

# Social networks, appearance and self-esteem: a literature review from 2002 to 2021

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## To cite this article:

Silva, H.M.; Vilarim, J.R.L.; Lorena, J.S.F.S.; Silva, M.E.A.; Luna, M.S.; Brito, M.A.S.; Silva, N.S.A.; Araújo, S.M.G.S.; Felix, P.T. **Social networks, appearance and self-esteem: a literature review from 2002 to 2021.** *International Journal of Sciences*. Vol. 2, No. 3, 2021, pp.112-116. ISSN 2763-5392.

**Received:** 10 26, 2021; **Accepted:** 10 28, 2021; **Published:** 11 03, 2021

**Abstract:** With the popularization of social networks that focuses on the dissemination of images, much of society follows the "rule" that everything is likely to be seen, everything is photographable and everything generates content. This enhances our willingness to record everything we see and, especially, what we experience. Using social networking apps as a means of personal dissemination and work is a custom that has transformed society. People want to be accepted and, for this, select angles and moments of their own that show a reality that does not exist for the majority of the population and often not for themselves. They're fragments of "perfect lives." In order to follow the standards established by society, including that of the digital world, people practice a digital "self-distortion" of appearance and this occurs, fundamentally, to feel accepted, desired and loved. Cases are increasing that this "self-distortion" is being brought to real life, through plastic surgeries and facial harmonization's so that they can see in the mirror what they see on the screens of smartphones. This fact is getting sick of people, who see themselves compared, often by themselves, with the perfect celebrities of social networks or even their own faces through filters. In this context, in this study, data were collected from bibliographic surveys of numerous national and international authors in several databases.

**Keywords:** Social Networks. Appearance. Self-esteem. Filters.

## 1. Introduction

Since antiquity, the cult of beauty is part of the culture of the most diverse societies. To talk about beauty is to discuss aesthetic models defined by each time and place in history. Beauty is what pleases, that provokes admiration, that attracts the gaze; and since the first civilizations people take care of themselves and use artifice so as to make their appearance close to the standards of what is evaluated beautiful for time,

in order to be accepted.

"To look back at the social processes of meaning is to touch on a key historical and cultural problem. When looking at history, it is possible to verify that the concept is changeable, subjective and depends on the historical, social and cultural context in which it is inserted. If times and spaces change, so do the meanings, modes and actors that produce them. From the wheels around the fire to navigation in the informational oceans of the Internet, both the contents and cultural values

and the paths of its construction are distant and distinct" (Marteleto and Stotz, 2009).

Today, the cult of beauty remains. Beauty is about how we relate to objects. Thus, the assumptions of measurable, quantifiable and normalized qualities are removed from this category, causing the essence of beauty to take place in the relationship (Sampaio and Ferreira, 2009). The image we have of ourselves is not inherited but learned. Throughout our lives we have acquired information that is continuously stored by us in the form of beliefs. Thus, the relationship we establish with the external world develops in our mind an image of what we believe it to be (Santana, 2020).

We are always comparing ourselves to the models and trying to be benefices by the society in which we are inserted. When we create a profile on a social network, we seek to bring contours that tell us who we are and what our real-world identification is for online environments. The social networks that basically use images and photographs are the most popular among young people and adults around the world, as it has a fast and easily assimilated and disposable consumption; extremely different from the analogue photographs of the old family albums, which were limited to the family environment.

The popularity of selfies is not only due to advances in smartphone technology and social networks, but is also influenced by various social motivations (aspects of social comparison) and psychological impacts (formation of self-awareness and self-concept) as a consequence of this behavior (Shin *et al.*, 2017). "As we search for this representation of the "i" in these online spaces, we find ourselves in need of creating this identification through photographs that translate us, that are our representation. The idea of sharing the photographs on any of the digital social networks, part of the purpose of the exposure value, of how that photograph can be associated with how we are seen by the other and how we intend to be seen; when we share a photograph, we want to pass on the idea of belonging, of being part of something." (Almeida, 2015)

Through social networks, users seek to record their lives through the best images they can capture of their "reality". The content posted reveals tastes, passions and ideals; but these captures hardly do not go through manipulations before going public: adjustment in lighting, color highlighting, lights and shadows of images, which change the actual record. "The ease that digital provides has made photography a mass pastime, widespread among young people and, mainly, a form of self-affirmation and entertainment" (Fontcuberta, 2012).

Everything on the internet is more beautiful, as it is manufactured as exclamations of vitality, vital outbursts of self-affirmation and self-promotion. Images are not posted that show the sad moments, nor those that expose people's defects, problems or failures; photographs related to heartbreak are hardly posted; on the contrary: there is always the intention to seek the support and admiration of followers on social networks, in order to praise the image that the user has of himself, which is measured through the likes, shares and comments that image has.

Taking and posting happy selfies can provide a boost in self-esteem, despite a person's initial state of mind, if feedback obtained through the number of likes is positive (Pounders *et*

*al.*, 2016).

"By being part of cyberspace, social actors find themselves in need of a particular identification, since there is no visibility of the physical body in these online places. Relationship sites thus require an image, a portrait of the subject who will constitute social networks through internet-mediated communication. The photograph is selected, manipulated, digitized and posted, finally, as a way of visual construction of the face of the "i" of the subjects in cyberspace" (Rebs and Recuero, 2013). In this way, one can, in a way, admit that almost all the photographs we see on the networks are advertisements, because we try to sell our image through photographs and content that we put daily on these networks; we never share negative thoughts, nor sad moments, and we spend the best of us: our moments of fun and how we are surrounded by people we cherish (Almeida, 2015)

Transmitting and sharing photos then functions as a social communication system, as a ritual of behavior that is equally subject to particular norms of etiquette and courtesy (Fontcuberta, 2010). The need to confirm reality and enhance the experience through photos is an aesthetic consumerism in which everyone today is addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-dependent; is the most irresistible form of mental pollution (Sontag, 2004).

These norm images are intended for all those who see them and, through an unceasing dialogue between what they see and what they are, individuals dissatisfied with their appearance are cordially invited to consider their body defective (Malysse, 2002). This phenomenon, which we define of overvaluing beauty, has made people devote themselves in such an obstinate way to the pursuit of beauty, which often put life at risk (Cordás, 2004; Cordás and Claudino, 2002; Pinzon and Nogueira, 2004).

In this context, it is intended in this review to bring up questions about the analysis that people make of their images, having as comparison themselves using filters available in social networks, and how these impacts on their real lives, in relation to their self-esteem and self-acceptance.

## 2. Methodology

This is a study with data collection based on bibliographic data collection. For this survey, articles were retrieved in several databases such as the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), Virtual Health Library (VHL), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), Electronic Journals in Psychology (PEPSIC) and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). The inclusion criteria determined for the selection of articles were: texts available in full, articles in Portuguese and In English from 1991 to 2021; master's dissertations and doctoral theses and articles in full that portray themes such as social networks, self-esteem and appearance. All opinions or unreferenced texts served as exclusion criteria in this study.

## 3. Results and Discussion

With the virtual extinction of print media, all eyes have

turned to social networks and nowadays it is difficult to consume content that is outside of an application on our smartphone. Instagram filters started out as a fun and harmless way to "dress up", with dog-whiskers, kitten whiskers and fun glasses. But it didn't take long for the effects that completely transformed our faces to emerge, leaving everyone looking the same (Coronato, 2021).

Daily, we are exposed to perfect bodies, perfect relationships, charming places, in short, a reality that reaches few people and becomes the ideal for many, who do not always manage to achieve such achievements and frustration at not achieving such expectations are directly related to the way the individual perceives himself, and consequently reflects on his self-esteem (Silva, 2021).

Our appearance is one of the ways we present ourselves, or reintroduce ourselves, or represent ourselves in the world. Certainly, this representation is not limited to our aesthetic appearance, but the relevance of the impact of visual printing on the way we are apprehended by others, in a first contact, is evident. Undoubtedly, the representations that others build about us are not exclusively subordinated to the aesthetic evaluation of a first contact, but, in general, aesthetic evaluation is the first to which we have access to when we meet someone and, in some way, outlines, even in a previous way, the bases for the construction of representations about the person we know (Sampaio and Ferreira, 2009)

As harmless as Instagram filters may seem, they have transformed the way we see ourselves and nowadays posting a selfie without any filter or editing, has become an act of courage and almost a political positioning. People look at their deformed images on the mobile screen and see it as an upgrade of itself, comparing its real appearance with the computerized and nothing human version that the filters offer us (Coronato, 2021). Based on augmented reality technology, which overlaps a virtual layer over the real world, these apps make everything possible in the image projected on the cell phone screen: fine-tune the nose, correct the eyebrow, change the color of the eyes, give the skin that porcelain texture and even simulate plastic surgeries (Codeço, 2021).

When faced with the images of people or social networks places, it is rare that we remember that such images, probably and most of the time, have undergone touch-ups of color, light, shadow and contours. For those who see, they portray reality and become the ideal of beauty and fulfillment, making most humans feel insufficient and below such an ideal.

Of course, frustration and low self-esteem hit the door hard, after all, beauty is unique and human subjectivity is so beautiful that it does not allow us to look like other people but ourselves. The more we see a representation of perfection and detailed edited and calculated clippings online, the more our brain understands that that image is a pattern to follow (Clorofitium, 2021).

Our life on social networks is a constant search to demonstrate much more what we would like to be than we really are (Thomaz, 2020). In the unbroken universe of Instagram there are no pores, sass, round faces, no acne scars

or double chin. The standards of beauty that until the other day were only unattainable, today are social network fiction. Through the filters, photos can have effects such as different coloring of eyes and hair, smaller cheeks, elongated eyelashes and filled lips (Souza, 2020)

It is also denoted the 'false happiness' carved in social networks, in which people show only what they want others to see, as a way to achieve a virtual fame. It can be noted that by constantly comparing one another people, bodies and lifestyles, especially and using as reference posts on social networks, one enters a dangerous path. By assuming as a parameter, the world of appearance, we give fuel to a low self-esteem, weakening not only our interpersonal relationships, but also the relationship with our own body (Silva, 2021)

Fixation by a computerized and unreal appearance can pose physical and psychological risks to generations that are native to the Internet. Increasingly we see depression and low self-esteem linked to younger people, and dissatisfaction with one's own image has become almost a characteristic of new adolescents. Girls up to 14 years represent the most frequent users of Instagram and of course these data are interconnected, their high frequency on social networks is definitely one of the main causes of psychological diseases in Generation Z. Generation Z is shown to be the one that leaves home the least and socializes with others. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly common to see girls who feel uncomfortable presenting their real image to the world, since the person we see on their Instagram is completely treated, edited and distant from reality (Coronato, 2021).

Research indicates that the people we've compared to are the key to the issue. People are comparing their appearances to peoples in Instagram images, or on any platform they're on, and often end up deeming themselves inferior. In a survey of 227 college students, women reported that they tend to negatively compare their appearance with those of distant friends and celebrities, but not with family members (Oakes, 2019).

The reality, however, is opposed. We have never been so happy and successful, apparently speaking, and so depressed and dissatisfied in reality. The perfect images generated on social networks seem to cover up ever deeper wounds, of lovelessness, of abandonment, of envy of the fictitious perfection of the fictitious life of others, and even the cruelty present in various personal and social situations. The internet ceased to be a place where the best qualities of each one was exhibited, whether they were real or not, and became a place where the shadow began to expose itself in the most explicit way possible (Bertolotto, 2018).

Social networks coerce us to always maximize what is beautiful all the time, if before beauty followed defined and more permanent elements, now this overexposure charges even more of our body and face. The filter shows that, despite the apparent perfection, this is not enough. We always have to make this image more interesting. We can't have our own face anymore. According to the 2016 Census of the Brazilian

Society of Plastic Surgery, the search for non-surgical aesthetic procedures increased by 390% in the country. In 2017, a study by the American Academy of Plastic Surgeons revealed that the motivation of 55% of people who had rhinoplasties in 2017 was the desire to do better in selfies. If we were looking to look more beautiful in physical life before, now we want to be right in the photos of social networks. We want to be and have in real life that look so careful of social network profiles (Eiras, 2020).

The problem gets worse when trying to transport the 'digital' beauty to the real. There are numerous reports of a growing demand for aesthetic treatments that bring the Instagram look to the real thing. The filters have led to an increasing number of women seeking plastic surgeons, desiring surgeries to look like the "filtered" versions of themselves; or overcrowding the aesthetic clinics to perform facial harmonization's to have that mouth fleshier and more sensual, the most angled face or, perhaps, the most defined cheekbones.

In 2018, scholars created the term "Snapchat Dysmorphia", precisely to address the cases of people who began to seek professionals with the aim of achieving an appearance as close as possible to themselves with filters (Moltini, 2020). The rise of social media and selfie culture means the phenomenon is not limited to stars; for example, look at 'Snapchat Dysmorphia', which, like Zoom Boom, has also generated an increase in demand for plastic surgery. Many studies in recent years have linked taking selfies and social media with negative body dysmorphia and self-esteem and self-image (Meeson, 2020).

Social networks have not only changed the standards of beauty, the desired physical changes followed this new pattern and the discomforts became others. Previously, it was common for patients to arrive at the office with the photo of a celebrity they wanted to look like, but the photos of themselves with the effects of the filters have become more recurrent. At the same time that social networks and filters can make more accurate the decision to undergo plastic surgery to improve self-esteem, when the concern with appearance escapes control becomes a problem (Nascimento, 2020).

Expectations become so superlative that often the result of plastic surgery does not fill them, generating more frustration. The pandemic, which shook habits so much, also intensified aesthetic concern, especially with the face. Understandable in this era in which personal and professional contacts are massively made by videoconferencing, with people having the image framed all the time on a screen, seeing in detail the inescapable imperfections (Codeço, 2021).

The need for approval by strangers, the great circulation of people doing surgical procedures for aesthetic purposes only, the spread of the concept of perfect life and the importance of displaying a life of luxury and travel of large profiles, the aesthetic pattern unreachable leave people sad with their bodies, with their homes and lives - F.S. Affect people psychologist so many suffer from depression by trying to fit in in the "standard" that society imposes - M.N.S

(Silva, 2021). The type of content published and consumed by users is even more impactful on mental health. It is known that many publications reinforce narcissism, living standards, consumption and status, so that they have contributed to the increase in the prevalence of various psychiatric disorders, including depressive symptoms, anxiety and low self-esteem. (Abjaude *et al.*, 2020).

## 4. Conclusions

Social networks and digital media have profoundly impacted the values of our society, making appearances, status and idealizing a 'perfect life'. This change of values, although constantly transformed, can become a trigger of suffering, since we are daily presented with a stereotype of beauty and lifestyle that is not easily attainable and this can generate malaise (Silva, 2021)

The daily and successive situations of evaluation to which we are subjected in the social tract place us simultaneously in the position of judges and the object of judgment. That is, we are concomitantly judgmental and judged. This social dynamic, in which our roles are evaluated, offers us a place in the social hierarchy. It is in this individual-society relationship that not only our social identity is constituted but also our self-concept and self-esteem (Sampaio and Ferreira, 2009)

Social networks — or any other resource — become a channel of oppression and suffering, when internally I am not able to love and take pleasure in the person I am (Moltini, 2020). This is the result when we try to follow something that is not part of us: frustration and inconsistency (Clorofitium, 2021)

There is a consensus among psychologists and plastic surgeons: the best way to deal with this distorted notion of beauty is self-knowledge. It's not about the filters, it's about the way you see yourself. "Social networks sell us an imperative of happiness and beauty. Then, there is a need to show well-being and, at the same time, to be recognized by the other. In this movement - of wanting to display a constructed image - the subject moves further and further away from himself. In a society like ours, sustaining uniqueness is a very difficult mission" (Moltini, 2020)

The happiness expressed in social networks has an artificial impact, anesthetic, does not cure our pains. They are the raw material of change, that's right, our anguish moves us to transformation. The quest to meet social conformity blocks our awareness of what is the truth we live. Changes are not made from lies but from the truths we have to deal with. (Thomaz, 2020)

In a world where perfection does not exist, while being vulnerable is an act of courage, being who you are, it is an act of self-love (Clorofitium, 2021).

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