30% of participants indicated that social media influenced them to modify their exercise routines. The rise of fitness content, including workout challenges and exercise tips shared by influencers, appears to play a key role in motivating users to engage in physical activity or adjust their fitness habits.

Interestingly, only 10% of participants reported opting for cosmetic procedures as a direct result of social media exposure. While this is a smaller percentage, it highlights a concerning trend where some users feel compelled to undergo aesthetic alterations to align with the beauty standards frequently portrayed by influencers and advertisements online.

On the other hand, 25% of participants stated that social media had no influence on their behavior at all. This suggests that while social media has a substantial impact on the lifestyle choices of many, a considerable segment of the population remains unaffected by its pressures, maintaining autonomy over their decisions regarding diet, exercise, and cosmetic procedures.

Fig. 7 Behavioral Changes Due to Social Media Influence



DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results demonstrate a clear relationship between social media usage and decreased self-esteem among participants, with 75% reporting a drop in self-esteem after exposure to aesthetic content on these platforms. This finding aligns with previous studies, such as those by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) and Twenge et al. (2019), which highlight the negative influence of social comparison on social media, particularly among young

adults. These platforms promote idealized and often unattainable beauty standards, intensifying body dissatisfaction and the desire for aesthetic procedures, thus fueling a cycle of anxiety and personal dissatisfaction.

When comparing these findings to more recent literature, it becomes evident that the impact of social media on self-esteem and mental well-being becomes more pronounced with increased exposure. Our data show that the longer participants spend on social media, the more likely they are to experience a decrease in self-esteem, as illustrated in the correlation between social media usage and self-esteem (Fig. 6). Recent studies, such as Perloff (2021) and Cohen et al. (2020), reinforce this trend, suggesting that prolonged exposure to aesthetic content intensifies the pressure to conform, especially among women.

Moreover, the data reveal that platforms like Instagram and Twitter play a central role in shaping beauty ideals. Notably, 35% of participants reported changing their diet and 30% adjusted their exercise routines due to social media influence. This highlights the powerful role these platforms play in shaping users' behaviors. However, only 10% opted for aesthetic procedures as a direct result of social media exposure, suggesting that while the psychological pressure is significant, it does not always translate into immediate physical changes.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the discussions of authors such as Bauman (2001), who describe contemporary society as "liquid," where identities are constantly reshaped by external influences. The relentless pursuit of aesthetic perfection, exacerbated by social media, epitomizes this fluidity, where individuals strive to conform to ever-changing and often unattainable beauty ideals.

Practically, these findings point to the need for educational interventions aimed at fostering critical media literacy. Digital literacy programs could play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of social media by teaching individuals, especially young people, to critically interpret the content they are exposed to. Additionally, social media platforms could be held accountable for promoting harmful beauty standards by implementing stricter policies that ensure transparency regarding edited or sponsored content.

CONCLUSIONS

In the world of social networks, where nothing has purely positive effects, the rapid advancement of technology has introduced numerous challenges. The data from this study reveal significant issues related to the influence of social media on self-esteem and behavior, specifically driven by the aesthetic industry, which finances much of the content users consume.

The bar chart on self-esteem demonstrates that 75% of participants reported a decrease in self-esteem after engaging with social media, indicating the negative psychological toll of exposure to idealized beauty standards on platforms like Instagram and Twitter. These results highlight the harmful consequences of comparing oneself to influencers who promote often unattainable beauty ideals. Only a small percentage 10% experienced an increase in self-esteem, suggesting that positive effects from social media are limited for most users.

The time spent on social media and self-esteem impact chart further shows that the more time participants spent online, the more likely they were to experience a decrease in self-esteem. Those spending over five hours per day on social media reported the highest rates of dissatisfaction. This finding underscores the damaging effect of prolonged exposure to curated online personas and the pressures to conform to these images.

The behavioral changes due to social media chart highlights how these platforms also influence users' actions, with 35% of participants reporting changes in their diet, 30% increasing their exercise habits, and 10% undergoing cosmetic procedures. These behavioral shifts are often motivated by the desire to emulate influencers and conform to social media-driven beauty standards, contributing to a cycle of dissatisfaction and striving for unattainable perfection.

In conclusion, while social media offers valuable tools for communication and participation, it also poses significant risks, especially related to self-image and behavior. The data strongly suggest that social media platforms, driven by commercial interests, perpetuate superficiality, leading many users to feel inadequate and unhappy. To mitigate these effects, heightened awareness and digital literacy are essential, ensuring that future

generations can navigate social media without succumbing to the pressures of unrealistic beauty standards and harmful comparisons.

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