

Self-Presentation in the Digital Age: A Study on Instagram Selfies, Body Image Satisfaction Among Young Women

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This study examines how younger women utilise Instagram selfies to shape their identity, manage self-presentation, and negotiate body image satisfaction within a more visually focused digital environment. It aims to understand how visibility and validation on Instagram affect the emotions and thoughts of young women, through the frameworks of uses and gratifications theory and objectification theory. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 39 university students from the Northeastern states of India, and data analysis involved both a priori and inductive thematic coding using NVivo 14. The analysis revealed five main motivations for general Instagram use: self-promotion, entertainment, seeking validation, documenting, and leisure. Additionally, the four-factor framework (Sung et al., 2016), comprising attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment, was applied to examine selfie-specific behaviours.

Findings indicate that selfies function as performative acts of agency and sites of self-surveillance. Respondents reported feeling empowered by the creative control and social recognition that selfies afford. However, many reported feeling anxious due to social comparison and the pressure to enhance their appearance. This emotional ambivalence reflects the complex nature of digital self-presentation, often characterised by a coexistence of empowerment and insecurity. By incorporating narratives from young women in Northeast India, this research contributes to global discussions about gender, visibility, body politics, and social media. It demonstrates that while Instagram enables women to express themselves and maintain social connections, it simultaneously reinforces subtle hierarchies of beauty, attention, and self-worth that continue to shape contemporary experiences of femininity.

Keywords: Instagram, selfies, body image satisfaction, uses and gratifications theory.

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Introduction

In 2021, the Wall Street Journal published an investigative report, which revealed that Facebook was aware of the negative impacts of its photo-sharing app, Instagram, on the mental health of its users, who are mostly teenagers (Wells et al., 2021). The report revealed that Facebook's internal

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documents acknowledged Instagram's negative impact on adolescent well-being, noting that the platform made "body image issues worse for one in three teen girls" and that "teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression" (Wells et al., 2021). Several previous studies have similarly highlighted that female social media users often experience challenges related to body image satisfaction and self-objectification (Butkowski et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2017; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018).

In today's digital era, social media platforms have become integral to everyday life. Among them, Instagram stands out as one of the most popular social media platforms, with approximately 2 billion users worldwide as of 2022 (Barinka, 2022). India currently has the highest number of active Instagram users globally, witnessing a rapid increase from 209 million in February 2021 to an estimated 400 million by August 2022 (Chaturvedi & Laghate, 2022).

Instagram has gained prominence, mostly among teenagers and adults, because of its focus on visual content. Over 50 per cent of the total global users are below 35, and around 49 per cent of users are females (Wise, 2023). Instagram has revolutionised how people conduct and portray themselves in the digital realm.

Unlike traditional media, social media offers interactive features, allowing users to curate personalised content and share it with the world. It paves the way for users' self-presentation and empowers people to construct their digital identities. As a social practice, selfies are as common as texting. On Instagram, people often post selfies showing an edited version of who they are - smiling with friends at a café, posing after a workout or on a "good hair" day. Through these images, individuals control how they would like to be viewed by others (Shin et al., 2017).

Unlike other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is a photo-sharing application which allows users to edit their photos and videos and apply different effects and filters. Users can post these digitally enhanced images and videos on their profiles curating a visually pleasing and personalised feed for people to see. People react to these posts in the form of likes and comments. Instagram has played an important role in popularising the term selfie. A simple search for the #selfie hashtag on the photo-sharing app reveals a staggering collection of over 451.9 million photos. Additionally, there have been 17.4 million posts featuring the hashtag #selfietime and 2.9 million posts tagged with #selfiequeen on Instagram.

Self-portraits eventually become a part of the personal "brand" that a user wants to build about oneself on social media. Cohen et al. (2017) stated that Instagram users often indulge in "appearance-focused" photo activities. On Instagram, users can compare their body appearance with that of their relatives, friends, and celebrities, eventually leading to dissatisfaction with their body image (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011).

Many past studies highlighted that women tend to make more selfies and post them on their social media accounts than men (Dhir et al., 2016; Lakshmi et al., 2020; Sorokowska et al., 2016; Thomson, 2020). How a person perceives their physical appearance plays an important role in shaping their confidence and self-esteem. If they not feel happy about their appearance, it may lead to anxiety and

mental health issues. Mills et al. (2018: 90) discussed that females who uploaded selfies² on social media after the first take and without using any beauty filters “felt more anxious, less confident, and less physically attractive afterwards.”

The objectification theory (OT), proposed by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997), said that women are socialised to internalise the gaze of external observers and to evaluate themselves mostly on the basis of their physical appearance. This internalised surveillance leads them to monitor and judge their own bodies much as others might. The process is also evident on Instagram, as women assess their selfies and compare them to posts from their peers, as well as alter their appearance to meet certain standards of beauty and in the process, women are constantly evaluating their appearance, which reinforces self-objectification and appearance anxiety (Cohen et al., 2017; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Mills et al., 2018).

The available international research has linked women’s Instagram use with self-objectification, appearance comparison, and body image concerns (Cohen et al., 2017; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Mills et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). However, there is little peer-reviewed work from India. There have been limited studies on selfie behaviour of Indian adolescents (Lakshmi et al., 2020), there is not much empirical research examining how young women in India, particularly outside of Tier 1 urban centres, negotiate selfies, visibility and body image through Instagram. This study addresses that gap by focusing on female university students in Northeast India.

The present study examines how young women relate their selfie practices on Instagram to their perceptions of body image satisfaction and mental well-being. It explores how the act of taking and sharing selfies can influence self-evaluation, confidence, and anxiety among women in Northeast India, a region often overlooked in digital media research and considered vulnerable due to social and geographic marginalisation. The focus on women from Northeast India brings a distinct cultural dimension to the study. The region’s peripheral media visibility and diverse ethnic identities offer a meaningful context in which to explore how young women navigate self-presentation within overlapping influences of local culture, national identity, and global visual trends.

The researchers carried out a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with a diverse group of women of different age groups who were enrolled in universities. The rationale for selecting female university students is that those who study in universities are generally perceived as mature and educated and therefore able to understand different aspects of selfies.

Theoretical Framework

This paper drew on the uses and gratification theory to understand the different reasons for or needs underlying women’s use of Instagram. The uses and gratification theory deals with the questions: why do people engage with specific media, and what do they gain from it? According to

² “Selfie” was declared as the 2013 Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionaries (BBC News, 2013), which defined the term as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.

the uses and gratification theory proposed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch (1973), the audiences are active participants who consume media based on their preferences and needs. The authors suggest that individuals may have different needs - psychological, social, informational, personal, or identity-related - and use media to satisfy these needs and derive gratification. The theory further posits that if individuals experience gratification from using a particular type of media, they are likely to continue consuming it in the future.

In the past, the uses and gratification theory primarily focused on traditional media such as newspapers, radio, film, and television. However, the theory remains highly relevant in the digital era. Researchers have applied the uses and gratification theory to study social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. (Apodaca, 2017; Hossain, 2019; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The theory identifies three critical sources of audience gratification: content, the act of media consumption itself, and the social context surrounding media use (Apodaca, 2017). Many people use Instagram to view content such as selfies, images, or videos posted by other users. Some derive gratification simply from scrolling through their Instagram feed. Additionally, Instagram users may experience satisfaction through social interaction with friends and followers, receiving likes and comments on their posts, and engaging in online discussions.

This study also explored the social comparison theory (SCT) to examine young women's tendency to compare themselves with others. According to the SCT proposed by Festinger (1954), people have a biological tendency to compare their skills, attitudes, appearance, and identity to those of others. Festinger proposed that people engage in two types of social comparison: upward and downward. Upward comparison involves comparing oneself with someone perceived as more successful or beautiful, whereas downward comparison refers to comparing oneself with someone considered less successful or less attractive. Although previous research has examined selfie behaviours across genders (Dhir et al., 2016; Sorokowska et al., 2016), the present study focuses exclusively on women, as appearance-related self-presentation and body image concerns have been found to be more pronounced among female Instagram users. This gender-specific focus enables a more in-depth understanding of how women in the Indian context experience self-presentation and body satisfaction through selfies. Since female Instagram users compare their selfies and body appearance with others on the platform, upward comparison may at times lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and anxiety.

Thornton & Moore (1993) found that women experienced a decline in self-perceived attractiveness and confidence after comparing themselves with physically attractive women. In the past, such social comparison was possible primarily through face-to-face interaction. However, the rise of social media has transformed this process, inundating individuals with a constant stream of images from friends, influencers, and celebrities, thereby encouraging continuous self-evaluation and comparison. Previous studies have shown that both the platform and the practices of self-presentation vary across age cohort. For instance, college-age users adapt their online identity management as they transition into adulthood (Yang & Brown, 2016) and selfie behaviours differ among adolescents, young adults, and adults (Dhir et al., 2016). Recent surveys indicate that Generation Z users place greater emphasis on image-based platforms such as Instagram (Anderson et al., 2023; Vogels et al., 2022).

The study has sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What motivates young adult women to use Instagram?

RQ2: Why do young adult women post selfies on Instagram?

RQ3: How do young adult women perceive the impact of selfies on their body image satisfaction?

RQ4: Do young adult women seek approval or feel pressured about their appearance before posting selfies on Instagram?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach to explore female Instagram users' experiences and perceptions of selfies and body image satisfaction. Denzin and Lincoln (2017:2) stated that qualitative research is "an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world." Qualitative research focuses on analysing the respondents' words and behaviours to understand their views on an issue rather than quantifying data. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow the researchers to understand the respondents' emotions, feelings, and experiences regarding selfies and body image satisfaction on Instagram. The study employed an in-depth interview technique and used a semi-structured questionnaire to collect data. A semi-structured questionnaire allows respondents the flexibility to express their views in detail in relation to the questions.

The study included 39 young women between the ages of 20 and 30 ($M=26.15$, $SD = 1.73$). Among them, ten 10 respondents were 25 years old. The oldest was 30, and the youngest one was 20 years old. This age group was targeted because young women have been identified as the most prominent users of Instagram (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, allowing researchers easy access. All respondents were students of two public universities in Assam, namely Assam University and Tezpur University, and come from six different states of the Northeast.

Of the 39, eleven are from Assam, eight from Meghalaya, six from Mizoram, four from Arunachal Pradesh, five from Nagaland, two from Tripura, and three are from Manipur. The researchers visited two university campuses and invited participants to take part in the study. Assistance was sought from professors at both universities to help identify potential participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and all participation was voluntary. The primary inclusion criterion was that participants had to be active Instagram users. The selection of participants from Northeast India was intentional, reflecting the study's aim to expand digital culture scholarship beyond India's metropolitan centres. The region's sociocultural diversity and relative marginality within national media discourse make it an important site for exploring how women engage with globalised platforms such as Instagram.

Given the study's qualitative approach, a small sample size was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of female Instagram users' perceptions of selfies and the influence of others' selfies on their body image satisfaction.

The questionnaire comprised both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Interviews were in English and audio recorded, with participants' responses transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews took place between August 21, 2023 and November 25, 2023. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted using NVivo 14 software, following an a priori coding process.

Although the study is qualitative in nature, it incorporated the four-factor selfie motivation scale developed by Sung et al. (2016) - which includes attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment - not as a quantitative measure but as a framework for analysis. This reflects a theory-led, qualitative approach that draws on established concepts for initial coding, while remaining open to emergent meanings (Gale et al., 2013). Using Sung et al.'s framework allowed the researcher to maintain theoretical consistency with previous selfie studies while situating participants' stories within the sociocultural context of Northeast India. The motivational categories used in this approach were not rigidly imposed; rather, they provided a platform for contextual interpretation, allowing the data to nuance and expand the original four-factor model.

Findings

A total of 39 young women between the ages of 20 and 30 took part in the study. As to how frequently they used Instagram, six respondents said "more than 2 hours," seven said "1-2 hours a day," 17 said "30 minutes to 1 hour" a day, and 12 said "less than 30 minutes" a day. The respondents' average (M) time on Instagram is approximately 0.911 hours per day, which is 55 minutes a day.

Table 1. Time spent on Instagram in a day (24 hours)

Time spent on Instagram	Frequency
<i>More than 2 hours</i>	6
<i>1-2 hours</i>	7
<i>30 minutes to 1 hour</i>	17
<i>Less than 30 minutes</i>	12

Respondents were asked about their reasons for using Instagram. Researchers coded the transcripts based on inductive coding techniques. Two independent coders were also employed to code from the transcripts and find reasons for the use of Instagram. The coding was done using NVivo 14 software. Independent coders were engaged to minimise potential researcher bias and enhance the reliability of the analysis. The thematic analysis of transcripts revealed the following motivations for Instagram use among the respondents:

Table 2. - Motivations for using Instagram

Categories	Numer of coding references	Some illustrative examples
<i>Self-promotion</i>	10	To show my friends the good things about my life (Respondent 6,10, 11). To show my dance moves, I am a trained dancer/singer/photographer (Respondent 38,11,9,24).
<i>Entertainment</i>	6	I love to watch reels and trending videos (Respondent 1,4,5,8,12). To follow Bollywood gossip (Respondent 4,9,17,2,13,28)
<i>Seeking validation or attention</i>	7	To get attention from my followers (Respondent 33, 23, 24,17). I want to become an influencer and love people’s attention (Respondent 27,37,3).
<i>Documentation</i>	7	It is the best place for documentation (Respondent 9,32,39). I post pictures on Instagram to keep it as a memory (Respondent 9,11,18).
<i>Pastime</i>	9	To beat boredom (Respondents 3, 7, 19,21)

Self-promotion is found to be the primary motivation for using Instagram. However, most respondents described using the photo-sharing application as a way to spend pastime and enjoy watching reels posted by others.

Respondents were asked selfies. Out of the 39 respondents, 21 reported taking selfies "once a week," 10 stated that they take selfies "rarely," six mentioned taking selfies "a few times a week," and only two indicated that they take selfies "once a month". The data revealed that the majority of respondents preferred to take selfies using their mobile phones.

Table 3. - Frequency of taking selfies

How often do you take selfies using your mobile phone?	Count	Relative Frequency
<i>A few times a week</i>	6	0.154
<i>Monthly</i>	2	0.051
<i>Once a week</i>	21	0.538
<i>Rarely</i>	10	0.256

Respondents were asked how often they posted selfies on Instagram. 20 respondents stated that they post selfies on Instagram "rarely," 10 reported posting them "monthly", six indicated posting selfies "a few times a week", and 3 reported posting them "once a week". None of the respondents reported never posting selfies on Instagram.

Table 4. - Frequency of posting selfies on Instagram

How often do you post selfies on Instagram?	Count	Relative Frequency
<i>A few times a week</i>	6	0.154
<i>Monthly</i>	10	0.256
<i>Once a week</i>	3	0.077
<i>Rarely</i>	20	0.513

Respondents were asked about the motivations for posting selfies on Instagram. In a quantitative study, Sung et al. (2016) found four motivations behind the users' decision to post selfies on social networking sites. These are:

- (1) attention seeking,
- (2) communication,
- (3) archiving, and
- (4) entertainment

This study analysed the answers given by the respondents about their motivations for posting selfies based on the scale proposed by Sung et al. (2016). The answers were coded on NVivo 14 software following an a priori coding process. Two independent coders were engaged to code the transcripts separately.

Table 5. - Motivations for posting selfies on Instagram

Categories	Number of coding references	Some illustrative examples
<i>Archiving</i>	4	"I am a fitness enthusiast. I love to share selfies on Instagram as this helps me track my progress and stay accountable to my health goals" (Respondent 9) "I use Instagram as a digital diary to document my travel adventures through selfies. I mostly travel alone, so I have no other option beside taking selfies for memories." (Respondent 11)
<i>Attention-Seeking</i>	17	"Through selfies on Instagram, I share my passion for makeup and beauty trends. It's a platform where I can showcase my skills and experiment with different looks." (Respondent 23) "I use selfies to promote my creative endeavours. I love the positive feedback I receive about my eyes. Many say that my eyes are beautiful. So, selfies capture the eyes beautifully as selfies are clicked from proximity from the body." (Respondent 18) "I use selfies to promote my jewellery brand." (Respondent 30)
<i>Communication</i>	12	"I post selfies, and my friends react to them. This process leads to communicating with friends once in a while. Nowadays, we do not have the time to talk to friends. So, whenever someone posts something, we react" (Respondent 19) "Through selfies, I am in touch with my followers" (Respondent 17)
<i>Entertainment</i>	6	"I enjoy posting selfies with my pets. They are so cute. Sometimes, I use different filters and post funny selfies." (Respondent 3)" Posting selfies makes me as I love taking them" (Respondent 13)

The next research question aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of the respondents regarding the impact of posting selfies on body image satisfaction. The thorough analysis of the respondents' answers revealed that many felt pressure concerning their physical appearance. Several respondents admitted spending considerable time deciding which photo to upload to their account, often seeking help from friends to determine which image might receive "more likes." In response to this question, one respondent stated:

"I would say that posting selfies on Instagram is a mixed experience. There is a fun element to sharing moments with friends, but there is also this hidden pressure on me to look perfect in every photo. As a result, I take several selfies just to get a perfect one. This process is sometimes frustrating, especially if I don't get that perfect selfie, and sometimes this affects how I see myself."

The ninth respondent echoed the first one's response about feeling pressured to get the perfect shot. She also added that she often compares her selfies with those of her friends and celebrities and tries to emulate them. She said:

"Selfies are great. However, I would like to highlight that posting selfies on Instagram has increased my body image concerns. The pressure to present a 'perfect' image can sometimes be overwhelming. When I see someone post a selfie that looks really good, I immediately try to take some self-portraits on my mobile. But my selfies never turn out as good as my friends', so, I delete them and feel a bit dejected."

Eight other respondents similarly mentioned that they compare their pictures with others - particularly celebrities - on Instagram and attempt to emulate them. One participant even shared that she purchased an Apple iPhone to take "perfect" selfies.

However, some respondents expressed a more carefree attitude, stating that they post selfies whenever they feel like it, regardless of others' opinions. Respondent 13 stated:

"We should share selfies or any picture of ours without hesitation. I have many friends on Instagram, and I must say that sharing selfies has improved my body image satisfaction. I have never been bullied for my appearance and don't even care what people think. I know how to respond if needed. The positive interactions with my friends on Instagram have made me feel more confident and validated."

Respondent 16 echoed Respondent 13:

"Instagram is a great app. I love sharing selfies on Instagram, which has helped me appreciate my body more. It's liberating to see others supporting body diversity and encouraging self-love. I feel confident. And honestly, I don't bother about the number of likes I get in my posts."

There were also some neutral responses. The respondents stated that they did not perceive any impact of posting selfies on body image satisfaction.

Discussion

Findings revealed that selfies on Instagram embody a paradox of empowerment and exposure. Women are able to exercise control over how they are seen, however, this control often depends on continual self-monitoring shaped by the gaze of imagined audiences. The same act that grants agency simultaneously reproduces discipline. Consequently, self-presentation on social media reflects both freedom and constraint. The analysis identifies two layers of use. People engage with Instagram for purposes of self-promotion, entertainment, validation seeking, self documentation, and leisure, reflecting broader patterns of media gratification. Conversely, the act of posting selfies aligns more closely with the framework of attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment proposed by Sung et al. (2016). The selfie thus constitutes an intimate, affective performance that demonstrates visibility and self-worth, while everyday use of the platform remains primarily motivated by social connection.

Attention seeking emerged as the most emotionally charged motive. Respondents acknowledged modifying their selfies by retaking, filtering, or deleting them in response to public reaction. Such activities render visibility a form of obligation - the obligation to maintain, compare, and present one's online image. Within the framework of uses and gratification theory, attention functions as a social reward; however, according to objectification theory, it also operates as a disciplinary gaze. These perspectives illuminate why recognition on social media feels simultaneously gratifying and exhausting, as self-worth is frequently quantified through metrics such as "likes".

Comparison with peers and influencers functions as the hinge between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. According to social comparison theory, exposure to idealised imagery carries emotional repercussions. Respondents reported experiencing anxiety and engaging in selective posting, reflecting Instagram's visual culture of self-scrutiny. However, these behaviours also reveal a degree of critical literacy: many young women recognised the inauthentic nature of their perceived beauty and expressed disillusionment at their inability to reproduce it.

Contextual narratives from Northeast India illustrate how regional identity shapes digital visibility. Within a media environment often characterised by a metropolitan and homogeneous brand of representation, Instagram offers a space for asserting both presence and difference. Posting selfies thus functions not merely as an act of individual expression but also as a means of affirming belonging within national and transnational visual publics. The platform consequently embodies a dual dynamic of cultural pride and conformity to prevailing aesthetic standards - a tension rarely examined in studies centred on urban India. The interplay of uses and gratification theory, social comparison theory, and objectification theory reveals a cyclical process of gratification→comparison→self-surveillance. Gratification denotes the initial motivation to connect and display; comparison captures the evaluative processes through which Instagram users engage with others; and objectification explains how these external evaluations become internalised, producing self-regulation.

Theories that are often examined in isolation intersect here, revealing that digital self-presentation integrates agency, emotion, and structure within a single act. The findings suggest that the selfie is far from trivial; it constitutes a meaningful mode of communication through which young women negotiate recognition, aesthetics, and identity. The results also underscore the urgent

need for a national media literacy campaign to raise awareness among young social media users about the way in which algorithms manipulate visibility and how appearance validates digital presence. Moreover, the study demonstrates how existing motivational frameworks can be synthesised with contextual interpretation, thereby extending the theorisation of digital femininity beyond Western and metropolitan contexts.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how young women manage and interpret self-presentation through their Instagram selfies. What emerged most clearly was a persistent tension between empowerment and exposure. Women recognise the power inherent in visibility, yet they also experience the strain it entails. While previous research has identified similar dynamics in Western contexts; this study extends the discussion by incorporating the perspectives of women from Northeast India - a region frequently excluded from global scholarship on digital culture. Their narratives add cultural and regional nuance to broader debates on visibility and self-representation in online environments.

The analysis contributes to the expansion of both uses and gratification theory and objectification theory. What begins as a pursuit of connection or enjoyment can quickly evolve into self-surveillance, influenced by peer feedback and algorithmic cues. Rather than dismissing selfies as superficial or self-indulgent, this study treats them as small yet meaningful acts of communication that expose how digital systems mold emotion, labour, and self-esteem.

The findings also demonstrate that metrics—likes, shares, and views—tell only a fraction of the story. Engaging directly with respondents through qualitative inquiry reveals how self-attention, validation, and social comparison intersect to shape online identities. These insights underscore the importance of studying digital behaviour not merely as data but as lived experience.

Future research could explore how these patterns vary across gender and age, as well as how feelings about digital self-worth evolve over time. There is also scope to examine how recommendation algorithms subtly mediate visibility, determining who is seen and who remains invisible. Charting these gradual shifts can illuminate how visibility functions as an emotional economy within the networked digital world.

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