

The Mediating Role of Upward Social Comparison in the Relationship between Attitudes Regarding Digital Media Influencers and Fashion Clothing Involvement

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ABSTRACT: The present study addressed the gap in the indigenous literature of Pakistan by examining the relationship between attitudes regarding digital media influencers and fashion clothing involvement among youth. The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design to evaluate the relationships between the variables at a single point in time and used a purposive sampling technique to recruit university students aged 18 to 34 years from Karachi, Gujranwala, and Quetta. Out of 280 individuals approached at universities, 214 fulfilled the inclusion criteria and completed the questionnaires. The study administered standardized questionnaires to the participants. The correlational results revealed significant relationships among the variables, whereas mediation analysis demonstrated that upward social comparison significantly mediated the relationship between attitudes regarding digital media influencers and fashion clothing involvement. More positive attitudes regarding digital media influencers were associated with greater upward social comparison, which, in turn, was associated with greater fashion clothing involvement.

KEYWORDS: Attitudes Regarding Digital Media Influencers, Fashion Clothing Involvement, Upward Social Comparison

Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly modernized, and so is technology; young adults, in particular, are increasingly exposed to digital media, which shapes their behavior, aspirations, and opinions (Anderson et al., 2021; Wara, 2026). The advent of social media has transformed how youth perceive fashion ideals through social media rather than traditional media. The culture of following, liking, and commenting has transformed how fashion influencers shape fashion choices and lifestyles among youth, particularly in relation to clothing (Azhar et al., 2025; De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019; Gupta et al., 2024; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020; Suh, 2020).

These days, fashion trends can spread overnight through digital media influencers, whereas in the past seasonal and largely promoted by celebrities and designers (Bendoni et al., 2020; Gray, 2024; Rousso & Ostroff, 2024; Saifee & Madhan, 2026). For instance, a conventional dress presented with a twist on Instagram by an influencer can spark the same reaction among young adults (Edwards et al., 2026; Shahid et al., 2026). Likewise, collaboration between TikTok influencers and universal brands makes high-end fashion trendy yet achievable for youths (Hancock, 2022; Odemis, 2026; Jankowska et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2025).

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In the cultural context of Pakistan, fashion clothing involvement, which can be described as a person's level of involvement, engagement, and value placed on fashion trends, as well as their understanding of fashion-related decision-making and preference formation, is deeply affected by social and cultural norms, family beliefs, and religious values (Aziz et al., 2025; Qureshi & Mahmood, 2025; Sadaf et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2026), were deeply affected by the social as well as cultural norms, family beliefs and religious thoughts (Farrag & Hassan, 2015; Khurshheed et al., 2025; Mumtaz et al., 2003; Razzaq et al., 2018; Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2018).

The rapid growth of social media has extensively provided a new perspective, where interconnect with local traditions with universal trends (De Courcy, 2025; Ruzmatov, 2026; Saniută et al., n.d.; Singh et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2022; Zhou, 2025). On one hand, influencers come up with lifestyle and fashion trends, making them alluring for different fractions of society. On the other hand, the high number of influencers and their culture has started comparisons among pressure factors among young adults (De Courcy, 2025; Zhou, 2025).

The study is grounded in Festinger's theory, which clearly demonstrated that people tend to compare themselves with others either by perceiving others as better off or by comparatively considering themselves as being superior (Festinger, 1957). This study deals with the better-off aspect of the social comparison theory, as upward social comparison is something young adults idealize to adopt certain fashion clothing involvement after being inspired by digital media influencers, unlike in the past, where the youth used to adopt the fashion from television. The transformation of modern technology, particularly digital media, has transformed how the youth tend to immediate the fashion on the constant exposure to it (Ann et al., 2022; Darshan et al., 2024; Park & Chun, 2020; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Rocamora, 2013). However, the phenomenon has been widely studied but has rarely been examined in non-Western countries.

There are several studies regarding the relationship between young adults' attitudes toward fashion clothing involvement resulting from inspiration from digital media influencers; however, the mediating role of upward social comparison in this relationship has received limited attention, particularly in the cultural context of Pakistan. These studies are very relevant; therefore, it is important to address this gap in the indigenous literature and provide appropriate implications for young adults from the perspective of a healthy society.

Hypotheses

H1: Attitudes regarding digital media influencers significantly predict fashion clothing involvement through upward social comparison as a mediator.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a cross-sectional correlational design to assess attitudes regarding digital media influencers, upward social comparison, and fashion clothing involvement among youth. This design was suitable for examining the variables at a single point in time and determining whether upward social comparison statistically mediated the relationship between the variables.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were Pakistani citizens, university students aged 18–34 years, and had been using digital media for at least one year prior to their participation in the study.

Sampling Technique

Data were collected using a purposive sampling technique, whereby participants were selected based on the predefined inclusion criteria.

Participants

The sample comprised 214 participants. The mean age was 25.91 years (*SD* = 3.47). Regarding gender, 116 (54.2%) participants were men and 98 (45.8%) were women. In terms of current residence, 89 (41.6%) participants were from Gujranwala, 74 (34.6%) from Karachi, and 51 (23.8%) from Quetta. Regarding current educational level/enrollment, 109 (50.9%) participants were enrolled in BS programs, 80 (37.4%) in MS/MPhil programs, and 25 (11.7%) in PhD programs. Instagram was the most commonly used platform, reported by 114 (53.3%) participants, followed by TikTok (18.7%), YouTube (18.2%), and Facebook (9.8%). Regarding influencer-viewing duration, 77 (36.0%) had been viewing influencers for 7–9 years, 52 (24.3%) for 9 or more years, 46 (21.5%) for 1–3 years, and 39 (18.2%) for 4–6 years. Daily social media use was 3–4 hours for 77 (36.0%) participants, more than 4 hours for 70 (32.7%), and 1–2 hours for 67 (31.3%).

Measures

Attitudes regarding digital media influencers were measured using the General Attitude Scale for Social Media Influencers (GAS-SMI), comprising six items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The scale demonstrated a unidimensional structure and strong reliability in its original validation ($\alpha = .89$; Önem & Selvi, 2024), while reliability in the present study was acceptable ($\alpha = .78$).

Upward social comparison was assessed using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999). The 11-item scale is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and assesses individuals’ tendency to compare themselves with others. The scale showed good original reliability ($\alpha = .78$; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and excellent internal consistency in the present study ($\alpha = .91$).

Fashion clothing involvement was assessed using the four-item Fashion Involvement Scale, adapted from O’Cass (2000) by Sun and Guo (2017). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The scale demonstrated adequate reliability and a unidimensional structure ($\alpha = .72$), while the present study showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles were followed throughout the data collection process. Permission was obtained from the authors of the instruments to administer the measures in the study. Participants were provided with an informed consent form, which explained the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences, the confidentiality of their responses, and the purpose of the study. After providing written informed consent, participants completed the demographic questionnaire and standardized study measures. The collected data were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27 for statistical analysis.

Results

Table 1

Correlational Analysis

Variables	1	2	3
1.ArDMI	-	.66**	.43**
2. Upward Social Comparison		-	.80**
3.FCI			-

Note: *N* = 214, ***p* < .01, ArDMI = Attitude regarding Digital media influencers, FCI = Fashion clothing involvement

The results indicated that all study variables were significantly and positively correlated.

Table 2
Mediation Analysis Using Hayes Macro Process 4.2, Model 4

		Consequences						
		USC (M)			Fashion CI (Y)			
Antecedents		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>P</i>		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>P</i>
ArDMA (X)	<i>a</i>	1.36***	.11	<.001	<i>c'</i>	-.15**	.05	.003
USC(M)	-				<i>B</i>	.42***	.02	<.001
Constant	<i>I</i>	7.18**	2.19	.001	<i>I</i>	.03	.83	.96
<i>R</i> ² = .44, <i>F</i> =166.93					<i>R</i> ² = .65 <i>F</i> =201.10			
<i>p</i> <.001***					<i>p</i> <.001***			

Note: N = 214, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.001, ArSMA = Attitude regarding Digital Media Influencers, USC = Upward Social Comparison, CI = Clothing Involvement

The mediation analysis showed that attitudes regarding digital media influencers significantly predicted upward social comparison (*B* = 1.36, *SE* = .11, *p* < .001), which in turn significantly predicted fashion clothing involvement (*B* = .42, *SE* = .02, *p* < .001). The direct effect of attitudes regarding digital media influencers on fashion clothing involvement remained significant (*B* = -.15, *SE* = .05, *p* = .003).

Table 3
Indirect Effect (N = 214)

	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Upward SC	.58	.60	.06	.46	.73

Note: SC = Confidence Interval

The indirect effect analysis showed that upward social comparison significantly mediated the relationship between attitudes regarding digital media influencers and fashion clothing involvement. The indirect effect was positive (*B* = .58, *β* = .60, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.46, .73])

Discussion

The correlational analysis revealed a significant association among attitudes regarding digital media influencers, upward social comparison, and fashion clothing involvement. This finding is consistent with recent research showing a significant relationship between digital media influencers and social comparison, suggesting that individuals may compare themselves with and emulate influencers’ lifestyles (Wahba et al., 2025).

The mediation analysis partially supported the study hypothesis, as attitudes regarding social media influencers significantly predicted fashion clothing involvement, while the indirect effect through upward social comparison also remained significant. This finding is consistent with research among young adults in Germany, which found that social media significantly influences social comparison (Rüther et al., 2023). The reason is culturally relevant to Pakistani culture, as there is limited mental health awareness that is causing the issues to be elevated, which needs to be addressed, and this study addressed that gap empirically in the local cultural context of Pakistan. There are plenty of studies that have demonstrated that indigenous people do not have awareness of how the excessive usage of social media is detoxicating the mental health and daily social perspective of young adults.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study adapted a cross-sectional correlational study design, longitudinal design is recommended for future studies. Moreover, data from the limited cities in Pakistan may not be an adequate representation of the whole Pakistani students' population. Additionally, future research should examine other factors, such as social media usage intensity and body image, that may influence the relationship between attitudes regarding digital media influencers and fashion clothing involvement.

Implications

The study has both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, there is a need to increase awareness among students in Pakistani educational institutions regarding the potential influence of social media on their perceptions and behaviors, which may contribute to psychological distress. Theoretically, the study extends Festinger's Social Comparison Theory to the online context by highlighting the role of upward social comparison in shaping fashion clothing involvement among young adults.

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