

## Digital Empowerment: Transformation of Women's Body Display Norms in the Age of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

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The increasing prominence of body display on social media has transformed how women engage with self-presentation and identity construction. This study examines the role of digital platforms, particularly Instagram, in reshaping norms surrounding body image and physical capital. Through 29 in-depth interviews, the research explores how women navigate digital spaces to express their identities, often challenging traditional societal expectations. Social media provides a unique environment where users can both display and reconfigure their physical appearance, empowering women to redefine their self-image. However, the freedom offered by these platforms also introduces challenges, such as heightened body dissatisfaction and mental health concerns, driven by the pressures of online visibility and comparison.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The body may be molded through substantive changes, such as surgical and hormonal interventions, As well as through transient modifications, such as makeup, clothing, and body language. All forms of body plasticity are implicated in a complex web of emerging labor, gender, and class relations and aspirations (Islam, 2022). Mobile phones have morphed into smartphones with advanced features, namely accessibility to the Internet, social media, email, and location-based services (Hessari et al., 2022; Bai & Vahedina, 2023). In recent decades, information and communication technology advancements have changed many processes in many fields, such as [...], economics (Mohammadi et al., 2023; Bai et al., 2024; 2024), sports, lifestyle, politics, and social changes.

Online social media such as Facebook, ..., and Instagram have provided convenient platforms for the self-manifestation of users (Yigiter et al., 2024). Studies have shown that users tend to create an ideal image of themselves to expose it to other users (Manago et al., 2008). However, such photos can lead to a negative mental body image among other users (Toma & Hancock, 2010) because people are less satisfied with their faces and bodies after viewing ideal photos in the media. They become more aware of behavioral and cognitive capital for their appearance and go on an inappropriate diet (Jung et al., 2001; Harrison, 2001). McComb et al. observed that "across all conditions, exposure to the images results in decreased body satisfaction, likelihood to compare one's body to another's, happiness, confidence, and anxiety."

Women are more concerned about their physical appearance because they think the beauty of their faces and bodies can contribute to achieving their economic and social goals and ideals. Women assume their bodies as a tool. A study on removing the like option on Instagram shows that "women believe removing the visibility of the number of likes may facilitate a reduction in negative self-focus (comparisons and competitiveness) and improve mental health." (Prichard et al., 2021). Instagram can be a hugely persuasive public pedagogy, and in using it, women may learn to (re)produce particular ways of performing "perfection" in relation to both gender and body size (Nikolova & LaMarre, 2023). On the other hand, the evidence indicates that the need for approval is a strong and consistent predictor of strategic self-presentation behaviors on social media (Chen et al., 2022). Thus, specifically observing female practices is fundamental to comprehending technological bias and digital usefulness (Baudens et al., 2023). But often, when they focus on individual empowerment of women, they ignore fundamental gender inequalities (P'ecot et al., 2024). And the fact is ignored that negative experiences of the body in women's life world are often associated with body disconnection in adulthood. However, sometimes due to self-awareness and presence, self-care, rejection of gender norms of the body and recovery of agency related to the body, in the future it has been associated with empowerment, communication and recovery of physical and mental freedom in the next life (Piran., 2016)

There are few pieces of research about the consequences of smartphones in Iran, and there is no strict monitoring or educational program to address this phenomenon there (Hessari et al., 2022). Due to the fact that in Iranian society,

the display of physical beauty and daily private spaces has increased among women. This research aims to show how people exercise themselves on Instagram by analyzing respondents' experiences. To what extent do they have the freedom to display their bodies, and what has facilitated the display of bodies without *Hijab*? Moreover, does body display ultimately play a role in constructing individual identity?

### ***Physical Capital and Body Display as Ways to Achieve Identity***

Approximately 85% of emerging adults use at least one social media site. Research suggests that viewing and internalizing unrealistic body ideals often displayed online may have detrimental effects on youth body image. However, studies on the relationship between social media use and body image have mainly focused on women's desire to be thin, suggesting that body image is a form of capital through which people score points (Brasil et al., 2024). And appearance comparisons are an important socio-cultural factor that affects women's body image ((Fardouly et al., 2017) The concept of physical capital describes the value resulting from individuals' appearance, attractiveness, or physical capabilities that can be exchanged against other forms of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 1995). Bourdieu considers the aim of body management to be the acquisition of dignity, differentiation, and social base (Shilling, 1991, p. 127). According to Bourdieu, the taste gives material form to the body (Shilling, 1991, p. 655). Body management leads to a sense of having control over the body and making gestures that are opposite to the normal body and daily habits of life (Featherstone, 1999). Early influences are important in everyday life and encounters (Goffman, 1959, p. 11). conventional and common forms of non-verbal language guide people's understanding (Shilling, 1993, p. 82). one's face is very important in in-person interactions (Synnot, 1990, p. 61). People's faces are the source of oral as well as nonverbal communication (Synnot, 1988, p. 606). Face can create an image of us that is desired by others or vice versa. This body display is influenced by people's emotions, beliefs, and perceptions (Rice, 2005, p. 3). As the social media platform Instagram has a steady stream of Image-based posts with captions that often portray ideals of beauty promote self objectification (Harper & Tigman, 2008). Similarly, Lazuka et al. (2020) found that approximately one-third of body-positive posts from public profiles indicated a broad conceptualization of beauty. Goffman believes that the meanings attributed to the body are determined by a shared bodily glossary that is also under the immediate control of individuals (Goffman, 1963, p. 35). For Douglas, the body is full of symbols and metaphors that carry physical limitations on one end and social order on the other end (Turner, 1966, p. 26). He refers to the physical body and the social body. He regards the physical body as a small world linked to social pressures. On the other hand, the social body limits how the physical body is seen (Douglas, 1996, p. 69).

In general, approaches based on perceiving the body as a purely cultural construct provide a better understanding of the role of power in shaping it. However, this conceptualization leaves little room for women's individual agency and, consequently, for constructing their central sense of self (Bell, 2019). Meanwhile, social networks, especially in societies like Iran, where women are

generally confined to the private domain of the home, have opened up new spaces for agency.

In such a situation, increasing bandwidth and access to mobile devices and the online nature of social media have always encouraged people to constantly share details of their daily lives (Mullen, 2010). Because of this accessibility, a new collaborative form has emerged on the Internet (Gadekar, 2017; Hessari et al., 2024). And social media content has affected young women's body image and mood by challenging traditional narrow beauty ideals (Cowles et al., 2023). Instagram provides a context for its users to display themselves by publishing images and short videos (Moon et al., 2016). These new technologies and new media have brought new realities into women's lives to express and shape identity (Guta et al., 2015). That is, women themselves are publishers of the news about themselves (Guta et al., 2015; Magdalena, 2015), and access to this form creates an opportunity for anyone to communicate with the mass of individuals or virtual communities without control (Guta et al.; Magdalena, 2015). Women get into the long-term, developing relationships in this space. Relationships that are actually complementary to face-to-face relationships (Pentley, 2009, p. 6). Of course, social media content can negatively affect body esteem in young women by reinforcing beliefs that people must look a certain way to be considered attractive. (Davies et al., 2020).

Finally, it can be said that the expansion of cyberspace and the possibilities for self-realization have led agents to become self-manifested in these networks (Valenzola, 2009). People's decisions about how to represent themselves online are influenced by age as well as their motivation to be present in online spaces (Moncur et al., 2016). Still, Instagram users upload photos of everything, meaning many accounts with many followers have numerous selfies (Marwick, 2015). According to Schwartz, we see a shift from photographing others for personal usage to documenting our use for others (Schwarz, Ori. 2010). Initial research has identified that selfies have been considered a tool for controlling and managing reputation (Marwick, 2015) and enjoying reputation (Abidin, 2014). Images play an important role in how we construct our world (Katherine & Edgar, 2015) because images teach us how to see (Bordo, 2003) and identify the collective ethics and aesthetic values through what has the ability to be considered as photography (Bourdieu, 1996; Van House et al., 2005). Selfies can be seen as a measure to indicate identity as well as a behavior to attract attention (Wagner et al., 2016). Diane and Leidler (2013) see Facebook as an appropriate space to build a feminine identity that allows them to have an alternative self. Contrary to optimistic approaches, pessimistic approaches believe that women build their own online social media that conform to the gender stereotypes of society (Delona, 2011; Delis, 2012).

For example, Carstensen (2009) believes that women under the pressure of their audiences display their physical attractiveness in their photos. Delis (2012) believes that women generally display a better image of themselves on Facebook. Delona (2011), on the other hand, believes that the effects of social construction on users' physical gestures in their photos are quite obvious. For example, men in their photos often have a straight, standing posture under the

social norms that men are expected to be harsh and strong, but women's bodies do not have a straight posture. Women are soft, flexible, and attractive. Seibeck (2007) has also shown that women exhibit images with gender stereotype codes and seek to create self-images to meet societal expectations of ideal feminine beauty. Further research shows that appearance-based social media leads to appearance comparisons, which lead to body surveillance, which leads to social appearance anxiety and ultimately leads to thinness motivation in female students (Seekis et al., 2020)

## **THEORETICAL OVERVIEW**

Display of the body is a social issue that has become increasingly important with the decline of earlier identity references, such as religion and tradition, in societies like Iran, where agent agents acquire their identity by using them. This significance is because the body's components have semantic implications. Like the media, the body transmits our unspoken messages (Marshall, 1990). On the other hand, the characteristics of the body are involved in shaping social appropriateness, production, and reproduction (Krieger & Smith, 2004, p. 94). Because bodies are shaped by ideal gender norms and Femininity with an emphasis on young, slim and stylish appearance (Bennett et al., 2024). the Body Project involves verbal, written, and behavioral exercises to induce cognitive dissonance by challenging the thin ideal (Wu et al., 2023 ). As a result, body posture and a desire to change it have become a commercial, exhibitivite, and cosmetic interest (Cress et al., 2014). Of course, the reaction of the audience in the virtual space is not always positive, as the results of the research show that the results showed that the viewers gave a lower score to sexualized women (compared to non-sexualized) in terms of competence and authenticity (Vendemia., 2024).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on data from 29 in-depth interviews with women who, in addition to displaying their everyday lives on Instagram, have presented their bodies more freely and beyond the traditional norms of Iranian society, where covering hair and body is mandatory. To select participants, we considered several criteria, including spending more than 3 hours a day on social media, publicly posting stories about their body and casual style, having an open hair and body dress code in posts, possessing higher education degrees, not fearing or feeling ashamed of freely displaying their bodies, and not hiding stories from close acquaintances. The sampling logic of this study is purposeful and strategic, as it helps us to compare with the traditional spectrum of Iranian women, whose virtual and real-life displays are the same, and to reach women who exhibit a freer aspect of their leisure, bodily dress, and material hedonism in the virtual space. To find sample individuals, we used the snowball method, starting with Instagram accounts we were previously aware of for their free lifestyle aspects. We requested interviews from 10 people, of which six accepted, and then considered them as reliable references to access other sample members. Most participants were in their third decade of life.

The research interviews lasted an average of 2 hours, with some conducted via chat on Telegram and others recorded in person and then transcribed verbatim. In the analysis process, we inductively analyzed the data, and while reading the transcripts, we noted initial codes using the grounded theory method

(Charmaz, 2014). We then entered the codes into the MAXQDA software and categorized women's lived experiences through hierarchical coding.

Then, in the stage of creating the primary codes, the key points of the participants' speech were extracted from the Internet in the form of initial codes related to the concept of the student experience. The third step, finding themes, was based on sorting and setting the primary codes into the primary themes and naming them. During the revision of the themes, they were first revised and refined based on Brown & Clark's work (2006). The initial themes that arose from respondents' narratives were elaborated to create more analytical themes. Overall, in the data analysis, approximately 26 initial codes were extracted, and after reviewing them, about 21 initial themes were identified. In the subsequent review, three main themes and nine sub-themes were written. Figure 1 shows the final numbers and connections of codes.

To adhere to the ethical principles of qualitative research, all names were converted to numbers, and we followed the standard guidelines provided and followed by others (Pedersen & Lupton, 2018) for protecting the participants and ethical conduct with data. To validate the data, the findings of this study were presented to the participants, and they expressed their views to the researchers on how the findings and themes coincided with their experiences. On the other hand, several experts in qualitative research were asked to examine the extracted codes whose opinions were applied to select the codes' index.

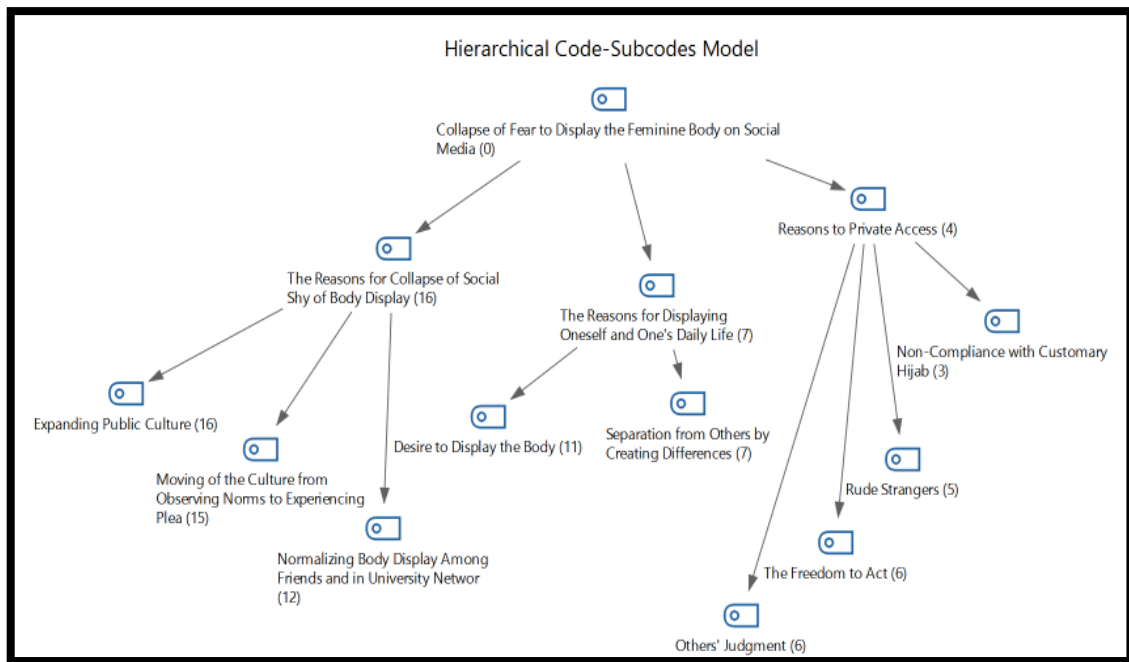


Figure 1. Graphical Representation of Three Main Themes and Their Sub-Themes, Extracted from Coding

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to analyze the collapse of social shame of women's body display in a sample of 29. Table 1 lists the contextual and general characteristics of the respondents.

*Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Age, Education, and Account Security Status*

<b>Age at the time of the interview</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
	26	20	32
<b>Level of Education</b>	Illiterate	0	
	Elementary	0	
	Diploma	0	
	Bachelor of Arts	21	
	Master of Arts	8	
<b>Account Status</b>	General	2	
	Private	26	

### *Reasons for Private Access*

In this theme, users have cited reasons for restricting access to their private page for others.

### *Non-Compliance with Customary Hijab*

In Iranian society, wearing a Hijab for women is one of the basic laws of society. In addition, the ethical foundations of collective and customary culture also make the individual observe their wearing to a large extent. Some users have stated the reason for privatizing their personal accounts not being seen by strangers. For example, interviewee No. 15 said, "I used to accept all the requests. However, now, as my personal images are without Hijab, I deleted the strangers on my page." In another case, participant No. 3 said: "I do not like the public page because I post private images of my body, and still, some parts of the society have no capacity for my freedom."

### *Others' Judgment*

One of the main reasons for the interviewees' privatization of their accounts is that the culture of Iranian society is still collectivist. This collectivism leads people to view each other's lives constantly and, as Goffman explains, puts a negative social label on the individual. In this case, the agent generally tries to avoid a situation where he or she may be labeled or judged by others because social scandals can be very hurtful, and most of them tend to evade these labels due to fear of being disgraced. For example, interviewees NO. 29 and 13, in response to the question, (Do you post photos of your personal spaces of life such as parties, family celebrations, and your gatherings on social media?), expressed their opinion as follows:

NO. 29: "I usually don't post very private photos on social media because others judge you the day after you post." Participant No. 13 responded: "I post photos of my private space, but before that, I try to cut anything like a cigarette or liquor in my photo. I can't tolerate the reaction of my coworkers at work because of the party I attended last

night." NO. 4 replied: "Our family is closed and, unfortunately, jealous. I'm the only girl in the whole family with different beliefs. I didn't get married at a young age. I lived in Tehran alone. I just came out of the country; unfortunately, there is always talk behind me. Moreover, my parents live in a small town, and judgments bother them. So I don't want to let the relatives see something they could use to annoy my parents anymore. And I would never allow them to follow me or understand what I'm doing in my life because they are close-minded." Interviewees indicated that they use behavioral strategies of secrecy to avoid being exposed to the social judgments and consequences of being labeled, so privatizing their profiles is part of the strategy. For example, Participant No. 1 said, "Although I have a private account, I do not share photos with my emotional partner. Because anyway, some relatives shouldn't know about my private life." According to Pfitzmann & Hansen (2010), Such statements indicate that one's fear of being faced with the inferences of others would limit their living space to an extent.

#### *The Freedom to Act*

Some interviewees generally sought to display themselves for the free experience of the body because they were annoyed by the limitations of the real world, preferring to experience this freedom in a widespread way. However, their pages would not be accessible to the public. For example, interviewees No. 4 and 17 responded to the question (Why did you personalize your page?) as follows: No. 4 said, "Since I sometimes do civic activities, I prefer not to be trapped in cyberspace by intelligence agents, and that's the key to have my normal life." It is noteworthy to mention that due to the creation of numerous fake accounts in the Iranian online sphere, people generally distrust the friendship requests of others. Participant NO. 17 stated her reason as follows: "In the street and wherever you go, you are always restricted, you always think that maybe you will be bothered by others, so I like to show myself in cyberspace the way that I like and not have to take a photo while wearing a scarf or Hijab... so for exercising my freedom, I restrict others' access." Answers like this indicate that female users see cyberspace as a public space, allowing them to experience more freedom than real space. However, the actual experience of this freedom depends on the privatization of this virtual world.

#### *Rude Strangers*

One of the main reasons that interviewed women used to justify privatizing their accounts was that most of them had their accounts publicly available to everyone earlier on Instagram. However, they have been experiencing bitter remarks such as insults or anonymous people posting their mobile numbers in their comments. That has led them to be blamed by their family and relatives. Respondents 21, 6, and 9, for example, expressed their views as follows: NO. 21: "My account was public earlier when I posted a photo; all of a sudden, one that I didn't know wrote in my comments that you are very beautiful, or another stranger sent direct messages. So when I saw our culture was not mature enough, I preferred privatizing my account." Number 6: "If I don't make my page private, these impolite boys will comment below my photo, and then I must close my comment section. So privatizing allows me to prevent irreverent people from posting on my page."

***The Reasons for Displaying Oneself and One's Daily Life******Desire to Display the Body***

This theme illustrates that Instagram space has given some users the opportunity to display their physical beauty more freely and, in fact, to extricate their bodies from the structural constraints of real space. Respondents NO. 3, 27, 24, and 15, for example, expressed their views as follows.

NO. 24: *"I like to take photos of myself, and I always post the one photo that others would give a compliment on and is well taken. Because my boyfriend is watching, and I want to attract him." In accordance with this interviewee's response, the research results show that people in virtual networks feel significant pressure to create good feelings for themselves. Especially when they expect to be seen by a certain person, they are trying to be more attractive, and to do this, they are displaying their best photos on their profiles (Manago et al., 2008). As Interviewee NO. 10 said: "I would try not to post the photo that my boyfriend did not like, or others did not respond well. If the number of likes was low, I would delete the photo." NO. 7: "Everyone likes to take photos of themselves. Maybe I like it a little bit more. I love photography and photos, and I love to have artistic photos of myself. It just puts me in a good mood when I post a beautiful photo of myself. If it leads to a positive reaction from others, it will make me even happier." No. 27: "I post many photos of myself to show myself look good, not to be enviable. Mostly, I care about displaying myself as beautiful. Honestly, all women like to look pretty, and I am like everyone else."*

Studies in this regard show that social network members exhibit more of their beauty, as this is their best attraction strategy. (Rhode, 2010). In fact, network communication provides an opportunity for members of the online social network (OSN) to enhance their social status (Ellison et al., 2014). For example, on online dating sites, people use a virtual identity to present themselves strategically attractive and planned, potentially romantic and fantasy (Gibbs et al., 2006; Guadagno et al., 2012).

***Separation from Others by Creating Differences***

The theme shows that cyberspace activists tend to avoid being assimilated with others by portraying their own lives and themselves. Social media is an opportunity to increase self-manifestation values, and the ways of self-manifestation are changing (Orehek & Human, 2017). Luxurious Instagram accounts are like catalogs of what young people aspire to have, or they make an opportunity to display a dreamlike and different lifestyle (Marwick, 2015). For example, Participant No. 15 said: "I always try to have a good look or pose in my photos and wear my best clothes, even my makeup and hairstyle is important to me ... maybe because I don't like to be like everyone else". Participant NO. 11 responded: "I often take my photo in a certain way, whether in terms of my beauty or appearance or my body position. I like my photos to be vague, and no one can find out the reality of my personality. I think being mysterious makes me feel different."

The responses in this section indicate that social media provide the context for individuals to shape their own identities. Theories before the year 2000

suggest that identity reconstruction as an interesting phenomenon in online environments has attracted a great deal of attention and that internet users have been able to create different identities through different meanings of online spaces (Poster, 1995; Tambyah, 1996) because reproduction and reconstruction of virtual identity have been important since the advent of social networking platforms, and with the upload of photos, virtual actors tend to build an image that is desirable and at the same time distinct from others (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008). Thus, cyberspaces such as Instagram allow people to move from undesirable aspects of their identity to the expression of idealistic identities, much of it through selfie photos and photos in stylish places. It happens in clean and luxurious clothes. This is what is being developed in Iran under the hashtag luxury trend. As research results show, adults engage in different behaviors in order to gain attention and validation from others through their "followers" on Instagram.

### *The Reasons for Collapse of Social Shyness Regarding Body Display*

This section studies cultural changes in the field of self-manifestation and body display in social media. Due to the process of modernization in the field of virtual communications as well as technological advances, customary beliefs and norms have changed. On the other hand, diminishing values, decreasing the role of patriarchal traditions and morals, and increasing pressure on ideological mechanisms to exert power over body control have altered cyberspace practices and strategies. The result of these changes is a growing desire in Iranian society to remove the Hijab and a tendency to share photos without a Hijab with half-naked limbs on social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Part of this tendency is because theatrical and consuming attention to the body is a sign of a healthy and good life and an indicator of cultural capital. The other part is that with the increasing importance of the "self," which is more a product of modern society, the body has a special place as its most obvious carrier. The emphasis on the body as an image reflects modern forms of social differentiation and recognition. However, the intensity of these policies nowadays is much greater than in the past. With the rise of Western consumerist culture and the development of the concept of aesthetic enjoyment, women's bodies and consumption have undergone many changes. In this situation, as Deserto (1997) put it, women are not merely subordinate to structure. They exhibit a particular type of agency. Understanding the logic of patriarchal/ consumer society and aligning themselves with it, women apply specific approaches to improve their subordinate status. The makeup, the more sexualization of the face and the body, and the exposure of their body on social media such as Instagram provide them with a tool to promote themselves in such a gender-unequal society.

Women pursue goals and interests through theatrical actions and seek to improve their subordinate position in the patriarchal structure by achieving these goals and interests. Iranian women's body-related theatrical actions can be considered a resistance strategy against a new patriarchal strategy. According to this approach, women's perceptions of themselves in daily lives are mixed with the gendered expectations of their bodies, leading them to think that if they want to demonstrate a successful social self in their daily lives, they must come up with

an ideal set of images and actions related to their body. These gendered expectations are embedded in people's minds and shape their interactions, including Iranian women's interactions. They interact in everyday life in different places/circles, such as beauty salons, parties, and more, through storytelling and posting and sharing images on Instagram.

To better understand the reasons for the interviewees' tendency to display their bodies, some questions were asked, which are interpreted in the following codes.

#### *Moving of the Culture from Observing Norms to Experiencing Pleasures*

Although Iranian society still has a traditional and religious context, it is under the influence of multiple processes of cultural globalization, pluralism, and relativism in beliefs, increasing individualism and the expansion of the body industry, physical management, and such processes. Generally, newer generations do not rely on prior norms and traditions. In this new mode of action, people are more likely to view the world around them with a pleasurable attitude and seek freedom from real space constraints. In this regard, respondents NO. 2 and 19 commented as follows:

Respondent 2: *"I cannot be like my parents. I like to go to coffee shops and shopping malls. I like to wear fashionable clothes and go to parties. In general, I like to spend my life happily. Well, I've been sharing most of the events of every moment of my life since Instagram came. Maybe that's because I want to say that I am experiencing a happy life. It was not possible ten years ago. However, people are accepting these things now."*

Respondent 19: *"I think to the extent that you make life harder, life becomes harder. But if you go your way to pursue your tastes, you can pursue the pleasures you want to experience. The society also changes itself. Why should we always be afraid? In the real world, well, I'm limited. However, in the virtual world, I want to tell others about my life and what entertainment I'm experiencing."*

The above answers show that cyberspace provides an appropriate opportunity for people to show their lives more unrestrainedly in the current situation of Iranian society. As Hilberman (2009) believes, actors use social media to build their lives and, in the process, change traditional lifestyles.

#### *Expanding Public Culture*

One of the reasons that interviewees justified sharing their private photos was that cultural approaches and collective ethics have changed over time and by technological advances. Such an issue can be dealt with a priori from Durkheim's theory. Durkheim had concluded that by the advent of modern culture multiplication, moral individualism would be one of the few common beliefs. Modern societies transform the individual into a sacred thing, and the community's survival depends on giving people more freedom. Durkheim strongly defends civil society and citizenship (Durkheim, 2004). In his view, individual autonomy is socially expanded and correlated with improving and developing individual personality, social distinctions, and individualistic ethics

(Tillman, 2002). He rejects the common idea that collective ethics perish in modern society, but society, instead, creates new collective ethics in an organic cohesion. In this sense, "the difference between modern and traditional societies is not between the power and the weakness of the collective conscience, but between the two forms of collective conscience, because even in the most advanced societies, the collective conscience cannot be destroyed. Based on Durkheim's theory, it can be said that Iranian society is experiencing cultural evolution from a closed, mechanical culture to an individualistic culture, and social media are one of the effective means of transforming to this and are helping to experience this form of individualism. Interviewees No. 26 and 21's responses support this idea. Responding to whether she was willing to share her images decades before and during the time of Yahoo Messenger, No. 1 said: "No, I wouldn't. But now, the conditions of society are different. Now, if I post a photo of myself, no one bothers me, and nobody criticizes me because posting these photos has expanded to the extent that it has been accepted."

NO. 21 said: *"Everybody is posting more comfortable photos of their bodies. This matter made the point normal for me. In the past, everyone was scared, but now, no one fears being seen. Instead, these days, it is normal for everyone to take a good photo of themselves and others."*

Also, Respondent No. 26 stated: "If you were asking this question like 6 or 7 years ago, I would have answered no. But now I can say yes easily. I have no fear. I'm not shy, either. Because in the past, it was very nasty, and people couldn't accept the matter. At that time, everyone would save private photos of others. They might do it now, too, but it has decreased so much. Since posting these kinds of photos is common, people have become more comfortable displaying parts of their lives."

#### *Normalizing Body Display Among Friends and in University Networks*

This is another reason for disrupting the traditional collective conscience restraining the freedom of body display. Agents acquire ethics and culture through social processes in groups of friends or in social spaces such as the university. For example, facing the question of how their borders and red lines of showing their hair and bodies collapsed/changed, respondents No. 15, 10, and 26 responded as follows:

No. 15: *"It was only for the sake of getting my boyfriend's attention that my photos were without the Hijab. Now, I post those kinds of photos because it has become normal and trivial to me. Of course, my friends and my boyfriend were influential in changing my point of view. They were very influential."*

Respondent No. 10: *"My classmates complimented my makeup and beauty in the university and said I am beautiful, so these compliments made me like be seen more and more."*

Respondent NO. 26: *"Most of the comments that boys had on me caused me to cope with my photos without Hijab. All the guys like makeup. No one likes a*

*woman without makeup for friendship. They like heavy makeup and feminine clothes rather than sporty ones. They care about your hair to be tidy."*

## CONCLUSIONS

Agents rely on social media as a key factor in their social lives (Boyd, 2014; Putri et al., 2023). They form a large part of the process of constructing their personal identity by comparing themselves with others on online social media. Ultimately, these interactive processes influence the creation of the desired person (Marder et al., 2016). Meanwhile, women, especially in countries affected by collectivist cultures and patriarchal beliefs, can find more opportunities to express themselves through the capital, such as through the beauty of their bodies. On the other hand, via uploading and sharing photos and videos on social networking sites, they can expose parts of their daily lives to their fans and friends. In this regard, the results of the present study show that Iranian society is experiencing cultural modernity and technological modernization and is changing agents' cultural beliefs and practices by adopting cultural diffusion processes taking place on online social media. Iranian women are among the agents who are experiencing these changes and can also be considered active actors in building these new cultural relationships. In fact, like men, they use the possibilities of networks such as Instagram to express their private lives freely, display their beauty, gain social trust, display body and physical capital, and attract others' attention. On the other hand, via photographing and filming the moments of their daily lives and their feminine world of existence, they are experiencing a form of modern individualism. The results of the present study show that the social network Instagram is a social opportunity for Iranian women to release themselves from the traditional cultural constraints of family and public spaces such as the university and the street and experience a new form of self. This new form of self-experimentation is meant to show the body in a freer clothing style and free from the formal norms prevailing in the real world, such as wearing a scarf.

Despite its positive aspects in the realm of women's freedom, this issue has also brought concerning challenges, including body dissatisfaction, a concern that, according to Brady et al. (2017), is a serious public health issue that exacerbates the risk of several other negative health outcomes, including depression. Other research indicates that maintaining traditional cultural beauty norms in more patriarchal societies can increase pressures for a slim, modest, and attractive appearance (Smart & Tsong, 2014). It also strengthens the process of self-objectification, which, according to Jongenelis & Pettigrew (2020), involves constant evaluation and meticulous scrutiny of physical appearance and assessing that one is failing to conform to internalized views, which may lead to body shame and appearance anxiety (Jongenelis et al., 2020). Another noteworthy point this research reveals is that continuous use of the Instagram platform has led to appearance comparisons, as evidenced by checking the number of likes and viewers of one's stories. The negative body image results are associated with the importance placed on likes and related comments (Seekis et al., 2020). Another intriguing aspect is that participants who displayed themselves more freely discussed forming a perception of bodily beauty in men's

eyes. In this context, the findings of the study by Wu, Mulkens, Atkinson, and Alleva (2023) show that the sexualized nature of women's images plays a fundamental role in their self-objectification process.

Following these structural changes in the realm of identity and body representation, we are faced with the emergence of the 'new woman,' who displays faces that signify the ideals of modernization and globalization (Dhawan, 2010). However, the results of our research, similar to the study by Anja K. Munder, Julia C. Becker, and Oliver Christ (2023), show that Iranian women who live more freely in cyberspace are more exposed to group humiliation than to potential group benefits.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The results of this study offer both practical and theoretical implications for understanding the role of social media in reshaping body display norms and identity construction among women. These findings hold significance for social media platforms, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers, with a shared responsibility to foster a more empowering and supportive digital environment.

From a practical standpoint, education and awareness campaigns are necessary to address the complexities of body image and digital self-presentation. Social media platforms, in collaboration with educational institutions and relevant organizations, should lead efforts to educate users—especially young women—about the effects of idealized body images prevalent on social media. These programs should aim to develop critical media literacy skills, encouraging users to question and challenge the unrealistic standards often perpetuated online. Additionally, educational initiatives should promote the understanding that self-worth is not solely determined by physical appearance, thereby reducing the negative impact of social comparison on mental well-being.

Mental health support is another critical area where practical interventions can make a difference. The study highlights that social media use can exacerbate body dissatisfaction and related mental health issues. Platforms should collaborate with mental health professionals to integrate support mechanisms within their services. These could include offering resources on body positivity, self-esteem enhancement, and guidance on responsible social media use. Providing such resources would help users manage the emotional challenges associated with digital self-presentation and combat the harmful effects of online body scrutiny. Furthermore, platforms should take an active role in promoting more diverse and authentic representations of body image. As the study shows, the dominance of idealized images leads to pressures for women to conform to narrow beauty standards. Social media companies can implement guidelines to encourage content that reflects a broader spectrum of body types, cultural backgrounds, and beauty norms. By normalizing diversity in digital spaces, platforms can help reduce the pressure on women to present a narrowly defined version of beauty and foster a more inclusive and empowering environment for users.

Theoretical implications of this research lie in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of identity construction in digital spaces. The study reinforces the concept that social media has become a powerful tool for self-expression and identity negotiation, particularly for women navigating societal expectations and restrictions. The digital space, as shown in this research, serves as an arena where traditional norms around gender and body display are both challenged and redefined. The findings support existing theories on digital empowerment by illustrating how women use platforms like Instagram to subvert societal limitations and perform new, self-determined forms of identity. The study extends this theory by situating it in a context where women face strong societal and cultural constraints, thus demonstrating the transformative potential of digital platforms in such environments. Moreover, the study contributes to theoretical discourse on physical capital, illustrating how women engage with body display as a form of social currency in digital spaces. The concept of physical capital is reexamined in the light of digital empowerment, showing that online self-presentation not only influences personal identity but also affects social standing and interpersonal relationships. This interplay between physical appearance and digital engagement highlights the evolving nature of social capital in the modern, interconnected world. By documenting how women manage their physical capital through online platforms, the study offers valuable insights into the ways digital technologies reshape traditional forms of social interaction and identity construction.

The practical and theoretical implications of this study underscore the need for coordinated efforts by social media platforms, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to promote healthier online environments for women. Digital platforms provide a unique space for women to challenge traditional norms, express their identities, and engage in self-empowerment. However, ensuring that this space remains supportive and inclusive requires deliberate actions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of body image pressures and fostering diversity and positive self-representation.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

While this study provides significant insights into the transformation of women's body display norms and identity construction on social media, it is not without limitations. First, the sample size of 29 participants, although sufficient for a qualitative analysis, may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on a specific demographic of Iranian women who are active on Instagram and engage in body display beyond traditional societal norms. As a result, the experiences of women from different social strata, regions, or religious backgrounds may not be fully represented. Future research should aim to expand the sample to include a more diverse group of women, considering variations in cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts.

Second, this research relies on self-reported data collected through in-depth interviews. While interviews allow for rich qualitative insights, they are also subject to biases such as social desirability or selective memory. Participants might have tailored their responses to fit what they perceive as socially acceptable or may have underreported certain experiences due to privacy

concerns. Future studies could benefit from using mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative interviews with observational techniques or surveys to provide a more nuanced understanding of how women engage with body display on social media.

Another limitation pertains to the geographical and cultural specificity of the study. By focusing on Iranian women, the study reflects the unique socio-cultural and political landscape of Iran, particularly regarding the influence of religious norms and state policies on women's appearance and body display. However, these findings may not directly apply to women in other cultural or national contexts where societal pressures and media representation differ. Future research should consider comparative studies that examine body display and identity construction in various cultural settings. Such research could explore whether similar patterns of digital empowerment and identity redefinition occur in different countries with varying levels of cultural and religious restrictions.

Moreover, the study does not explore the long-term psychological and social effects of body display on social media. While it highlights the immediate consequences of body dissatisfaction and the impact on mental health, it lacks longitudinal analysis that would reveal how prolonged exposure to and engagement with social media body display norms affect women's self-perception, relationships, and mental well-being over time. Future research could address this gap by conducting longitudinal studies that track participants' experiences over extended periods, thereby capturing the evolving impact of social media on their identities and mental health.

Lastly, the study's focus on Instagram limits its scope to one specific social media platform. Although Instagram is one of the most popular platforms for visual self-presentation, other platforms like TikTok, Facebook, or Snapchat might offer different dynamics of body display and identity construction. Future research should consider exploring multiple platforms to understand the broader landscape of digital self-presentation and whether different platforms encourage different forms of body display or self-representation.

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