



EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS, FITSPIRATIONAL CONTENT, AND PERCEPTION OF WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract

The current study explores the experience of youth consuming fitspirational content and how social media influencers and their content shape youth's perception about success and well-being in one's life. The current study aimed to investigate the in-depth understanding of young people and in their ideas regarding the consumption of the content, bridging the evidence-based research gap in Pakistan. Convenient sampling technique was used to approach a sample of 10 participants (age ranging from 18-25 years old, 7 females and 3 males). Semi-structured and open-ended question were designed for the in-depth interview from the young participants, who follow social media influencers and fitspirational content. To examine the data, thematic analysis was used. The analysis categorized the data into two groups, first is the experience of social media and the second is perception of success and wellbeing. Findings suggested that young people consume social media in a favorable manner. However, the subsequent themes indicate maladaptive influence, incongruent real and ideal selves and a suspension of disbelief from the utopian world among young people. **Keywords:** Youth, Perceptions, Experiences, Social Media Influencers, Fitspirational Content, Thematic Analysis, Idealistic World.

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Introduction

Social media is considered one of the significant part of lifestyles of people in the contemporary digital world. It has become a defining aspect of one's individuality, lifestyle, individuality, and communications within social circle. Social media influencers have been rising form different platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, influencing the overall perception of wellbeing among youths (Ruther et al., 2023; Marciano & Vishwanath, 2023). Ruther, Jhan and Marksteiner (2023) defined social media influencers as the online figures who present themselves and communicate persuasively with audience in a relatable manner, which influences and shape audiences' attitude and perception. Within the domain of social media influencers, fitspirational influencers or content creators are the figures on social media who promotes wellness and fitness through the combination of motivational talk and visual ideals (Mayoh & Jones, 2021) which emphasize on the self-worth based on appearance and attaining unrealistic ideal self (Jeronimo et al., 2022).

Wellbeing is it's a term that's often used to describe how people's lives are going (Dodge et al.,2012). Happiness, quality of life, and life satisfaction have all been used interchangeably to express well-being, but the phrase "well-being" has a lot of ambiguity linked to it. There are many different interpretations of what it means to be comfortable, healthy, and happy (Allin , 2007).

Success is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It is focused with people's quality and action on one hand. It, on the other hand, deals with topics such as adaptability, stress management, organizational crises, and a wide range of others (Asgari, 2015). As mentioned in the assumptions of the Late Life Success Theory, success is viewed as a personal achievement that is linked to growth (Garcia, 2019). Studies by Easton et al., (2018) and Ladwig (2020) suggested that social media has the dual functions i.e. empowering and motivating the audience and also effecting adversely with potential ham for young consumers. Social media influencers portray their lives and attitudes highly that gives a sense of productivity, constant happiness and achievement to the audience (Harris et al., 2020).

Stutts (2024) suggested that ideals created on digital platforms are often considered as the standards for success leading to follower's evaluation of how they see their own achievements and wellbeing. When young audiences get exposed to these imageries ideal, it creates sense of self-objection, low self-esteem and difference between real-self and ideal-self (T'ng ,2024). While, other studies by Harris et al., (2020) also highlights that the content on social media can also be effective as enhancing source of motivation, community and self-improvement specially when consumers sense relatability and authenticity in the content (Mehmood et al., 2024)

There are growing researches in this regard, however limited research has been done in Pakistan to investigate the perception of wellbeing and success of young people while engaging in social media and inspirational content consumption. The current study's goal is to fill the research gap an explore the experience of social media influencers, fitspirational content, and ho the consumption of these content can shape the perception of well-being and success among youth.

Methodology

Objective

The current study has the following objectives:

1. Explain social media experiences of youth.
2. Explain experiences of youth regarding social media influencers/fitspirational content.

3. Explain the perception of well-being and success in the study.
4. Explain possible relation of social media usage and perception/ideas of goals.

Sample and Participants

A sample of Young adults who identified themselves as the followers of social media influencers or fitspirational content creators, were approached through a convenient sampling technique. The sample consisted of 10 participants (three males and seven females) within the age group of 18 to 25 years, including five post graduates and five undergraduate's students. Selected participants reported the usage of social media like Instagram, fakebook and you tube for atleast four hour per day.

Instruments

In accordance with existing literature, semi-structured interview questions and informed consent protocols were developed. Open-ended questions were also asked for in-depth investigation of the responses. With the written consent of the participants, the responses were recorded with an audio recorder device.

Ethical Consideration

Throughout the process of data collection, all the possible ethical practices were considered carefully. Ethical integrity and transparency were maintained by the researcher. Participants were informed thoroughly regarding the confidentiality and privacy of their information and responses, which were solely for research purpose. Participants were also informed about the purpose of data collection and provided with the option to agree or decline audio recording of their responses via written consent form and their right to decline responding to any question that caused any emotional distress or discomfort.

Procedure

A series of open-ended questions were asked from the participants regarding the level of motivation to consume the contents of social media influencers and fitspirational content creators, their viewing experiences, and the content's perceived impact on their perceptions of success and well-being. The responses were recorded with an audio recording device, transcribed the responses and verified the transcription before running the analysis. The collected data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis in order to identify the frequent and relevant themes where each transcript was given a respective code. The next step in the analysis was to create themes from these codes, which capture key elements and patterns in the data. Through iterative grouping of similar codes, broader themes and subthemes were categorized. Continuous refining of themes was carried out by comparing it original transcript in order to ensure maintaining the analysis coherent and credible.

Inter-Rater Agreement

To increase the objectivity and reliability and to minimize the limitations of current qualitative research, two independent raters cooperated in their interpretations of data to achieve considerable consensus qualitatively.

Results

In order to fulfil the objective of the study thematic analysis was conducted and themes were derived from the data inductively. Theoretical framework of the research were used after analysis to integrate the findings of the research and theoretical insight. Possible reasons, interpretations and latent insights were further analyzed and discussed in the light of previous and related researches and theoretical background. Initial coding was further reduced or merged on the understanding of the researcher and subject matter expert.

Themes were divided into two categories of significant themes once thematic analysis on the acquired data was completed.

1. Themes related to experience of social media
2. Themes related to perception of success and well being

The Major themes with respective sub themes related to experience of social media include

Perceptions regarding social media

In this theme, we looked at the positive and bad aspects of people's perspectives of social media use. Some participants saw social media as having a beneficial impact on them.

"Yes jitna maine dekha he social media ke through to bhot kuch seekha he or positive way me seekha he to mare future goals me isny kafi help ki he or maine kafi kuch seekha he"

This demonstrates that users get a lot from social media and use it effectively to achieve future goals. Some interviewees believed that social media influencer content might had harmful impact on people.

"me jo beauty bloggers dekhti hn unka bhot negative effect hota he logun per.ek ordinary larki wo dekhti he or wo products wo lena chahti he jo ke uski bisat sy bahr he .to negative impact hota he bhot zyada."

This remark implies that some content providers may have negative and detrimental effects on individuals.

This topic reveals that the participants lean toward positive social media use, yet later themes suggest that they are negatively influenced by social media, demonstrating cognitive dissonance in their conduct.

Adaptive and Maladaptive Usage of Social Media

As indicated by participants, this theme describes many ways in which media can be employed. The participants stated that using social media is a necessary discipline for a way of life, and that it has the ability to motivate them because they obtain motivation and gain current knowledge from it, and that other participants used it as a source of fun.

"Yes it is very important,agr hum baat kryn us content ki jo me dekhti hun to wo humy way of life dikhata he,agr hum dekhien to her kisi ki life me ups and downs aty rehty hyn ,to jo content me dekhti hun usmy wo btaty k apny apni life sy fed up ho jaty hien kesi event ki waja sy to ya ek andhere me roshni ka kam dety hien , apko motivate krty hein k apni life sy disappoint ni hona he agy bherty jana he."

Some participants indicate their maladaptive relation with social media which according to them has become source of an addiction resulting in time waste and other issues.

"Social media logun per effect krha he , her chiz k use k do treeqy hoty eh positive or dosra negative, agr hum positive way me lien to aj kl covid ki baat kryn to hum online studies ki terf gai ya ek positive use he or usky alawa social media ke sath humari adaptation esi ben gai he ke hum time bhot waste krty hien"

This theme reveals that the participants discuss both adaptive and maladaptive uses of social media, with a preference for adaptive use. However, later studies revealed that they utilize it in a maladaptive manner, revealing contradictions in their actions and behaviors.

Utopian Depiction in Social Media Influencer Content

The participants state that there is a disconnect between real life and the content of social media influencers. The participants express their dissatisfaction with social media influencer content, claiming that it is unrealistic.

“Nahi bilkul b nahi , social media content creators ideal life dikhaty hain jo ke real life jesa bikul be nahi hota ,to ya real life jesa nahi”.

This theme demonstrates that participants are aware of the Utopian image in SMIs content, but they continue to consume SMIs content, demonstrating their adaption to social media usage.

“Itna nahi he real life k mutabiq, unka ek standard set ho jata he,wo kahte hien k flan benda ya ker skta he to ap bhi ker skte ho,to ya baat thori si ajeeb hoti he humare lia kiu keh humary pass wo resources ni hote ,to ya reality se hut ke ho jata he,wo bhot zyada optimistic hoke dikha te hien keh her banda ya chiz ker skta he or her bnda bhot achi life guzar skta he,kesi ki zindagi me dukh nahi he ya wo ,ya chizien humari reality sy different hien kiu keh her koi kahi na kahi suffer karha hota he.”

Cognizance of Improvement in Social Media

Participants gave some cognizance for improvement in social media influencer/fitspirational content in order to be more productive for well being are as follows.

- (a) Limitation in applicability of content
- (b) Authentic and reality based content
- (c) Positive content
- (d) Congruent to real life
- (e) Natural content.

“We need people jo strong things write up krien,we need people jo apko reality se connect kr wa skien or logun me awareness lani chiehe keh social media me her chiz correct nahi hoti he.”

The major themes with respective sub themes related to perception of success and well being include

External Influence on Goals

In this theme the participants described that they were influenced from external environment to set their goals and standards. The goals they made were influenced by external expectation and social comparison from environment.

“Insan ko kahte na apne skills or potential ke hisab sy apne lia goals set krne chiehy,phie mane apni jo skills khud mien dekhi or jo mare family, friends, teachers wagera ne mujhe observe kr ke muje btai, kiunke kehty na agla bnda apko ache sy observe ker skta to usi hisab mane apne goals set kia or mien smjhti hun keh jo gals mane apne lia set kia hin wo perfect hien.”

Participants feels compulsions for external expectation especially family expectations as they have set their goals on the basis of external expectations.

“Jb meri sari needs or desires pori hon or jo expectations mare parents mujh sy rakhte hien jab mien unko achieve ker lu to wahi meri sab se bari success he,like mien apni example du to meri ammi kehti hien keh apki moral values bhot high honi chahy ,according to me agr mien wo moral values achieve ker lu to mare lia succes he.”

Some participant said that due to social comparison they have made their goal.

“Mary environment ki bhot sari larkian meri classmates aj America tk gai hien ,mien instagram me unki pictures dekhti hun to mien kehti hun keh agr ya wahan gai hien to mien bhi jaon gi yeh bhot motivating ha mery lia.”

Flexibility and Adaptation

Participants discuss the flexibility and adaptation of their aims and ideas for achieving success in life in this theme.

Some participants claim to have the flexibility to reach their objectives, which might be attributable to both internal and external influences.

“yes bhot zyada flexible hun ,sometimes jo standards mane set kia hien wo me achieve ni kr pai due to some domestic reasons due to some personal reasons,phir mane alter kia chalo ya nahi ker skti to wo ker leti hun I gain another opportunity.”

On the other hand, other participants say they feel compelled to achieve their objectives.

“Sometimes I thought mien nahi ker pao gi ,mien bhot rigid hun nahi change kr pao gi apny goals jo mane set kia apny lia.”

According to the remarks of some participants, they may have unresolved complexes.

“Missing bhot sari chizirn hien ,sb se pahly baba ni hien unki kami bhot feel hoti ksh keh baba hoty to ya hota wo hota, or dosr chiz keh socha tha LLB kro gi ni kr pai to jb bhi kesi wakeel ko dekhrti hun to dill me ata keh kash me bhi yahn hoti or life time mujhe ya chzi staiy gi.”

This theme depicts the participants' tendency toward flexibility in their ideas and aspirations, but when compared to other themes, it reveals inconsistency in their thoughts and conduct. They are quite set in their ways in terms of the goals they desire to reach in the future.

Fear of Missing Out

We discovered through interviews with the participants that excessive usage of social media can lead to inferiority complexes and a fear of missing out owing to social comparison.

“Ager age ke hisab se dekhein to kuch missing nahi he pr agr soch ke hisab sy dekhien to bhot kuch missing he kiu ke insan waqt se pahly chizyn chata he or pathway sy hut jata he to ya mery sath hwa he.”

This theme depicts the contradictions in behaviors of participants

Discussion

The results show that there is a huge disparity in user experience. There are participants who see the use of social media as a compulsory discipline, source of motivation, modern knowledge, and entertainment. This finding is consistent with the prior studies, which discover the necessity of knowledge (e.g., exercising, nutritious foods) as the driving force behind the consumption of fitnesspirational content (Dennison, 2019). The goal-oriented consumption of these participants reinforces the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974) in which people are active media users who choose media as the means of fulfillment of certain needs and wants (Ruggieri et al., 2000). The participants have indicated that they are working with a vast variety of content, including fashion, makeup, and fitness to stay informed and entertained as one participant said:

“Mien ek type ka content nahi dekhti social media pe, mien her type ka content dekhti hun keh society me kia ho rha he,fashion ke hawale se alg content ,makeup ka alg , beauty tips ka alg, fitness ka alg to mien sb dekhti hun .Ap ek to update rehne ke lia dekhty hien or dosra entertainment ke lia to depend krta he .”

On the other hand, the other participants also said maladaptive relationship whereby social media is an addiction resulting in a lot of time wastage and other problems as one participant mentioned:

“Pahle to social circle ki waja sy tha keh sb dekh rahe social media to muje bhi dekhna chiehy but now, I realize keh meny bhot sara time waste kr dia he, mien or productive ho skti thi social media use kia bagare.”

Although the participants actively consume influencer content, it was evident that they express a high level of doubt and comprehension of genuine content and trustworthiness. Their agency to choose whom to follow was conscious and follows the framework of Dennison (2019), who instructs that individual qualities like age and education seem to protect them against possible harm. This critical perspective did not, however, exclude any influence:

“Mane bhot sari chizien follow ki hien wo meri personal urge thi ,phir social demand keh apko kia dekhna chiehy phir mane wo follow kia or jo content wo de rhy us hisab se mien apni life set krhi hun.”

The vein of positive motivation was present, as the participants believed they learned important information in social media, which enabled them to make future objectives. However, there is a critical gap between this inspiration and the practical use of it. Similar to Dennison (2019), the participants wanted to know more about exercise and healthy eating, which did not always result in real changes in their lifestyles.

Negative effects were also shed light in the study. The participants told of feeling jealous in relation to perceived ideal body images and lifestyles, guilt in relation to failure to achieve standards promoted, and feeling out of control with regards to use. One of the interviewees pointed out the adverse impact of beauty bloggers:

“me jo beauty bloggers dekhti hn unka bhot negative effect hota he logun per.ek ordinary larki wo dekhti he or wo products wo lena chahti he jo ke uski bisat sy bahr he,to negative impact hota he bhot zyada.”

It is a strong indication that this content by influencers may induce Social Comparison anxiety and inferiority complexes which is a major contributor to distress on social media (Weinstein, 2007). The observation is consistent with the theory of Festinger (1954) which suggested that people who did not have objective metrics compared themselves with others. Such comparisons undermine self-esteem and well-being, which leads to a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). FOMO, in its turn, triggers compulsive checking (Alutaybi et al., 2019) and is associated with negative affect, stress, and sleeping disorders (Milyavskaya, 2019). Przybylski and colleagues (2013) relate FOMO to Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), indicating that it is developed as a result of psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) remaining unsatisfied, thus turning motivation away towards intrinsic (self-satisfaction) to extrinsic (external acclaim) (Lepper et al., 1973). And the desire of one of the participants to become a vlogger describes this change:

“Kash mien bhi ya kr skta ,lakin jo ho ni skta ,her bnede ka pna talent hota he , ab mien vlogging nahi kr skta hun mare pass wo skills hi nahi hien lakin mien chahta hun keh kash mien vlogging ker skta, mare pass digital camera hota to main vlog bnata..”

Respondents affirmed that their objectives were usually determined by the outside world especially the family desires. That is consistent with the Need-to-Belong Theory, which is based on the desire to be accepted (King et al., 2017). One respondent said they set their objectives depending on skills and potential spectators identified:

“Insan ko kahte na apne skills or potential ke hisab sy apne lia goals set krne chiehy,phie mane apni jo skills khud mien dekhi or jo mare family, friends, teachers wagera ne mujhe observe kr ke muje btai, kiunke kehty na agla bnade apko ache sy observe ker skta to usi hisab mane apne goals set kia or mien smjhti hun keh jo gals mane apne lia set kia hin wo perfect hien.”

One of the mostly recurring themes was that social media representations and reality did not go together. The content by influencers was characterized by participants as unrealistic, fantasy, and an ideal life that is exaggerated:

“Nahi bilkul b nahi , social media content creators ideal life dikhaty hain jo ke real life jesa bikul be nahi hota ,to ya real life jesa nahi”

This observation shows a huge deficit in congruence, which is a notion of person-centered theory developed by Rogers (1961), and which determines psychological maturity as congruence between the internal experience and external reality.

Such disconnection drives users to go with the times. Other respondents explained their objectives as adaptive and changeable according to the changing social standards (Haferkamp and Kramer, 2011). Others, though, demonstrated considerable inflexibility, and saw themselves unable to revise their established ambitions, which seemed to be in other cases tied to unresolved personal regrets:

“yes bhot zyada flexible hun, sometimes jo standards mane set kia hien wo me achieve ni kr pai due to some domestic reasons due to some personal reasons,phir mane alter kia chalo ya nahi ker skti to wo ker leti hun I gain another opportunity.”

Some participants claim to have the flexibility to reach their objectives, which might be attributable to both internal and external influences. On the other hand, other participants say they feel compelled to achieve their objectives.

“Sometimes I thought mien nahi ker pao gi , mien bhot rigid hun nahi change kr pao gi apny goals jo mane set kia apny lia.”

Finally, participants clearly identified a need for improvement in influencer content to better support well-being. They called for: (a) content with greater real-world applicability, (b) authentic and reality-based content, (c) more positive content, (d) content congruent with real life, and (e) more natural (less staged) content. As one participant summarized, there is a need for content creators who connect users to reality and raise awareness that:

“We need people jo strong things write up krien,we need people jo apko reality se connect kr wa skien or logun me awareness lani chiehe keh social media me her chiz correct nahi hoti he.”

Conclusion

The qualitative research focused on understanding the experiences of young people (aged 18-24) consuming social media influencer and fitspirational content, that is, its connection with the feeling of success and well-being. The conclusions have shown a profound and complex paradox, and the participants have clear definitions of success and well-being. Still, the ideals and the reality of their lives conflict, this disidentification that is greatly affected by their social media usage. On the one hand, the participants have adaptive behaviors, perceiving that social media is an essential discipline to ensure they are motivated, obtain modern knowledge and as entertainment. This interactive consumption is in line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory. In this case, users take an active role in choosing media so that they can satisfy specific needs. The participants said that they learned a lot and believed that social media helped them to set their future goals.

Conversely, this is accompanied by very dysfunctional relationships which have addiction, time wastage, and frustration. It is the negative aspect that is propelled majorly by the psychological processes that are recognized in the analysis. The idea of the utopian representation of influencer content was a significant issue; the participants were very conscious that such content is unrealistic, fantasy-based, and does not match the real world. This disjuncture between the delusional cyberworld and the real world self-creates a

great deal of cognitive dissonance and incongruence (Roger, 1961), the discrepancy between the internal world and the external world.

This inconsistency is the source of adverse consequences in a direct manner. Those involved had said that they felt jealous of idealized life styles, guilty and that they had lost control. These emotions are framed in terms of Social Comparison (Festinger, 1954), since participants always compare their personal accomplishments, looks, and ways of life with the ones displayed online. This, in its turn, creates a solid Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) that, according to previous studies, is associated with negative affect, stress, and compulsivity.

Moreover, these outside forces directly influence the objectives of participants. The results reveal that there is an intense pressure of the ambitions in the external expectations especially in family and social comparisons, which are a Need-to-Belong. Although a few respondents have stated that they are flexible, others have indicated that they are very rigid and distressed with the failure of achieving their goals, which indicate unresolved complexes. Although these are the adverse effects, participants are not inactive consumers. They do not trust the content of influencers and are aware of the necessity to change. The participants demanded authentic, reality-based, positive, and real life-applicable content.

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