Self-Image in the Digital Veil: Social Media, Modesty, and Identity Among Muslim Women in Kashmir

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Abstract: *This qualitative study explores how young Muslim women in Kashmir navigate self-image development in the context of social media engagement. Situated at the intersection of digital modernity, Islamic values, and Kashmiri cultural traditions, participants (aged 18–25) offer nuanced insights into the challenges and strategies they employ while constructing online identities. Drawing from 25 in-depth interviews, the study reveals three core thematic areas: the negotiation of modesty and identity, the impact of global beauty standards on self-perception, and the role of community surveillance and support networks. Findings indicate that while platforms like Instagram and Facebook can reinforce body dissatisfaction and religious scrutiny, they also foster digital sisterhoods and empower diverse self-expression. Social media acts as both a site of conflict and connection—where personal authenticity, cultural heritage, and religious expectations are continuously contested and redefined. This study extends objectification and social comparison theories through an intersectional feminist lens, foregrounding the culturally specific experiences of Kashmiri Muslim women in digital spaces.*

Keywords: Social media, Self-image, digital identity, Body image, Muslim women and Kashmir.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pervasive influence of social media on self-perception is a defining feature of contemporary adolescence and young adulthood. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp offer unprecedented avenues for connection, self-expression, and access to global narratives, yet simultaneously present significant challenges to self-image through constant comparison, curated perfection, and exposure to diverse, often conflicting, ideals (Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Perloff, 2014). This dynamic is particularly complex for young Muslim women in Kashmir, a region with a rich cultural tapestry, deep-rooted Islamic traditions, and a distinct socio-political environment. Navigating the digital landscape requires them to reconcile global online trends with local Kashmiri customs, Islamic principles of modesty, and evolving gender expectations. This qualitative study seeks to explore the nuanced ways in which social media influences the self-image development of young Muslim women (aged 18-25) in this unique context.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The history of social media use in Kashmir parallels broader national trends yet also reflects region-specific developments. Mobile telephony in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir began in August 2003, when Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee inaugurated mobile services in the Union Territory (International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews, 2022). This expansion of telecommunications infrastructure laid the groundwork for internet accessibility among Kashmiri youth. By 2015, Jammu and Kashmir had over 3.5 million internet subscribers, with broadband connections growing from approximately 35 lakhs (3.5 million) in that year to nearly 59 lakhs (5.9 million) by 2021 (Nahvi & Showkat, 2023).Summing up, Kashmir's social media landscape emerged from early 2000s mobile and broadband expansion, matured through widespread adoption of Facebook and WhatsApp in the 2010s, and diversified into image-centric platforms like Instagram by the late 2010s. These developments created a digital

ecosystem in which young women could engage with global content while negotiating local cultural norms. Mobile internet penetration is significant among urban youth, though access disparities based on gender, location, and socio-economic status remain relevant factors in digital participation (Kashmir Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2022).

Self-Image Development and Digital Environments

Self-image, defined as an individual's mental conception of their identity, including appearance, abilities, and social worth, is fundamentally shaped through social interaction and comparison (Harter, 2012; Festinger, 1954). Social media intensifies this process by providing a constant stream of curated peer and influencer content, facilitating upward social comparison (comparing oneself to those perceived as better off) which is often linked to negative outcomes like body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, especially among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2022). Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) further explains how the visual nature of many platforms can lead women to internalize an observer's perspective on their own bodies. However, social media can also foster connection, support, and positive identity exploration (Valkenburg et al., 2006).Muslim women globally utilize social media for agency, community building (Ummah), challenging stereotypes, and exploring diverse expressions of faith and modesty (Piela, 2021; Bunt, 2018). Yet, they also face specific pressures, including heightened scrutiny regarding their appearance (especially the hijab) and adherence to religious and cultural norms (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). Research focusing specifically on the experiences of young Muslim women in "Kashmir" regarding social media and self-image is notably scarce. The Kashmiri context adds distinct layers: unique cultural norms, traditional attire (e.g., "pheran"), a strong emphasis on family honor ("izzat"), and a specific socio-political milieu influencing digital access (Robinson, 2013; Kak, 2021). This intersectionality remains significantly under-explored.

Statement of the Problem

Although social media use has surged among Kashmiri youth, little is known about how it shapes self-image among young Muslim women—who negotiate multiple cultural, religious, and aesthetic expectations online. This gap presents a significant problem: These women navigate intense pressures balancing traditional expectations (modesty, family honor) with pervasive online beauty and lifestyle ideals. Unaddressed negative impacts on self-esteem and body image can contribute to mental health challenges (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).Social media is a key site for cultural negotiation. Understanding its impact on self-perception is vital for grasping evolving Kashmiri and Muslim identities and gender roles.A critical gap exists in media effects, identity, and gender studies literature concerning this specific demographic within Kashmir's unique context. This study contributes to theory by extending Media Effects Theories. It examines how Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) operate within the unique intersection (Crenshaw, 1989) of being a young, Muslim woman in Kashmir, exploring how cultural and religious factors moderate established relationships. It challenges homogenizing narratives by detailing the specific experiences of Kashmiri Muslim women, enriching feminist and postcolonial media studies (Mohanty, 1988).The core tension this study addresses is how young Kashmiri Muslim women actively use and are influenced by social media as they develop their self-image amidst competing demands of global digital culture, Islamic values, Kashmiri traditions, and familial expectations.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do young Muslim women in Kashmir describe the influence of social media on their self-image (including perceptions of appearance, self-worth, and identity)?
2. What cultural (e.g., "izzat", traditional norms) and religious (e.g., modesty, "hijab") considerations shape their online self-presentation and interpretation of social media content?
3. In what ways do encounters with beauty and lifestyle standards on social media impact their body image and self-esteem?
4. How do these young women utilize online spaces and communities for social support, affirmation, and resistance against negative self-image pressures?

Significance of the Study

Young Muslim women in Kashmir navigate socio-cultural norms shaped by Islam and local customs, where interpretations of modesty (haya) influence attire and online presentation, and women are often seen as bearers of familial honor (izzat), impacting offline and online behavior expectations; rising educational attainment creates a dynamic interplay between traditional roles and modern aspirations reflected in their digital engagement. Understanding these experiences is crucial for recognizing their online agency, understanding cultural shifts as digital culture interacts with traditions and values, fostering informed community dialogue, and amplifying their voices. Findings can inform culturally sensitive mental health interventions for social media-related concerns, digital literacy programs focused on critical consumption, safety, resilience, and positive expression within frameworks, and youth empowerment initiatives supporting self-esteem and identity development.

III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences of young Kashmiri Muslim women regarding social media and self-image. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes) were conducted with 25 purposively sampled participants aged 18–25 from urban/semi-urban Kashmir. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring diversity in socioeconomic/educational backgrounds. Interviews occurred privately in Urdu/Kashmiri (participants' preference) by a female researcher to foster cultural rapport, using a guide covering self-perception, platform behaviors, cultural/religious negotiations (e.g., hijab, izzat), emotional responses to content, and support strategies. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, retaining original expressions.

Data underwent reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) via six phases: familiarization, initial coding (NVivo 14), theme development, refinement, definition, and reporting. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking (8 participants), peer debriefing, thick description, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity (journaling on positionality as a Kashmiri woman). Ethical approval mandated written informed consent, pseudonyms, data encryption, avoidance of political discourse, and provision of counseling resources.

IV. FINDINGS

This study explored how Muslim women in Kashmir (aged 18-35) experience social media and its effect on their self-perception. Through interviews and focus groups, three primary themes emerged.

Negotiating Modesty and Identity in the Digital Sphere.

Social media significantly impacts identity construction, especially among youth navigating between global cultural trends and localized, tradition-bound expectations (boyd, 2014). For young Muslim women, this intersection becomes particularly pronounced, given religious imperatives around modesty (haya) and culturally specific interpretations of identity. The digital realm introduces both avenues for empowerment and platforms for complex negotiations of modesty and representation, creating an evolving dialogue between individual autonomy, religious prescriptions, and community expectations (Piela, 2021).

Online Scrutiny and Idealized Islamic Femininity

Young Muslim women frequently encounter intense online scrutiny concerning their adherence to modesty standards, often magnified through the constant visibility facilitated by platforms like Instagram and Facebook (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). This scrutiny leads to pressures for conformity to an idealized Islamic femininity, compelling women to meticulously curate their digital personas. The tension between self-expression and perceived community standards often heightens internal conflicts, shaping their online behaviors profoundly (Fardouly et al., 2015). Several participants reported feeling subject to increased online observation regarding their interpretation of hijab and modest attire. In this regard Sheeba Jan narrated, *"When I first started posting photos wearing a hijab, I felt a sense of pride. But soon, every comment felt like an inspection—someone always found my scarf too loose or makeup too obvious. It made me anxious; I began to question every picture before posting, worried about criticism from people I barely knew."*

Another participant Reshma naarated in the same vein, *"My cousin once told me, 'Everyone talks if a strand of hair shows,' and she wasn't joking. After posting a family Eid picture, I received several private messages suggesting my hijab wasn't proper. It's exhausting living under this microscope, where my faith feels judged by strangers online."*

Commodification of Modest Fashion and Consumerist Pressures

The global rise of modest fashion influencers has fostered a vibrant, commercially driven online culture, influencing young Muslim women's fashion choices significantly (Shirazi, 2010). This marketization of modest apparel creates dual pressures, enticing women toward consumerist ideals while compelling them to negotiate personal authenticity and religious sincerity amidst increasing commodification and consumer culture (Bunt, 2018). Participants described tension between appreciating aesthetic modest wear and feeling inadequate if unable to afford trends or align with evolving, often less culturally specific, beauty standards framed within modesty. Most of the participants in our study faced this issue. In this backdrop Shubeena narrated,*"Scrolling through Instagram, I always get drawn to stylish hijabs and elegant modest dresses. But the cost is overwhelming. Sometimes I wonder if my simple hijab isn't trendy enough, or if wearing the same style repeatedly means I'm outdated or less faithful somehow."*
 Another participant narrated in s similar way *"Last Ramadan, I tried keeping up with modest fashion influencers, buying new outfits. My mother gently asked, 'Are these clothes about your faith or Instagram?' That question still echoes whenever I add something to my online cart."*

Agency and Diverse Representation: Redefining Self-Expression

Social media simultaneously acts as a space for reclaiming and redefining self-expression, providing opportunities for young Muslim women to resist monolithic representations of modesty and identity (Piela, 2021). This digital agency empowers them to showcase diverse, culturally resonant identities, affirming their distinct Kashmiri heritage and contemporary individuality through platforms that democratize voice and visibility (Robinson, 2013). Many participants actively utilized social media to seek out and follow diverse Muslim women (scholars, artists, activists) who challenged monolithic norms of beauty and modesty. This facilitated a sense of agency, empowering them to define beauty on their own terms, integrating faith, Kashmiri culture, and personal style, and sharing these representations positively. Against this backdrop Saima shared her experiences like this way , *"Finding local artists and activists online reshaped my idea of beauty and modesty. Seeing Kashmiri women proudly share their heritage and unique fashion styles gave me the courage to showcase my own cultural identity without conforming to narrow standards."*
Another participant Khushi Jan *"Initially, my social media was just selfies, fitting popular modest styles. Over time, I realized the power in being authentically me. I now post about traditional Kashmiri embroidery, proudly wearing pherans, merging faith, culture, and modernity in a way that truly represents who I am."*
 "I follow a local artist who paints Kashmiri women beautifully. It shows our style is unique and valid." (Participant, 21)

Intersectional Beauty Standards and Self-Perception

Global social media platforms propagate diverse beauty standards that frequently conflict with local cultural and religious ideals, influencing young women's self-perception significantly (Perloff, 2014). Navigating this intersectionality becomes particularly challenging for Kashmiri Muslim women, as they reconcile globalized aesthetics with culturally ingrained and religiously prescribed notions of beauty and modesty, thereby deeply impacting their body image and self-esteem (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

The Comparison Imperative and Diminished Self-Perception

The omnipresence of idealized images online exacerbates social comparison, triggering negative psychological outcomes like body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem among young women (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Continuous exposure to idealized beauty amplifies feelings of inadequacy, driving a constant evaluative process that shapes their self-worth negatively (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). The majority of the participants were engaged in

unfavourable comparisons with their own natural features, resulting in feelings of inadequacy. In this backdrop Insha Jan narrated, *"Whenever I scroll through social media, the flawless skin and perfect bodies leave me feeling inadequate. I start comparing myself, noticing imperfections I never cared about before. It feels like everyone else has a beauty filter in real life."*

Another participant responded in the similar vein *"Seeing endless posts about skin-care routines or ideal body types online gradually made me obsess about my appearance. Some days, I dread even looking in the mirror, knowing I'll see none of that 'perfection."*

Negotiating Global and Local Beauty Ideals

Young Kashmiri Muslim women face particular challenges navigating between global beauty norms, such as fairness and slenderness popularized online, and localized Kashmiri standards emphasizing distinctive aesthetic traditions and inner beauty consistent with Islamic values (Mandelbaum, 1988). This negotiation often leads to internalized conflicts as women attempt to balance authenticity with external expectations (Singh et al., 2022). Participants encountered beauty ideals from various global contexts online, which frequently conflicted with traditional Kashmiri aesthetics or Islamic principles emphasizing inner beauty and modesty. This created confusion and tension regarding which standards to internalize or aspire towards. Against this background , Bilkees narrated, *"Beauty online often means fair skin and slim figures. But my grandmother always said true beauty lies in humility and simplicity. Balancing these contrasting ideals is a daily challenge, making me feel caught between worlds."*

Another participant Masrat Ara narrated *"My friends constantly talk about beauty trends they see on Instagram, but none reflect Kashmiri aesthetics or Islamic teachings. It's a constant internal negotiation—do I follow trends or hold onto what my family and faith taught me?"*

Digital Authenticity and Filtered Self-Images

The prevalent use of digital filters has heightened the gap between virtual presentations and lived realities, generating internal tensions among young women who grapple with discrepancies between their digitally altered and authentic selves (Fardouly et al., 2015). While sometimes used playfully, participants acknowledged that this practice often exacerbated dissatisfaction with their unfiltered reality and intensified pressure to maintain a perfected online facade. This filtered representation can distort self-perception, fostering reliance on digital enhancements and undermining genuine self-appreciation and confidence (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Several participants had this shared experience. In this backdrop Fazaila Jan narrated,*"I love filters—they make me feel pretty instantly. But lately, I avoid mirrors; reality is disappointing after the glow of Instagram. I wonder, am I still pretty without digital enhancements?"*

Another participant Samreena Jan narrated, *"Filters became addictive. Every selfie seemed dull without them, to the point where my real reflection started to feel alien. It's a struggle to reconcile my online persona with who I truly am."*

Community Dynamics, Surveillance, and Support Networks

Social media interactions reflect broader community dynamics, simultaneously offering spaces for supportive interactions and creating environments ripe for informal surveillance and reputational management (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Young Kashmiri Muslim women navigate these complexities through continuous negotiation of personal freedom and communal expectations, deeply influencing their online behavior and self-presentation strategies (Rashid & Ahmad, 2022).

Digital Sisterhood: Solidarity and Shared Experiences

Online communities provide critical social support, fostering virtual sisterhood among young Muslim women by enabling shared religious and cultural exchanges. Such digital sisterhoods mitigate isolation, bolster emotional resilience, and empower women through mutual affirmation and collective identity-building, transcending geographic and social barriers (Bunt, 2018). Participants derived significant benefit from online communities focused on Islamic knowledge exchange, sharing Kashmiri cultural practices (e.g., recipes), discussing shared challenges, or connecting with Muslim women globally navigating similar intersections of faith and culture. These spaces provided crucial support, reduced isolation, and fostered a sense of belonging beyond geographical limits. In this backdrop Shubeena

narrated,"Joining an online group for young Muslim women was transformative. We share personal stories, religious guidance, and cultural recipes. It feels like a sisterhood, offering comfort I rarely find elsewhere."

Another participant Saima narrated,*"My online sisters have been my rock during difficult times, whether it's advice on handling societal pressures or navigating career choices. These digital connections genuinely uplift my spirit."*

Matrimonial Pressures and Profile Curation

Social media platforms have increasingly become spaces for matrimonial considerations, intensifying pressures on young women to construct idealized digital profiles that meet societal and familial expectations (Mandelbaum, 1988). This pressure leads to heightened anxiety and curated self-presentations aimed at aligning with community-defined standards of desirability, piety, and familial harmony (Robinson, 2013). In this background Samreena narrated,*"My mother insists my Instagram needs to project an image perfect for marriage proposals. Every picture becomes calculated—family-oriented, modest, yet modern. It's exhausting performing this curated version of myself."*

Another participant Insha Jan narrated: *"Rishta culture turned my social media into a marriage portfolio. Everything I post is evaluated, and the pressure to present an idealized, flawless self leaves me drained and questioning who I really am."*

Familial and Community Monitoring: Reputational Management.

The transparent and pervasive nature of social media enables familial and community surveillance, influencing young women's online activities significantly. The constant monitoring by extended family and community members reinforces traditional expectations around modesty and family honor (izzat), compelling strategic self-censorship and meticulous management of online reputations to prevent social repercussions (Dar & Khazer, 2023).In this backdrop, Shubeena narrated *"Every post is scrutinized by family members; one slightly modern outfit or opinionated post triggers endless family conversations. It feels like living under constant digital watch."*

Another Participant khushi Jan narrated *"I once liked a page promoting women's rights, and within hours my aunt called, suggesting it was inappropriate. Now I carefully manage my online presence, mindful of invisible eyes always watching."*

V. CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the complex interplay between social media and self-image among young Muslim women in Kashmir, revealing how digital spaces serve as arenas of both empowerment and constraint. Participants experience social media as a double-edged sword—offering visibility, community, and self-expression while simultaneously subjecting them to scrutiny, comparison, and commodified ideals of modesty. Their experiences illustrate the tension between global beauty standards and localized religious-cultural expectations, especially regarding hijab, fashion, and self-presentation. Despite these challenges, participants exhibit agency in shaping their digital narratives, using online platforms to challenge homogenized representations and assert nuanced identities grounded in faith, culture, and individuality. By centering the lived realities of Kashmiri Muslim women, this research contributes to broader discourses in feminist media studies, digital identity, and intersectionality, and underscores the importance of culturally contextualized approaches to understanding digital self-perception.

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