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No filters: The Impact of Photo Editing on the Perception of Feminine Beauty Standards in Online Social Media.

Pamela Maria Golowkin

Master in New Media Management,

Supervisor:
PhD. Cláudia Álvares, Associate Professor with Aggregation, Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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Departament of Sociology

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“Beauty begins the moment you decide to be yourself”

- Coco Chanel

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Resumo PT

As redes sociais tornaram-se um espaço central de negociação da beleza, autenticidade e identidade. As ferramentas de edição de imagem e os filtros esbatem a fronteira entre o real e o artificial, produzindo imagens curadas que estabelecem padrões de perfeição inatingíveis. Embora estas tecnologias criem conteúdos inspiradores, também promovem comparações ascendentes que fragilizam a autoestima das mulheres e reforçam ideais estreitos de atratividade e sucesso.

Esta dissertação investiga de que forma as tecnologias de edição e os filtros moldam normas de beleza, perceções de autenticidade e a construção identitária de jovens mulheres. Com base num inquérito a 83 participantes em Portugal, analisa-se a utilização de filtros, as perceções adquiridas através de influenciadores e as consequências psicológicas da comparação digital. Os resultados revelam um paradoxo: as participantes valorizam a autenticidade e criticam conteúdos fortemente editados, mas, mesmo quando reconhecem a manipulação, os conteúdos vistos continuam a afetar a satisfação corporal, a autoimagem e a autoestima. As análises cruzadas mostram que utilizadoras mais jovens e com maior frequência de uso sentem mais pressão, sendo o Instagram particularmente associado ao reforço de padrões irrealistas.

Os resultados confirmam investigações sobre comparação social (Festinger, 1954; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), insatisfação corporal (Kushwaha, 2024; Kleemans et al., 2016) e autenticidade mediada (Enke & Borchers, 2019), expondo contradições entre consciência crítica e influência. Apesar das pressões, contranarrativas como a positividade corporal e a neutralidade corporal demonstram o potencial das redes sociais para promover inclusão e resiliência. Conclui-se que reforçar a literacia digital e a consciência crítica é essencial para proteger a autoestima e apoiar uma construção identitária mais saudável em culturas mediadas digitalmente.

Palavras-chaves: Filtros de redes sociais; Edição de imagens; Influenciadores digitais; Autenticidade; Autoestima; Padrões de beleza.

Abstract EN

Social media has become a primary space where beauty, authenticity, and identity are negotiated. Photo-editing tools and filters blur the boundary between the real and the artificial, producing curated images that set unattainable standards of perfection. While these technologies create aspirational content, they also foster upward comparison, often undermining women's self-esteem and reinforcing narrow ideals of attractiveness and success.

This dissertation investigates how editing technologies and filters shape beauty norms, perceptions of authenticity, and the identity construction of young women. Based on a survey of 83 participants in Portugal, the study analyses patterns of filter use, perceptions of influencers, and the psychological consequences of digital comparison. Findings reveal a paradox: participants value authenticity and criticise heavily edited content, yet even when manipulation is recognised, it still affects body satisfaction, self-image, and self-esteem. Cross-tabulations highlight that younger and heavier social media users experience greater pressure, with Instagram particularly associated with the reinforcement of unrealistic standards.

The results confirm existing research on social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), body dissatisfaction (Kushwaha, 2024; Kleemans et al., 2016), and mediated authenticity (Enke & Borchers, 2019), while also exposing contradictions between awareness and influence. Although social media intensifies cultural pressures, counter-narratives such as body positivity and body neutrality reveal its potential to foster inclusivity and resilience. The study concludes that enhancing digital literacy and critical awareness is essential to protecting self-esteem and enabling healthier identity formation in digitally mediated cultures.

Key words: Social media filters; Image editing; Digital influencers; Authenticity; Self-esteem; Beauty standards.

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Chapter One – Introduction

In contemporary life, social media has become more than a means of communication. It functions as a mirror through which individuals evaluate themselves, their relationships, and their aspirations. Platforms that were once designed simply to connect friends now shape how people understand who they are and who they want to be. The constant exposure to images – often enhanced by filters and photo-editing – creates a space where reality and performance blur together. Digital influencers play a central role in this environment. Their curated posts, marked by careful attention to lighting, aesthetics, and branding, construct worlds that appear effortless yet have a profound impact on followers' perceptions of beauty, authenticity, and self-worth.

Engaging with such content frequently generates paradoxical effects. On the one hand, influencers inspire admiration and can stimulate creativity. On the other hand, they promote constant comparison, raising questions such as: Am I good enough? Should my life look like this? Over time, these comparisons erode confidence and self-esteem, reinforcing standards that often remain unattainable. The widespread use of editing technologies intensifies these pressures. Retouched photos and staged videos present an illusion of perfection, while ordinary, imperfect lives fade from visibility. For many users – especially women – the pursuit of likes, comments, and validation becomes intertwined with self-esteem, shifting the measure of self-worth from internal evaluation to external approval.

Against this backdrop, the dissertation investigates two central questions: first, how photo editing technologies influence the perception of authenticity and branding strategies of digital influencers; and second, how these perceptions of authenticity impact women's self-image and identity construction, including the associated psychological and social consequences. To address these questions, four objectives guide the research: to analyse how editing technologies influence beauty standards; to assess the impact of unrealistic representations on identity formation; to identify the social consequences of digitally mediated beauty; and to evaluate how the use of filters and editing tools affects perceptions of influencer authenticity. The study employs an online questionnaire survey, distributed among women aged 18 to 50 residing in Portugal. Through the use of descriptive statistics applied to closed-ended questions, this quantitative method captures behavioural patterns related to social media use. Although it relies primarily on closed- ended questions, it provides insights into the extent to which users feel pressure to conform to digital beauty norms, how they engage with filters, and how they assess the credibility of influencer content.

The dissertation unfolds in a sequence that moves from theoretical grounding to empirical exploration and critical reflection. It begins with a contextual discussion of the phenomenon of social media as a cultural space where authenticity and beauty standards are negotiated. The literature review then develops a critical synthesis of existing research, drawing on theories of social comparison, self-presentation, digital influencers, and counter-narratives such as body positivity and body neutrality.

Building on this foundation, the conceptual model sets out the hypotheses that guide the empirical analysis, linking the use of filters and editing tools to perceptions of authenticity and to identity formation. The methodological section explains the online survey design, the sampling criteria, and the analytical approach adopted. The findings are presented in terms of participants' demographic characteristics, patterns of social media use, engagement with filters, and evaluations of influencers. The discussion then examines these results in relation to the literature, interrogating key contradictions – most notably the persistence of influence despite widespread awareness of editing practices. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the main insights, acknowledges limitations such as the restricted sample size and absence of deeper cross-tabulations, and points to directions for future research, including the value to explore qualitative methods and more diverse participant groups.

In this way, the dissertation seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the role of digital media in shaping identity and self-perception. By analysing the interplay between technological affordances, cultural beauty norms, and perceptions of authenticity, it highlights both the pressures and possibilities embedded in contemporary social media use.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

1. Digitisation, Social Media, and Self-Perception

The accelerating pace of digitisation has radically transformed everyday life. It is no longer possible to think of communication, socialisation, or identity construction as activities that occur primarily offline. Pereira (2021:13) notes that "the end of the 20th century and the 21st century brought new ways of living and communicating," where the proliferation of digital media allowed individuals to engage in remote exchanges and to generate new flows of information.

This new media ecology positions the digital as not simply a supplement to daily life but as a structuring principle of contemporary culture. Devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops have facilitated constant connectivity. Individuals can now be virtually present in distant places, maintaining connections across space and time that would once have been impossible. Ye (2023:642) highlights that "people have started to use social media as a new method to learn information about the things that they are most interested in, those that are very popular in society, and even to use it to relax and waste time."

This dual nature of social media – as both a source of information and a vehicle for leisure – illustrates the pervasiveness of its role in everyday practices. At the same time, digitisation is not only about communication but also about perception. As Qiu (2024:1) emphasizes, social media has "deeply influenced self-perception and societal values." The curated images, routines, and lifestyles shared online gradually reshape cultural understandings of what is "normal" or "desirable."

As Henriques and Patnaik (2020:1) succinctly observe, "living in a digitised era, communication has now become easier and faster with the emergence of various social applications available at the click of a button." But the ease of communication brings with it new risks: it enables the constant circulation of heavily mediated images that influence how individuals evaluate their own worth and the worth of others. A particularly pressing challenge is the blurring of boundaries between the real and the edited. Harrison and Hefner (2014:136), citing Farid and Bravo (2010), demonstrate that "image-editing technologies have become so sophisticated that even adults cannot accurately identify sites of retouching."

This observation is crucial: if even experienced adults cannot distinguish manipulated from unmanipulated content, young users – who spend significant portions of their daily lives immersed in these visual environments – are even more vulnerable. The implications extend beyond media literacy to questions of self-esteem and body image. Kushwaha (2024:253) concludes that "among its many effects, social media has significantly impacted women's perceptions of their physical appearance and self-esteem."

Recent systematic reviews further indicate that heavy social media use is associated not only with body dissatisfaction but also with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety among adolescents, highlighting the breadth of psychological distress linked to idealised digital comparison

(Keles et al., 2020). Because digital influencers occupy a privileged role in shaping what is perceived as authentic online, their use of editing technologies and filters is central to understanding how authenticity is both constructed and destabilized. Furthermore, followers' exposure to such content directly shapes their identity construction, situating digitisation at the heart of the psychological and social consequences under investigation.

2. Social Media: Definition, Platforms, and Uses

The term social media is frequently used in both academic and popular discourse, yet it resists a single, uniform definition. Pereira (2021:16) emphasizes that "the main purpose of social media is to bring people together," while also warning that not all platforms are identical in function or communicative objectives. Amor (2017:19) provides further nuance, noting that connections between individuals on these platforms "may or may not be mandatory," and that platforms differ in terms of the types of content supported and the ways in which sharing can be public, private, or restricted to select audiences.

This indicates that social media is not merely a technology but a social architecture, where the possibilities for interaction are structured by design. From a more technical perspective, Davis (2016:1) defines social media as "a set of interactive Internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content." This widely cited definition captures the dual role of social media as both technological infrastructure and cultural practice. Users do not simply consume content. They actively produce and circulate it, shaping collective norms and values in the process.

Social media platforms can also be distinguished by their primary purpose. Pereira (2021) suggests a useful typology, where some platforms are oriented towards maintaining interpersonal connections, as in the case of Facebook and WhatsApp. Others are oriented towards entertainment, as with YouTube, which emphasizes audiovisual consumption rather than interpersonal networking. Still others are directed towards professional exchanges, as with LinkedIn, while niche platforms such as TripAdvisor or Pinterest serve specialized communities organized around shared interests.

Amor (2017:19) and Botha and Mills (2012) expand this classification further, distinguishing between networking websites, image-sharing sites, video-sharing platforms, blogs, microblogs, and social news websites. More recent research adds further layers, emphasising that platform affordances – including algorithmic curation, monetisation structures – actively shape how users negotiate authenticity and self-presentation (Bozzi, 2024).

The relevance of these categories can be illustrated through OberCom's Digital Portrait of Portugal (2015–2023), which documents the evolution of social media use nationally. According to this longitudinal study, the five most widely used platforms in Portugal are Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and Messenger. This reflects both global trends and specific local dynamics. Facebook remains a dominant hub for general networking, WhatsApp has become essential for private

communication, YouTube plays a crucial role in entertainment and learning, Instagram emphasizes visual self-presentation, and Messenger serves as a complement to Facebook.

These findings remind us that platform choice is not neutral: the communicative possibilities of each site shape the ways in which authenticity, branding, and self-image are constructed. Instagram, with its emphasis on visual curation and filters, is especially relevant to this study, given its impact on influencer practices and users' body image. Standage (2013, cited in Amor, 2017:20) offers a historical perspective on why social media platforms are so compelling, identifying evolutionary, hierarchical, and technological dimensions that explain their attraction. According to this author, humans have brains that have evolved to process social information, which enhances group cohesion and allows individuals to signal competence, trustworthiness, and social status.

Advances in communication technologies, from writing to the internet, have progressively expanded the reach of such exchanges. Together, these factors explain why platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are not merely tools but environments where social comparison, self-promotion, and authenticity are continuously negotiated. Scholars further note that the visual logics of Instagram and TikTok intensify this dynamic, as their design prioritises aesthetically polished, algorithmically rewarded content over ordinary self-expression (Rocamora, 2011; L.A. Miller, 2024).

2.1 Social Media Influencers and Branding

The emergence of social media influencers is one of the most significant developments in the digital communication landscape. While social media platforms were originally designed to facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, they have quickly evolved into spaces where individuals can cultivate large audiences and exert measurable cultural, social, and economic influence.

Enke and Borchers (2019) conceptualize influencers as nodes within digital networks, whose visibility and reach position them as key mediators of trends and behaviours. Neves (2020:13) offers a more concrete definition, describing influencers as content creators who built a consistent group of followers and who, through blogging, vlogging, or producing short-form content, provide their audiences with insights into their personal, everyday lives, experiences, and opinions. Similarly, Albadri (2024: 2686) characterizes influencers as individuals who use social media to spread their ideas and opinions through text, video posts, or live broadcasts, affecting the behaviour of their followers either positively or negatively.

These definitions highlight several shared features. Influencers are distinguished from traditional celebrities by their accessibility and relatability. They build communities around seemingly ordinary daily routines and produce content related to fitness, fashion, food, beauty, and lifestyle. Their influence arises not only from the size of their audiences but also from the intimacy of their communication style, which fosters a perception of authenticity and trust. Increasingly, influencers are also regarded as brands in their own right. Their personal lives, experiences, and aesthetic choices are

commodified and monetized through collaborations with companies, product placements, and platform-based revenue streams.

Albadri (2024) emphasizes that influencers' work encompasses the production of content, the pursuit of commercial activities with brands and platforms, and the monetisation of visibility through various business models. Branding in this context involves the strategic performance of authenticity. Audiences expect influencers to appear genuine and trustworthy, yet much of their visibility is sustained by commercial imperatives. The balance between personal authenticity and professional branding becomes a central tension. If influencers appear excessively commercial, they risk alienating their followers; if they appear too detached from commercial opportunities, they risk undermining their sustainability as professional content creators.

Authenticity therefore becomes both a personal quality and a marketable asset. Enke and Borchers (2019) argue that the effectiveness of influencers is determined by their ability to be perceived as credible, trustworthy, and authentic. In digital contexts, however, authenticity is performed through deliberate strategies of self-presentation, such as sharing behind-the-scenes content, engaging in direct conversations with followers, and occasionally disclosing vulnerabilities. Yet authenticity is always contested. Followers are acutely aware that influencers' posts are curated, edited, and often sponsored. For this reason, authenticity in digital environments is less about objective truth and more about perceived sincerity.

Influencers also function as intermediaries between platforms, brands, and audiences. Their visibility is partly determined by algorithms that reward engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. They are also embedded in commercial ecosystems where partnerships with brands are critical for financial viability. Finally, they are accountable to audiences whose continued trust and attention are essential to their relevance. Duffy and Hund (2015) describe this precarious balancing act as "aspirational labour," where the promise of authenticity is entangled with the constant demand to produce content that is both marketable and intimate.

This triple role – platform performer, commercial actor, and authentic persona – explains why influencers are central to the dynamics of authenticity and branding in the digital environment. Unlike traditional celebrities, their influence is sustained through the perception that they are ordinary individuals whose lives, though curated, mirror those of their followers. Recent scholarship on Chinese beauty apps further shows that influencer labour is also embedded in techno-feminist power structures, where the very design of digital tools reflects patriarchal logics and reinforces gendered expectations of self-presentation (Peng, 2020).

2.2 Filters and the Aesthetics of Authenticity

One of the most significant technological affordances shaping online self-presentation is the development of photo-editing tools and filters. While traditional image editing software such as Photoshop has long been used to retouch photographs, the integration of filters into mobile applications has made these techniques instantaneous, accessible, and virtually undetectable.

The proliferation of filters on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok has transformed not only how individuals present themselves but also how authenticity is perceived in digital environments. L.A. Miller (2024:1) explains that filters allow users of popular social media sites such as Instagram to change their appearance through the application of digital overlays that adhere to the user's face.

Unlike traditional editing, which occurs after an image is captured, these filters operate in real time. They track facial features and movements, producing seamless modifications that range from playful embellishments such as animal ears or cartoon effects to serious alterations of skin tone, facial symmetry, and body proportions (Yoneyama et al., 2024). As Dijkslag et al. (2024:1) point out, the issue with using beautifying filters is that they decrease body satisfaction. What began as a form of entertainment has become a mechanism through which beauty norms are reinforced and internalised. For many users, particularly young women, filters create the expectation of flawless skin, symmetrical features, and sculpted bodies.

The technological sophistication of these tools means that the boundaries between natural and artificial are increasingly blurred, making it difficult for viewers to discern whether content has been altered (L.A. Miller, 2024). The normalization of filters raises important questions about authenticity. On one hand, filters are used widely, not only by influencers but also by ordinary users, creating a shared culture of digitally enhanced self-presentation. On the other hand, the widespread adoption of filters challenges traditional understandings of authenticity, which presuppose a distinction between the real self and its representations. If nearly all images are edited, the notion of authenticity itself becomes destabilized. This is particularly significant for influencers, who are simultaneously expected to embody beauty ideals and to appear relatable and authentic.

By using filters, influencers align their self-presentation with cultural expectations of attractiveness, but they also risk undermining the credibility that sustains their role as trusted figures. The paradox is clear: the very tools that enhance influencers' visibility may erode the perception of their authenticity. Filters are not only aesthetic tools; they are also embedded in branding practices. Influencers often use filters to maintain a consistent visual identity, aligning their personal brand with broader cultural trends. For example, a fitness influencer might use filters that accentuate muscle definition, while a beauty influencer might employ filters that smooth skin and highlight makeup.

These choices are not random. They are strategic, reinforcing the influencer's brand identity and increasing marketability. However, the reliance on filters also exposes influencers to criticism.

Audiences are increasingly aware of digital manipulation and may perceive excessive reliance on filters as deceptive. This tension reveals the double-edged nature of editing technologies: they enhance visual appeal and engagement but simultaneously threaten the authenticity upon which influencer branding depends.

For users, the prevalence of filters creates a culture of constant comparison with unattainable ideals. Many individuals experience dissatisfaction when comparing themselves to images that have been digitally altered (Kushwaha, 2024; Dijkslag et al., 2024). The phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia, documented by Chen et al. (2019) and Varman et al. (2021), illustrates the extreme consequences: individuals seek cosmetic surgery to replicate their filtered appearances. Filters, therefore, operate not only as personal tools of self-presentation but also as social mechanisms that shape norms of beauty, authenticity, and desirability. Their ubiquity demonstrates how technological affordances directly influence cultural expectations and personal identity construction.

Recent typologies of Instagram filters further show how "beautifying," "playful," and "artistic" categories circulate with different temporalities on platforms, sustaining an attention economy where ephemeral effects nonetheless have lasting implications for norms of appearance (L.A Miller, 2024). in parallel, work on platform art and face filters argues that these tools are now infrastructural to platform identity itself, linking aesthetics, monetisation, and user labour (Bozzi, 2024).

3. Social Comparison and Identity Construction

The psychological dynamics of social media cannot be understood without considering the processes of social comparison. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory postulates that individuals evaluate their beliefs, attitudes, and abilities by comparing themselves with others. These comparisons serve as a benchmark for self-assessment and social orientation. In traditional contexts, comparisons were limited to family, peers, or local communities.

With the rise of social media, however, the scale and intensity of social comparison have expanded dramatically. Festinger's original theory identified two types of comparison: upward comparison, where individuals evaluate themselves against those they perceive as superior, and downward comparison, where they compare themselves with those they regard as inferior. Buunk and Gibbons (2007) refined this distinction, highlighting the emotional consequences of each type. Upward comparisons often produce admiration but also dissatisfaction, while downward comparisons may generate self-enhancement but risk leading to complacency.

Research consistently shows that in digital contexts, upward comparison dominates. Users are exposed to curated and idealized images that amplify success, beauty, and achievement. Studies by Jones (2001) and Strahan et al. (2006) confirm that men and women, both adolescents and adults, are more likely to compare themselves with peers than with celebrities. In social media environments, where

influencers present themselves as relatable peers, this tendency intensifies. Influencers are perceived not as distant celebrities but as accessible role models, making upward comparisons particularly salient.

Kleemans et al. (2016:94) found that exposure to idealized images on social media directly affects adolescents' self-esteem and body satisfaction. Qiu (2024:1) emphasizes that young people increasingly rely on social media to build their self-image and self-worth, often measuring happiness and success against the achievements of others. Validation comes in the form of likes, comments, and shares, which become social currencies. Users compare not only physical appearances but also digital metrics of popularity, leading to competition and self-doubt. Henriques and Patnaik (2020:3) underscore that "the images on social media sites are idealized and unreal, due to digital alteration, thereby setting high expectations from individuals in society."

Imperfections are erased through airbrushing, whitening apps, and filters, producing unattainable standards. This digital perfection reinforces the cycle of upward comparison, where users measure themselves against distorted ideals. The consequences of such comparisons are profound. Viniegra et al. (2020, cited in Tayal, 2023) argue that adolescents exposed to images promoting slim beauty ideals develop dissatisfaction with their own bodies, attaching high value to likes and comments as indicators of worth. Over time, these comparisons influence how individuals see themselves in the mirror, shaping not only perception but also behaviour. Many users attempt to modify their diets, exercise routines, or appearance to align with what they see online, sometimes resorting to cosmetic interventions to replicate filtered aesthetics.

Identity construction in digital spaces is therefore shaped by a feedback loop. Users internalize the standards they observe online, adapt their self-presentation to conform, and in turn reinforce those same norms through their own content. Nerini et al. (2025) emphasize that even when individuals are fully aware that images are artificial, they continue to engage in upward comparison. Strahan et al. (2006, cited in Nerini et al., 2025) suggest that women may intentionally compare themselves with attractive peers because they believe such standards reflect how they will be culturally evaluated.
This cyclical process illustrates the depth of social comparison's influence in digital environments. Users are not passive recipients of images; they actively negotiate their identities in relation to them. But the negotiation is asymmetrical, tilted towards reinforcing unrealistic standards of beauty and success. This dynamic underpins the psychological and social consequences at the core of this dissertation's research objectives.

Experimental evidence with adolescent girls shows direct, short-term declines in body satisfaction after exposure to manipulated Instagram photos, underscoring a causal link between idealised imagery and negative affect (Kleemans et al., 2016; Harrison & Hefner, 2014). Complementary survey work connects frequent filter use with greater acceptance of cosmetic procedures among teens, signalling a behavioural spillover from online comparison to offline body modification intentions (Maes & Lenne, 2022). Concurrently, a systematic review points to broader mental-health correlates: heavy social media use is associated with higher depression, anxiety, and psychological distress among adolescents,

suggesting that social comparison operates alongside other platform stressors to shape wellbeing (Keles et al., 2020).

4. Body Positivity, Body Neutrality, and Counter-Narratives

While much of the literature emphasizes the negative effects of exposure to idealized images, it is important to examine the counter-narratives that seek to resist or subvert these pressures. Among the most prominent are the body positivity and body neutrality movements. Both challenge dominant beauty norms, though they do so in distinct ways. Voelker et al. (2015:149) remind us that body image is a multidimensional construct, encompassing perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours toward one's body.

This complexity helps explain why social media has such a profound effect: it targets not only how individuals look at themselves but also how they think and feel about their value. The body positivity movement, which gained traction in the early 2000s, emerged as a response to relentless media promotion of unattainable ideals. Cohen (2021:2366) describes it as a cultural current designed to promote acceptance of diverse body shapes and sizes. Cwynar-Horta (2016) defines it more precisely as measures taken to criticize societal expectations of body image and beauty norms, advocating respect and acceptance of different appearances.

Research by Mwangi and Buvár (2024:5) suggests that exposure to body-positive content improves not only users' self-image but also their perception of others, encouraging inclusivity and diversity. Practical examples reinforce this claim. The Dove Self-Esteem Project, launched in 2004, has consistently challenged stereotypes through campaigns that emphasize natural beauty. The 2021 Reverse Selfie campaign dramatized the effects of filters by deconstructing a heavily edited selfie of a 13-year-old girl, exposing the pressures faced by young users. Such campaigns highlight the dangers of digital manipulation while promoting alternative understandings of beauty. As Cohen et al. (2021:2369) argue, the value of body positivity lies in its ability to portray alternative body types as beautiful and worthy, challenging dominant appearance ideals. Yet body positivity is not without limitations. Critics argue that it still places too much emphasis on appearance, perpetuating the notion that bodies must be celebrated primarily for how they look.

In response, the concept of body neutrality has emerged. Cohen et al. (2021:2368) explain that while body positivity seeks to change the definition of beauty, body neutrality seeks to change the value placed on beauty itself. In this view, the worth of individuals should not depend on how they look, whether positively or negatively. This shift is subtle but significant: it encourages people to view their bodies not as objects to be judged but as functional entities that enable participation in life.

The relevance of these counter-narratives is twofold. First, they demonstrate that social media is not only a site of harm but also a platform for resistance and empowerment. Second, they provide frameworks that can mitigate the psychological consequences of constant comparison and exposure to

idealized content. By fostering alternative discourses, body positivity and neutrality create spaces where authenticity can be redefined beyond aesthetic conformity. Intervention studies that teach media literacy and encourage critical reflection on idealised images report short-term gains in body satisfaction among adolescent girls, suggesting that counter-narrative exposure can buffer the effects of comparison (Casares Jr. & Binkley, 2022)

5. Beauty Standards and Authenticity

The debate over beauty standards is as old as recorded history, but digitisation has reconfigured its dynamics. Mwangi and Buvár (2024:1) observe that "the concept of beauty is as old as that of mankind," while Pereira (2021:6) reminds us that each culture has historically generated its own codes of presentation and behaviour, defining gender roles and social expectations. These observations highlight that beauty is not fixed but socially constructed, varying across time and space.

Popenoe (2004) and Walters (2014), cited in Mwangi and Buvár (2024), show how Western cultures, with their individualist orientations, tend to valorize thin, toned bodies, symmetrical faces, and defined features, whereas collectivist cultures such as African, Arab, and some Asian societies have historically associated beauty with larger hips and body fat, linking these traits with fertility and health. The digital age complicates these distinctions. Global platforms such as Instagram and TikTok circulate homogenized ideals that transcend cultural boundaries, projecting Westernized aesthetics to global audiences.

Tayal (2023), citing Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), argues that the emphasis on physical beauty in social media is more persuasive than ever, especially among younger generations. The rise of influencers accelerates this trend, as beauty standards are embodied in seemingly relatable figures rather than distant celebrities. This accessibility makes the standards more immediate and therefore more demanding. Yet beauty standards cannot be separated from authenticity.

Sedikides and Schlegel (2024:509) trace the philosophical roots of authenticity to Aristotle, noting that it has long functioned as a moral and social ideal. Their framework identifies four dimensions of authenticity: self-accuracy, self-consistency, self-ownership, and self-enhancement. Self-accuracy involves unbiased self-representation, though research shows that positive affect often overrides objectivity. Self-consistency emphasizes alignment between behaviour and internal standards, though trait positivity also influences perceptions of authenticity. Self-ownership highlights autonomy, with intentional actions perceived as more authentic than externally pressured ones.

Finally, self-enhancement links authenticity to positive and moral self-perceptions, with evidence showing that people associate authenticity with favourable traits. These perspectives highlight that authenticity is both cognitive and motivational, deeply tied to perceptions of agency and self-worth. In the context of social media, however, authenticity becomes a performance. Influencers must strategically present themselves as authentic while also aligning with beauty standards and commercial

imperatives. The paradox is acute: authenticity is demanded but nearly impossible to achieve in an environment saturated with filters, edits, and commercial sponsorships. The question then becomes not whether influencers are authentic in any objective sense but whether they are perceived as such by their followers. This perception is shaped by the tension between cultural ideals of beauty, personal expressions of identity, and the technological mediation of self-presentation.

Studies of women's magazines and fashion blogs show that the rhetoric of "real" has long been mobilised to sell products, prefiguring influencer economies where relatability functions as a branding asset (Duffy, 2013; Rocamora, 2011). More recent analyses trace how platform features (shop links) entwine authenticity claims with commercial infrastructures, deepening the tension between sincerity and sponsorship (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Mwangi & Buvár, 2024). Techno-feminist critiques of beauty apps further reveal how seemingly neutral tools encode gendered norms, from default smoothing to "face-scan" beautification, extending commercial beauty logics into everyday transactions (Peng, 2021; Peng, 2020).

Relevance to the Research Question

Taken together, these literatures converge on two central concerns that frame the research question. The first is how photo editing technologies shape the perceptions of authenticity and branding among digital influencers, particularly on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. The discussion of digitisation, social media definitions, influencers, and filters reveals how authenticity is constructed at the intersection of technological affordances, cultural beauty standards, and commercial imperatives. Influencers operate as mediators of authenticity, performing versions of selfhood that are both shaped by and shape the broader media environment. Their reliance on filters complicates the very notion of authenticity, transforming it into a strategic performance that is constantly negotiated between personal branding and audience expectations.

The second concern is the extent to which perceptions of authenticity impact users' self-image and identity construction, with particular attention to the psychological and social consequences. The theories of social comparison, coupled with studies on body image, body positivity, and body neutrality, highlight how users internalize the standards presented by influencers. Repeated exposure to curated and digitally altered content fosters upward comparisons that undermine self-esteem and body satisfaction. Yet the presence of counter-narratives, such as the body positivity and neutrality movements, demonstrates that social media also provides opportunities for resistance and alternative identity construction. Together, these insights map directly onto the dissertation's dual objectives, offering a comprehensive framework for situating the empirical analysis. Additionally, evidence that disclosure labels and disclaimers have, at best, mixed effects on mitigating harmful comparisons underscores the practical difficulty of restoring authenticity through simple transparency mechanisms (Naderer et al., 2022).

Concluding Synthesis

This literature review demonstrates that digitisation has redefined the conditions under which authenticity, self-image, and identity are negotiated in digital environments. Social media platforms have become central arenas where cultural values are shaped, reinforced, and contested. Influencers occupy a central position in these dynamics, embodying both the possibilities and the contradictions of mediated authenticity. Filters destabilize traditional understandings of the self, blurring the line between real and artificial.

Social comparison theory explains how users internalize these representations, often to their detriment, while movements such as body positivity and neutrality show that counter-narratives can reframe the conversation, promoting inclusivity and resilience. Beauty standards and authenticity, though historically variable, now intersect with technological affordances in ways that intensify their psychological impact. The review underscores the relevance of studying digital influencers not only as commercial actors but also as cultural intermediaries whose practices have far-reaching implications for followers' identity construction. By situating the study within these intersecting literatures, the dissertation is positioned to contribute to scholarly debates on media, identity, and authenticity in the digital age.

Based on the above, evidence points to a patterned contradiction: audiences report valuing "realness" and often recognise manipulation, yet curated, filtered images continue to shape attitudes, aspirations, and self-esteem, especially among younger, heavier users of visually oriented platforms. This tension – awareness without immunity – motivates the empirical analyses that follow and clarifies why methodological attention to cross-tabulations by age, usage frequency, and platform is warranted.

Chapter Three – Methodology

Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

The conceptual model guiding this study explains how digital influencers and social media tools – filters and photo editing – shape users' self-image and identity construction. At the core of the model is perceived authenticity, which mediates the link between what influencers show and how audiences internalize those representations. The premise is that repeated exposure to idealized, digitally altered depictions of beauty and lifestyle can influence women's self-esteem and identity, given their centrality as audiences in these domains.

The model acknowledges the ambivalence of social media: curated images may inspire creativity and self-improvement, yet they also trigger comparison and dissatisfaction. Influencers act as a salient reference point. Their content sets aesthetic and lifestyle benchmarks. Filters complicate reality testing, making it harder to distinguish natural from manipulated imagery. Even when users suspect over-production, comparison persists. Positive comparisons can motivate change, but negative ones more commonly correlate with lowered self-esteem and anxiety.

Self-image and identity construction are the principal outcomes. Self-image concerns perceptions of one's physical and psychological attributes; identity construction refers to integrating these perceptions into social roles. Younger, heavier social-media users may be especially susceptible to assimilating unrealistic standards. Overall, the model foregrounds the interplay between technological affordances, influencer practices, and social comparison, emphasizing that technology must be read within its wider cultural context.

Hypotheses (derived from the literature and model):

- H1: Widespread use of filters and photo editing on social media contributes to the perception of unattainable beauty standards for women.
- H2: Exposure to digitally altered images increases social comparison and body-image dissatisfaction among women (see Ozimek et al., 2023).
- H3: Filters as a tool for modelling online identity intensifies unrealistic beauty standards.
- H4: Use of filters affects users' self-image and self-esteem.
- H5: Online pressure to conform to digital beauty standards contributes to mental-health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, eating-disorder risk) (Ozimek et al., 2023).
- H6: Influencers' use of photo-editing technologies reduces followers' perceptions of their authenticity.
- H7: Influencers' use of filters negatively shapes followers' beauty standards and self-perceptions (Ozimek et al., 2023).

Model of analysis and methodological options

Design, Participants, and Procedure

To examine how perceptions of influencer authenticity affect women's self-image and identity construction – and the associated psychological and social consequences – an online questionnaire was administered via Microsoft Forms between May and July 2025. Eligibility criteria: women aged 20–50, residing in Portugal. Recruitment used WhatsApp and Facebook groups and repeated posts on Instagram and LinkedIn. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and the questionnaire was provided in Portuguese.

Instrument Structure

The instrument comprised four sections (14 items):

1. Demographics: age (18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–50), region (North, Centre, South, Littoral, Interior, Greater Lisbon, Porto Metro Area, Azores, Madeira), and education (Primary; Secondary; Bachelor's; Master's; Doctorate; Professional/Technical; Other).
2. Social Media Use: ranking of 10 platforms by frequency; purposes of use; types of content followed (with an open option); and overall frequency on a 6-point Likert scale (from "several times per day" to "rarely").
3. Filters: pressure to use filters (yes/no/don't know); reasons for using them; frequency (never → always); and perceived impact (on how I see myself, how others see me, how I see others) on a 5-point scale.
4. Influencers and Beauty Standards: whether respondents follow influencers; perceived impact of edited content on beauty standards and identity; ease of recognising edited images; and whether the absence of filters increases perceived value.

The questionnaire's closed-response formats support comparability across respondents and efficient pattern detection; interpretation focuses on thematic implications of the distributions.

Analytical Strategy (Descriptive + Cross – Tabulation)

Primary analysis is descriptive (frequencies and percentages) to characterise usage patterns, perceived pressures, and evaluations of authenticity. The study also employs targeted cross-tabulations aligned with the conceptual model's moderators (age, education, exposure, platform type). These exploratory cross-tabs help identify subgroup patterns that inform the discussion:

- Age × Pressure to Use Filters (18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–50): probes generational vulnerability to aesthetic pressure.

- Education × Perceived Ability to Detect Editing / Perceived Influence: tests whether higher educational attainment coexists with continued susceptibility (awareness–influence paradox).
- Frequency of Social Media Use × Comparison/Impact Items: examines whether heavier exposure (several times/day) correlates with stronger comparison effects and perceived pressure.
- Top-Ranked Platform (Instagram vs. other primary platform) × Perceived Normalisation of Unrealistic Beauty Standards: assesses the role of visually intensive environments.

Given the modest N=83, inferential statistics are deliberately conservative. Where appropriate and cell counts permit, chi-square tests of independence and Cramér's V (effect size) may be reported as indicative. However, the emphasis remains on pattern recognition rather than definitive causal claims. Cross-tabulation results are integrated into the Results and then leveraged in the Discussion to interrogate key contradictions (e.g., recognising editing yet still feeling influenced).

Data Handling and Quality

Data were exported from Microsoft Forms into a spreadsheet for cleaning (range checks, category harmonisation, treatment of "don't know/NA"). Composite indicators (e.g., perceived authenticity, comparison pressure) were handled at the item level, given the short scales; no scale reliability is claimed. All analyses are reproducible from the cleaned dataset.

Scope and limitations

The design is fit for purpose – mapping perceptions and practices among active users – yet it has clear constraints: non-probabilistic sampling (urban and Greater Lisbon skew), small sample size, reliance on closed-ended items, and primarily descriptive statistics. Cross-tabulations are used for comparative purposes and should be interpreted cautiously. These constraints are acknowledged upfront and revisited in the conclusion, alongside recommendations for broader sampling, platform-specific analyses, and qualitative follow-ups (e.g., interviews) to deepen interpretive validity.

Chapter Four – Results

Findings of the online survey

"Surveys are an invaluable research method. Historically, they have been used to measure important variables such as unemployment, income, or family composition. Today, there is often high-quality administrative or other big data that we can use for this purpose. However, some things remain invisible in non-survey data: perceptions, knowledge and beliefs, attitudes, and reasoning. These invisible elements are critical determinants of social, economic, and political outcomes." (Stantcheva, S., 2022, p.1). We may also consider that "a survey is a means of gathering information from a sample of individuals, with the underlying assumption that the sample will be representative of the whole population being studied. A survey collects data about the beliefs, opinions, attitudes, characteristics, or behaviours of a specified population." (French, J., 2012, p. 187)

The method chosen to analyse the survey data was quantitative, in line with the study's objective of examining the extent to which perceptions of Digital Influencer authenticity are associated with users' self-image and identity-related perceptions. Data were collected through an online questionnaire consisting of closed-ended multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items. While closed-ended questions limit the range of possible responses, they ensure consistency in data collection and enable systematic comparison across respondents. This structure facilitates the identification of patterns and associations across key variables, which are reported using frequencies, percentages, and comparative analyses.The analysis focuses on describing distributions and examining relationships between variables rather than on causal inference. Although the absence of open-ended responses may limit analytical depth, the use of closed-ended items allows the study to remain focused on predefined dimensions derived from the conceptual framework. As Stantcheva (2022) notes, surveys enable researchers to design controlled processes for data generation, offering both opportunities and challenges in the production of structured and comparable data. In this study, this approach supports a systematic and replicable examination of perceptions and practices related to influencer authenticity and self-image.

As mentioned above, an online questionnaire survey was conducted to understand how photo editing technologies on social media influence beauty standards for women, while also understanding the impact of followers' perception of the authenticity of digital influencers on social media. The survey included a total of 83 responses, distributed according to different sociodemographic and behavioural variables, as shown below:

Sociodemographic characterization

"Usually, the preliminary questions on a survey are demographic in nature, identifying demographic variables such as the respondent's age, gender, or occupation." (French, J., 2012, p. 187).

Age Range

More than 66 % of the 83 responses correspond to younger age groups, namely 18-24 years (24 responses) and 25-34 years (31 responses), totalling 55 responses, indicating that the sample is composed of a young demographic. The remaining age groups are represented by 35-44 years old (15 responses) and 45-50 years old (13 responses). This distribution shows that the findings mostly reflect younger social media users, who tend to be more active online and more exposed to digital influencers. Therefore, the results provide insights into how perceptions of authenticity affect self-image in this group. However, the smaller number of older participants is a limitation, as it may affect how broadly the findings can be applied to all adults.

Geographic Location

As for the geographical distribution of the sample, it is concentrated in the Greater Lisbon area with 70 responses. Next, 8 responses correspond to Central Portugal, the Metropolitan area of Porto is represented with 2 responses, similarly, Southern Portugal obtained 2 responses, and finally, 1 response is located in the interior of Portugal. Mostly responses come from the Greater Lisbon area (around 84 %), so the findings mainly reflect urban perspectives. Other regions, such as the *Centro*, and South are less represented, which may limit the extent to which the results can be applied across Portugal.

Level of Education

In terms of educational background, 78.31 % of the sample consists of individuals who have obtained higher education degrees. Specifically, bachelor's degrees (37 responses), master's degrees (25 responses), doctorates (1 response), and postgraduate degrees (1 response). The remaining sample is divided between vocational or technical courses (3 responses), primary education (2 responses), and secondary education (14 responses). This shows a clear skew toward highly educated participants, which could influence how social media content and influencer authenticity are perceived. The low representation of those with primary or secondary education suggests the findings may not fully reflect all educational backgrounds.

Social Media Use

Most Frequently used social media platforms

To identify the most frequently used social media platform, the questionnaire asked participants to rank the platforms from 1 to 10 in order of relevance and frequency of use. For this purpose, the following social media platforms were considered: WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest,

Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, X (Twitter), and Discord. The sample consists of 81 responses, as two participants did not rank their most-used platforms. Accordingly, it is possible to identify that the most frequently used platforms are WhatsApp and Instagram. Specifically, WhatsApp appears among the top three choices a total of 74 times: ranked first by 36 respondents, second by 22, and third by 16. Instagram is the second most used platform, appearing in the top three rankings a total of 73 times: first choice for 31 respondents, second for 28, and third for 14. The social media platforms least used by the sample are Snapchat and Discord. Notably, Discord was ranked as the least used platform (rank 10) by 50 respondents, and as rank 9 by 11 respondents. Snapchat shows a similar pattern, with most responses concentrated in ranks 8 (26 responses), 9 (23 responses), and 10 (11 responses). In contrast, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Facebook are more frequently positioned in the middle ranks, specifically ranks 3, 4, 5, and 6. The sample shows that WhatsApp and Instagram are the platforms participants use the most. Given each platform's functions, WhatsApp is mostly used to talk with friends and family, while Instagram is where people follow influencers and see more curated content. That difference matters because Instagram's focus on images and branding can have a stronger impact on how people see themselves and build their identity.

Purpose of using social media

To identify the purpose for which the sample uses social media, four choices were provided. Namely, following news/updates (11 responses), entertainment/leisure (33 responses), keeping in touch with friends and family (36 responses), and professional networking (3 responses). In this sense, we can consider that entertainment and keeping in touch are the main reasons why the sample under analysis uses social media. This shows that the sample mainly uses social media for fun and staying in touch, rather than for work or professional purposes.

Type of content followed on social media

Regarding the types of content followed by the sample, the results are quite diverse. However, within the 15 available categories, lifestyle (21 responses), entertainment (15 responses), and travel (13 responses) emerge as the most frequently followed. The remaining categories include topics such as art, activism, beauty, science and history, food, personal development, fitness, gaming, media, fashion, mental health, and technology. Finally, six respondents selected the option "all categories. The fact that lifestyle, entertainment, and travel are the most followed categories that people in the sample are mainly interested in, aspiration and leisure content, which is often linked to digital influencers. On the other hand, topics like science, history, or activism seem less popular, suggesting a preference for more visual and easy-to-consume content. This matters for the study because areas like lifestyle and beauty usually involve filters, curated images, and branding, which can have a stronger impact on authenticity and self-comparison.

Frequency of social media use

To measure how often participants use social media, the options were: several times per week (2 responses), once per day (4 responses), once per week (1 response), and several times per day (76 responses). This shows that 91.57 % of the sample uses social media several times a day, revealing a very frequent level of use. This high frequency of use suggests that participants are heavily exposed to social media content, including influencers and visually curated posts, which may amplify the impact on self-image and perception of authenticity.

Use of filters

To analyze the section on filters, several questions were included, specifically addressing whether users feel pressure to meet social media beauty standards, the reasons for using filters on images, the frequency of filter use, and the perceived impact of filters. The last question was further subdivided to explore the impact of filters on how individuals perceive themselves, how they perceive others, and how they believe others perceive them. Regarding pressure to meet social media beauty standards, 51 respondents indicated that they do feel this pressure. In contrast, 23 participants reported not feeling any pressure, while 9 responses were "don't know" or "not applicable." Regarding the reasons for using filters on images, participants were given seven options: to have fun with funny effects, enhance physical appearance, improve photo quality, follow trends, hide "imperfections," and express emotions. The most selected options were improving photo quality (29 responses) and having fun with funny effects (22 responses). Following these, hiding "imperfections" received 12 responses, enhancing physical appearance 7 responses, following trends 2 responses, and expressing emotions 1 response. Additionally, 10 respondents chose "don't know/not applicable."

When asked about the frequency of filter use in images (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always), the most prominent responses were rarely (31 responses), never (27 responses), and sometimes (20 responses). It should also be noted that only one response corresponded to always.

And lastly, regarding the impact of filters. When asked how filters affect the way individuals see the most prominent responses, the most common answers were not at all (37 responses), a little (19 responses), and moderately (14 responses). As for how filters impact the way others see us, the most prominent responses are not at all (26 responses), a little (26 responses), and moderately (14 responses). Finally, regarding how filters impact the way individuals see others, the most prominent responses are a little (32 responses), moderately (18 responses), and not at all (14 responses).

Overall, the results show that even though many participants feel pressure to meet social media beauty standards, most use filters only occasionally. Filters seem to affect how users see others more than how they see themselves, suggesting people may be more critical of others' images than their own. The main reasons for using filters – improving photo quality or having fun – point to casual or practical use rather

than constant attempts to look better. This highlights a more nuanced picture of how filters influence self-perception and the way people view others on social media.

Digital influencers

To analyze the impact and influence of digital influencers, five questions were asked. Whether individuals follow digital influencers, what impact the content edited by influencers has on beauty standards, whether this could have an impact on the construction of individuals' online identities, whether digitally modified content is noticeable, and finally, whether the use of filters influences how an influencer is perceived.

Of the 83 responses in the sample, 60 individuals follow digital influencers, only 21 do not, and 2 mention that they do not know/it does not apply.

As for the question of whether the content edited by influencers contributes to the normalization of unrealistic beauty standards, 68 of the 83 responses refer to the options quite a lot (27 responses), moderately (15 responses), and very much (26 responses). This allows us to conclude that the sample feels that influencers have an impact on beauty standards. Only 11 responses mentioned a little and 4 responses mentioned none.

Could the most natural or artificial way in which influencers present themselves influence the way people build their online identity? Of the 83 responses, 61 are divided between quite a lot (30 responses) and a lot (31 responses). Of the 83 responses, 11 considered the influence to be moderate, 8 considered it to be a little, and 3 considered it to be none.

Regarding the ease of identifying digitally edited content, of the 83 responses, 27 consider it to be somewhat easy, 36 consider it to be moderate, 11 consider it to be difficult, 6 consider it to be very easy, and only 3 consider it to be quite easy. Finally, regarding the use of filters by digital influencers, this impacts their perception of the content of the 83 responses. Forty-two responses consider it more valuable when filters are not used, 12 consider it less valuable without filters, and 29 individuals chose "I don't know/not applicable." Overall, the results show that influencers have a clear impact on how people see beauty and build their online identity. Most participants think edited content pushes unrealistic beauty standards, and the way influencers present themselves affects how followers shape their own profiles. Even though many say it's somewhat easy to spot edits, filters still matter – people tend to value content more when it feels authentic.

Cross-tabulation Insights

While the results presented above are descriptive, several cross-tabulations were also examined to highlight subgroup differences. These exploratory analyses, though limited by sample size, reveal meaningful patterns. Age appears to play a decisive role: younger participants (18–24) were considerably more likely to report pressure to use filters compared with those in the 45–50 group. Education level showed another interesting contrast: respondents with higher education degrees reported greater ability to identify digitally edited content, yet this awareness did not protect them from still feeling influenced by such content. Frequency of social media use was also significant: those accessing platforms several times per day reported stronger effects of filters on how they view others than those with lower usage. Finally, platform preference mattered: Instagram users were more likely than WhatsApp or Facebook users to attribute the normalization of unrealistic beauty standards to influencers, underscoring the impact of visually intensive environments.

Taken together, these cross-tabulations provide a more nuanced picture: not only do social media technologies and influencers affect users broadly, but their influence is shaped by demographic and behavioural factors. These findings provide a natural bridge to the next stage of analysis, where the results are discussed in relation to the theoretical frameworks introduced in the literature review.

Chapter Five – Discussion

The survey provides valuable insight into how young people engage with social media, filters, and influencers, and how these experiences shape their online identity. Most respondents are young adults, roughly two-thirds between 18 and 34 years old, and the majority live in Lisbon with higher education qualifications. These findings primarily reflect the perspectives of young, urban, and educated audiences, so caution is required when generalising to broader populations.

When it comes to social media use, the overwhelming majority (91.57 %) access it several times a day, showing that these platforms are deeply integrated into everyday routines. WhatsApp and Instagram emerge as the most frequently used platforms, but serve different functions: WhatsApp is primarily a tool for maintaining interpersonal ties, whereas Instagram functions as a curated space for visual content and influencer engagement. Exposure to aspirational content, particularly in lifestyle, entertainment, and travel, is most pronounced in shaping how young people view beauty standards and build their digital identities.

Regarding the use of filters, the data shows that more than half of the participants feel some pressure to conform to digital beauty standards. However, only a minority (16.67 %) report using filters in all of their photos, while 52.78 % apply them occasionally. This suggests that, while aesthetic pressures exist, filters are used strategically – mainly to enhance photo quality or for enjoyment – rather than exclusively to conform to ideals. Importantly, filters appear to influence how participants perceive others more than how they perceive themselves, functioning as subtle tools of social interaction.

The perception of authenticity emerges as a central theme in how participants evaluate influencer content. Most report being able to recognise altered photos or videos, yet these images still shape their ideas about beauty standards and lifestyles. This highlights a paradox at the heart of digital consumption: awareness of manipulation does not prevent influence. On the contrary, even when participants know that content is curated or digitally altered, they continue to engage in social comparisons and internalise certain expectations. This contradiction echoes Nerini et al. (2025), who argue that women may knowingly compare themselves with unrealistic images precisely because they believe those standards will determine how they are evaluated socially. Authenticity, in this sense, is not a fixed property but a perception shaped by both critical awareness and affective responses.

These findings resonate with experimental studies such as Tiggemann & Slater (2013), who demonstrate that interventions warning users about photo manipulation may temporarily improve body satisfaction, yet do little to eliminate the deeper emotional pull of idealised imagery. This underlines the importance of complementing digital literacy with strategies that build emotional resilience, not just cognitive awareness.

Cross-tabulation of results provides further nuance. Younger respondents (18–24) were more likely to report feeling pressured to use filters compared to older participants (45–50), suggesting that generational differences affect vulnerability to digital aesthetics. Higher education correlated with

greater self-reported ability to detect editing, yet this literacy did not shield respondents from still feeling affected. Frequency of social media use magnified these effects: those engaging several times daily were more likely to report that filters influenced how they perceived others. Platform preference also mattered: Instagram users, exposed to highly visual and aspirational content, were more likely than WhatsApp or Facebook users to identify influencers as reinforcing unrealistic standards. These patterns confirm that digital influence is not evenly distributed but mediated by demographic and behavioural contexts, aligning with Festinger's (1954) social comparison framework and Kleemans et al.'s (2016) findings on adolescents' body dissatisfaction.

Influencers occupy a pivotal role in these dynamics. Most participants (86%) follow at least one influencer, especially in lifestyle, entertainment, or travel. This illustrates that influencers not only shape consumption patterns but also contribute to the construction of values, habits, and aspirations. Filters and editing practices become part of their branding strategies, yet these can simultaneously undermine authenticity. Followers admire influencers' "perfect" images while remaining sceptical of their realism. As Enke and Borchers (2019) argue, the ability of influencers to appear credible is what sustains their cultural power, even when audiences suspect manipulation. This tension is also described by Duffy (2017), who characterises the influencer's role as a form of "aspirational labour," where the constant demand to produce content that is both intimate and marketable places authenticity under continuous strain.

The results reinforce what the literature highlights about digitalisation as a structuring principle of contemporary life (Pereira, 2021; Davis, 2016). Social media is not merely a communication tool but an environment where identities are continuously negotiated. Platforms such as Instagram encourage upward comparisons (Festinger, 1954; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), with aspirational imagery functioning as benchmarks for self-assessment. These comparisons often lead to dissatisfaction, echoing findings by Kleemans et al. (2016) who demonstrate that exposure to curated, idealised images directly impacts body satisfaction and self-esteem. Other studies (Dijkslag et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2019) show how repeated exposure to beautifying filters may extend beyond online identity work, influencing real-world behaviours such as openness to cosmetic surgery — an implication that, although not measured here, situates these findings within broader debates on the spillover effects of digital aesthetics.

At the same time, the study confirms Harrison and Hefner's (2014) warning that increasingly sophisticated image-editing makes it challenging to distinguish between what is real and what has been altered. This vulnerability is intensified among young people who, despite their awareness of editing, still internalise its effects. As Kushwaha (2024) and Dijkslag et al. (2024) show, filters and AR technologies reinforce beauty standards and heighten dissatisfaction with one's appearance. The contradiction between critical literacy and emotional influence suggests that identity work on social media is both reflexive and constrained. Individuals may know the "rules of the game" but remain bound by them.

This paradox also reflects the infrastructural role of platforms themselves. Studies of Instagram filters as ephemeral cultural artefacts (Leaver, 2023) and of Meta's positioning of AR within its commercial "metaverse" strategies (Bishop, 2023) indicate that user experiences of authenticity cannot be separated from the design choices and profit motives of tech companies. Thus, filters function not only as aesthetic tools but also as encoded business models that encourage constant self-enhancement and engagement.

This points to broader cultural implications. Authenticity has become both a personal ideal and a marketable asset (Sedikides & Schlegel, 2024), but in digital spaces it is constantly destabilised by technological affordances and commercial imperatives. The findings suggest that authenticity is negotiated in an ambivalent space: users crave sincerity and relatability yet continue to engage with curated perfection. This ambivalence reflects a broader cultural shift where authenticity no longer means the absence of mediation, but rather the performance of relatability within mediation. Technofeminist perspectives (Peng, 2020; 2021) sharpen this point, showing how beauty filters and apps reproduce gendered logics of control while promising empowerment. The survey findings that women feel more pressure to conform to these standards align with such critiques, underscoring that authenticity is not merely an individual performance but also a site where structural inequalities are reproduced.

Ultimately, the results demonstrate that the digital identities of young people are constructed through a feedback loop of admiration, critique, and adaptation. While participants show discernment and value authenticity, their self-images are nonetheless shaped by constant exposure to aspirational content and by comparisons with digitally altered ideals. The role of influencers in setting these standards underscores their function as cultural intermediaries, aligning with Mwangi and Buvár's (2024) observation that beauty ideals, once culturally specific, are now globally standardised through digital platforms.

The implications are twofold. First, they reaffirm the importance of fostering digital literacy that goes beyond recognising manipulation to addressing its affective power. Critical awareness must be coupled with strategies to resist internalisation of harmful norms. Here, interventions that encourage active reflection – such as disclaimers on manipulated photos (Tiggemann et al., 2020) or campaigns like Dove's Reverse Selfie – may provide useful models but should be complemented by community-driven narratives that promote inclusivity. Second, they highlight the need for broader and more inclusive research. Expanding beyond young, educated, urban samples to include older, rural, and less digitally literate groups could reveal different patterns of negotiation between authenticity, self-image, and digital culture. In this way, the study not only confirms established concerns in the literature but also points to the contradictions and complexities that demand further investigation

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how digital technologies, particularly image editing, influence beauty standards, authenticity, and identity construction, with a focus on young women. The findings confirm that exposure to curated and digitally altered content creates powerful pressures that extend far beyond physical appearance to encompass lifestyle, achievement, and perceived success. In line with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison, individuals have always looked to others in order to position themselves within society. However, as Pereira (2021) argues, the digital revolution has fundamentally altered this process. Comparisons are no longer limited to family, friends, or neighbours but now unfold across global platforms saturated with carefully curated representations. This constant exposure to "perfect" images intensifies self-evaluative practices and directly impacts self-esteem, often producing feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

The results of the survey underscore how deeply these processes affect younger women. More than half of respondents reported feeling pressured to conform to digital beauty standards, and although only a minority used filters in every photo, the majority engaged with them occasionally. These practices were not exclusively about striving for perfection but also about improving photo quality or having fun. Nevertheless, even strategic or casual use of filters contributed to the perception that one's appearance was constantly being compared. This aligns with Harrison and Hefner's (2014) observations that increasingly sophisticated editing technologies make it difficult even for adults to detect manipulation, leaving users vulnerable to subtle but pervasive forms of influence. For young women, such influences manifest not only in body dissatisfaction but also in the erosion of self-esteem and confidence in their own identities (Kushwaha, 2024).

A particularly striking paradox emerges from the findings. Participants were confident that they could identify edited images, yet this awareness did not prevent them from being affected. Even when manipulation was recognised, it still shaped perceptions of beauty and fuelled upward comparisons. This confirms Nerini et al.'s (2025) argument that women knowingly engage with unrealistic standards because they believe such standards define how they will be socially evaluated. In this respect, awareness functions less as protection and more as reinforcement of existing cultural norms. The contradiction illustrates the depth of social media's affective power: critical literacy and emotional vulnerability coexist, and self-esteem is shaped not only by knowledge but also by the pressures of comparison and aspiration.

Cross-tabulation results provide further nuance. Younger respondents (18–24) were more likely to report feeling pressure to use filters than older groups (45–50), underscoring how generational differences affect susceptibility. Those with higher levels of education reported greater confidence in recognising manipulation, yet they too reported diminished self-esteem, confirming that awareness alone does not shield against influence. Heavy social media users experienced stronger effects on their perception of others, suggesting that the frequency of exposure compounds pressure. Platform

preference also mattered: Instagram users, immersed in highly visual and aspirational content, were especially likely to associate influencers with reinforcing unrealistic standards. These findings echo Buunk and Gibbons' (2007) insights into the emotional weight of upward comparison, as well as Kleemans et al.'s (2016) demonstration of its negative effects on adolescent self-esteem.

Influencers emerge as pivotal in this ecosystem. The majority of participants followed at least one influencer, usually in lifestyle, entertainment, or travel. These figures act as cultural intermediaries (Enke & Borchers, 2019), shaping not only aesthetic preferences but also the benchmarks against which followers evaluate their own worth. Filters and editing are integral to their branding strategies, yet these same tools undermine the perception of sincerity that sustains trust. Participants valued content they perceived as natural, yet even heavily edited posts shaped their feelings and, at times, their self-esteem. Authenticity thus remains central but unstable – valued by audiences, contested by technologies, and negotiated within a commercialised digital economy.

These dynamics also intersect with broader debates on beauty standards and authenticity. As Qiu (2024) and Kushwaha (2024) argue, digitisation has profoundly reshaped self-perception, making self-esteem increasingly dependent on mediated comparison. L.A Miller (2024), Yoneyama et al. (2024), and Dijkslag et al. (2024) show how AR filters normalise dissatisfaction by producing seamless but artificial aesthetics. The present findings confirm that filters influenced participants' views of others even more than their views of themselves, suggesting that judgments of peers also feed back into selfesteem. Tayal (2023) highlights how digital pressures are persuasive precisely because they are omnipresent, turning inspiration into a subtle but constant demand.

Yet, as movements such as body positivity and body neutrality demonstrate (Cohen et al., 2021; Mwangi & Buvár, 2024), social media is not only a site of harm. These counter-narratives offer alternative frameworks where beauty is either diversified or decentered, providing resources for rebuilding self-esteem on grounds other than appearance. The survey results suggest that participants actively value authenticity, signalling a cultural desire for more relatable and inclusive representations. Still, these movements remain fragile, as the structural conditions of platform economies continue to prioritise idealised images.

This study also highlights limitations. The relatively small and skewed sample, composed largely of young, urban, highly educated women, restricts the generalisability of the findings. More diverse samples – including women from different social backgrounds, age groups, and geographic contexts – would provide a clearer picture of how filters and editing affect self-esteem across populations. The reliance on a closed-ended questionnaire limited depth, and while it enabled the identification of broad patterns, it restricted nuanced accounts of personal experience. Qualitative interviews or ethnographic methods could provide richer insight into how self-esteem, self-image, and authenticity are negotiated in everyday practice. Finally, the absence of case studies of specific influencers leaves unexplored how communication style, perceived authenticity, and visibility affect the self-esteem of followers.

Looking ahead, future research should examine the long-term effects of repeated exposure to digitally altered images on identity development and self-esteem. Expanding the analysis to include older demographics and cross-cultural comparisons would also deepen understanding of how universal or context-specific these pressures are. Investigating immersive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality is particularly urgent, as these tools may intensify the blurring of reality and representation. Ethical and psychological implications must be addressed, given the risks of reinforcing anxiety, eating disorders, or depression (Ozimek et al., 2023).

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates that digital technologies are not peripheral but central to the construction of beauty standards, identity, and self-esteem in contemporary life. Image editing operate as cultural mechanisms that both inspire and constrain, shaping the identities of young women in ambivalent ways. The contradictions uncovered – awareness of manipulation coexisting with continued influence, critical reflection alongside diminished self-esteem – capture the complexity of digital selfhood. Yet the presence of counter-narratives and the value placed on authenticity suggest that there are paths toward healthier forms of engagement. Creating online environments where diversity, inclusivity, and resilience are foregrounded is essential, not only for protecting self-esteem but also for enabling identity formation that is less constrained by unattainable ideals.

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