

# *Exploring social media appearance preoccupation in relation to self-esteem, well-being, and mental health*

## BACKGROUND

Social media platforms have become integral to modern society, facilitating diverse content interactions for individuals. The widespread use of social media has sparked intriguing inquiries into its impact on self-perception and individual well-being. This study investigated the phenomenon of social media appearance preoccupation and its complex relationship with psychosocial factors such as self-esteem, well-being, appearance-related anxiety, depression, and anxiety, considering both the rich-get-richer hypothesis and the poor-get-richer hypothesis.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

A sample of 401 Italian participants, aged 18 to 54, completed the demographic questionnaire, the Social Media Appearance Preoccupation Scale (SMAPS), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), the Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI), the Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II), and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Y2 (STAI-Y2).

## RESULTS

The results suggest a complex relationship between psychosocial factors and social media appearance preoc-

cupation (SMAP). While higher levels of self-esteem and well-being were associated with lower levels of SMAP, indicating a protective effect against appearance preoccupation on social media, there was a positive correlation between appearance-related anxiety, leisure hours of media use, and SMAP.

## CONCLUSIONS

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of SMAP and its associations with various psychosocial factors. Overall, these results provide partial support for the theory of the poor-get-richer hypothesis, suggesting that individuals experiencing heightened levels of appearance-related anxiety may turn to social media as a coping mechanism, potentially exacerbating their psychological distress.

## KEY WORDS

social media; appearance preoccupation; self-esteem; well-being; anxiety; depression; rich-get-richer hypothesis; poor-get-richer hypothesis

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## BACKGROUND

In today's digital age, the pervasive influence of social media has seamlessly integrated into our daily lives, shaping how we communicate, create content, and interact with others. Within this landscape emerges a significant concern known as social media appearance preoccupation (SMAP), characterized by individuals' excessive focus on their image and physical presentation in digital spaces (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021).

The prevalence of SMAP begs the question: why do social media contribute to such heightened attention to appearance? This phenomenon can be attributed to the unique characteristics of social media platforms, which prioritize visual content and offer tools for image editing and manipulation. Consequently, users engage in meticulous curation of their digital selves, fostering a culture of comparison and evaluation based on appearance (Dane & Bhatia, 2023; Maheux et al., 2022). This issue holds social significance as it potentially impacts individual well-being and mental health, influencing perceptions of self and others (Maheux et al., 2022).

Recent studies have shown that social media engagement, particularly activities involving appearance comparisons and judgments, is associated with emotional problems such as depression and social anxiety (Hawes et al., 2020). The ability to alter one's appearance on social media introduces a risk of developing a compulsive preoccupation with physical appearance, with implications for mental health (Aalbers et al., 2019; Capri et al., 2021; Fabio et al., 2022). However, the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes is complex and influenced by factors such as usage patterns and emotional engagement with the platforms (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2022; Guenther et al., 2024; Kingsbury et al., 2021).

Understanding the phenomenon of SMAP requires theoretical frameworks that address its underlying mechanisms. Two such frameworks – the rich-get-richer and poor-get-richer hypotheses – offer contrasting perspectives on who benefits from social media use in terms of social capital (Cheng et al., 2019; Pouwels et al., 2021). These frameworks may form the basis for hypotheses in this study, which aims to explore the predictors and mechanisms of SMAP within the context of psychological well-being and social functioning.

Drawing on established indicators such as self-esteem, well-being, anxiety, depression, appearance-related anxiety, and leisure hours of media use, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of SMAP and its associations. By investigating these variables, we aim to shed light on the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being, contributing to the theoretical under-

standing of SMAP and its implications for individual mental health.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of social media appearance preoccupation can be understood through two theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature, each addressing the question of who benefits from social media use in terms of social capital. These frameworks present opposing hypotheses regarding who benefits from social media use in terms of social capital. The rich-get-richer hypothesis suggests that socially affluent people, characterized by high levels of friendship support or low loneliness, are more likely to benefit from social media use (Cheng et al., 2019; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2020). This is because their existing positive relationships with friends are reinforced and strengthened through online interactions (Kraut et al., 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a, b). This perspective posits that individuals with wellness and already well-established social networks, marked by high levels of friendship support or lower levels of loneliness, leverage social media to enhance their existing positive relationships, leading to increased social capital. This could be attributed to a variety of factors, such as the desire to maintain their status and reputation within their social circles, or the pressure to conform to societal beauty standards prevalent on these platforms. Additionally, individuals with high levels of friendship support or lower levels of loneliness may still experience insecurities related to their appearance, which could drive them to seek validation and affirmation through social media interactions (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2020; Pouwels et al., 2021). Conversely, the poor-get-richer hypothesis suggests that socially impoverished individuals, characterized by low friendship support or high loneliness, may benefit more from using social media. In this scenario, social media use serves as a compensatory mechanism, helping these individuals overcome the challenges of loneliness and lack of offline friendship support (Pouwels et al., 2021). This hypothesis proposes that individuals facing social deficits or insufficient offline social connections may find solace and social interaction through online platforms, compensating for their perceived inadequacies in face-to-face interactions (Hjetland et al., 2022; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Sheldon, 2008).

In the present study, we extend these frameworks by incorporating additional indicators such as self-esteem, well-being, anxiety, depression, appearance-related anxiety, and leisure hours of media use. These extensions are grounded in their relevance to understanding the phenomenon of SMAP and its association with social capital. These indicators have been extensively studied in the literature and are widely

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recognized as crucial components of individuals' psychological well-being and social functioning.

Self-esteem, which refers to individuals' overall evaluation of their own worth or value, is a fundamental aspect of psychological well-being consistently linked to various outcomes, including social behavior and adjustment (Rosenberg, 1965). Well-being encompasses individuals' overall satisfaction with their lives, including aspects such as happiness, fulfillment, and contentment, serving as a broader indicator of psychological health and functioning (Diener et al., 1985). Anxiety reflects individuals' emotional state characterized by feelings of apprehension, worry, or nervousness, playing a significant role in shaping individuals' experiences in social contexts and influencing their engagement with social media platforms (Barlow, 2002). Depression refers to a mood disorder characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest or pleasure in activities, with profound implications for individuals' social interactions and overall functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Appearance-related anxiety specifically pertains to individuals' concerns and apprehensions regarding their physical appearance, particularly relevant in the context of social media where appearance-related comparisons and evaluations are prevalent (Cash et al., 2004). Leisure hours of media use also play a significant role in understanding social media use patterns and their impact on individuals' psychological well-being and social functioning (Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021; Iannizzotto et al., 2020; Rowe, 2006). This variable can serve as a compensatory mechanism for individuals, helping to alleviate feelings of loneliness and providing opportunities for social interaction that may be lacking offline. Additionally, it can influence the development of social connections and support networks, contributing to the enhancement of social capital among individuals who may initially have fewer resources in traditional offline social settings.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive investigation into the phenomenon of social media appearance preoccupation and its intricate relationship with various psychosocial factors.

## AIM OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of SMAP by exploring its association with various relevant variables, including self-esteem, well-being, appearance-related anxiety, anxiety, depression, and leisure hours of media use.

In line with the rich-get-richer hypothesis, we hypothesize that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem, well-being, and lower levels of appearance-related anxiety, anxiety, depression, and leisure hours

of media use will demonstrate a positive association with SMAP. This hypothesis suggests that socially affluent individuals may further enhance their psychological well-being and self-esteem through increased engagement with social media platforms.

Conversely, in line with the poor-get-richer hypothesis, we hypothesize that individuals with lower levels of self-esteem and well-being, and higher levels of appearance-related anxiety, State-Trait Anxiety Inventory score, Beck Depression Inventory score, and leisure hours of media use will also exhibit a positive association with SMAP. This hypothesis proposes that socially impoverished individuals may spend more time on social media and may be more concerned about their appearance.

These hypotheses aim to provide insights into the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being, shedding light on whether the benefits derived from social media engagement are influenced by individuals' pre-existing psychological states and the amount of leisure hours of media use.

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

### PARTICIPANTS

The research sample comprised 401 Italian participants aged between 18 and 74 years ( $M = 29.09$ ,  $SD = 12.18$ ), with 58.8% identifying as female and 41.2% as male. To provide insight into the sample's composition and socio-cultural background, the initial questionnaire section included general inquiries about the region of origin (Sicily 52%, Lombardy 48%), educational level (middle school 4%, high school diploma 50%, degree 38%, master's degree or doctorate 5%, other 3%), and occupation (student 58%, employee 17%, unemployed 8%, homemaker 7%, entrepreneur 5%, self-employed 3%, other 2%). The survey also assessed the participants' social media usage habits, revealing that the average number of leisure hours of media use was 3.12 ( $SD = 1.90$ ), compared to 3.61 hours ( $SD = 2.19$ ) spent for work or study. Instagram was the most frequently used social media platform for communication and staying updated (57.9%), followed by Facebook (21.8%), TikTok (11.9%), YouTube (7%), and Twitter (1.5%).

### MEASURES

*The Social Media Appearance Preoccupation Scale* (SMAPS; Fabio & Tripodi, 2024; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) was employed to evaluate concerns pertaining to appearance on social media platforms. The Italian standardization of the SMAPS scale (Fabio & Tripodi, 2024), comprises 18 items distributed across three subscales: online self-presen-

tation (seven items;  $M = 26.62$ ,  $SD = 9.14$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ), appearance-related activity (five items;  $M = 16.81$ ,  $SD = 6.73$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ), and appearance comparison (six items;  $M = 18.89$ ,  $SD = 10.28$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ). Online self-presentation assesses the intentional curation of self-images on social media platforms. An example item is: "I carefully select the photos or videos I post to present myself in a positive light on social media". Appearance-related activity evaluates behaviors associated with monitoring or altering one's appearance in the online realm. For instance, respondents may indicate the frequency with which they check their appearance in photos or videos posted on social media. Appearance comparison examines tendencies to compare one's appearance with that of others on social media platforms. An example statement from this subscale is: "I compare my appearance to that of others on social media to determine my self-worth". Participants provided responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Subscale scores were derived by summing the responses to the respective items.

*Psychological General Well-Being Index* (PGWBI; Dupuy, 1990). This 7-item questionnaire measures health-related quality of life over the past four weeks. Responses were recorded on a Likert scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ( $M = 18.19$ ,  $SD = 7.86$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (SES; Rosenberg, 1965): This scale assesses an individual's overall self-esteem, including both positive and negative self-feelings. It consists of 10 items. An example item is: "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others". Responses are rated on a Likert scale from 0 (*not at all agree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*) ( $M = 21.56$ ,  $SD = 6.48$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Appearance Anxiety Inventory* (AAI; Roberts et al., 2018; Veale et al., 2014). This inventory measures anxiety symptoms related to body image and includes 10 items on a Likert scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Participants rated how often they experience situations described in the scale (e.g., "I compare aspects of my appearance to others", "I am focused on how I feel I look, rather than on my surroundings"). Higher scores indicate a greater presence of symptoms related to appearance anxiety ( $M = 12.82$ ,  $SD = 8.73$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Beck Depression Inventory II* (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1961). For this study, the original 21-item inventory was applied. The BDI-II is a widely used self-report rating scale designed to measure the severity of depression symptoms. It consists of 21 items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Responses for the BDI-II assess the intensity of symptoms such as sadness, pessimism, and guilt over the past two weeks, with options ranging from 0 to 3 reflecting increasing severity. The final score is obtained by summing the responses to each item ( $M = 9.23$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ).

*State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Y2* (STAI-Y2; Spielberger et al., 1983; Spielberger, 1989). The STAI is a widely used self-report rating scale designed to measure state anxiety, which refers to a transitory feeling of tension and apprehension. The STAI-Y2 consists of 20 items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Responses for STAI-T assess the frequency of feelings "in general" as follows: 1 – *almost never*, 2 – *sometimes*, 3 – *often*, and 4 – *almost always*. The final score is obtained by summing the responses to each item ( $M = 11.2$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ).

To assess the participants' social media usage habits, we administered a structured survey that included specific questions about media use for leisure and for work or study purposes. Participants were asked to report the average number of hours per day they spent on social media for each of these two categories.

The questions were designed to obtain an accurate estimate of the time spent on social media. For instance, participants were asked: "On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media for leisure?" and "On average, how many hours per day do you use social media for work or study?". The responses were collected on an hourly scale, allowing participants to indicate both whole and fractional hours.

## PROCEDURE

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Committee. Participants were recruited by the authors through various social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook) and were encouraged to share the study invitation with others. Participants accessed the questionnaire through a provided link. At the outset, respondents were informed about the study's purpose, privacy and anonymity protections, and other relevant details. Only those who provided informed consent proceeded to complete the questionnaires. Participants did not receive any incentives for participation. After responding to general questions about their background, participants completed the scales. Clear instructions preceded each section of the survey, and the order of presentation was randomized. The entire survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 24.0 and Amos statistical software. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed for each variable. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between SMAP and the self-esteem, psychological well-being, appearance anxiety, depression, and anxiety. Bon-

ferroni’s correction was applied for multiple comparisons. To indicate the effect size of the correlation coefficient, Cohen’s cutoffs for small ( $\pm 0.10$  to  $0.29$ ), medium ( $\pm 0.30$  to  $0.49$ ), and large effect sizes ( $\geq 0.50$ ) (Cohen, 1992) were employed.

Linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the relationships between appearance anxiety, self-esteem, psychological well-being, depression, anxiety, and SMAP. Effect sizes for the regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) were calculated to determine the strength and direction of these relationships. R-squared values were computed to assess the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables in the regression model. Furthermore, path analysis was used to determine whether positive and negative psychosocial factors had direct and indirect effects on SMAP.

## RESULTS

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the administered instruments, while Table 2 displays the Pearson correlations among these scales. The correlation analysis revealed that self-esteem and well-being were negatively correlated with the total SMAPS score, with respective correlations of  $r(400) = -0.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $r(400) = -0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ , with Cohen’s  $d = .44$ . The AAI exhibited a strong direct correlation with SMAP, with  $r(400) = 0.68$ ,  $p < .001$ , with Cohen’s  $d = .78$ . Similar strong correlations were observed for the BDI ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = .43$ ) and the STAI-Y2 ( $r = 0.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = .39$ ). While the hours spent on work activity on the computer were not correlated with any variable, the correlation analysis revealed several significant associations between social media appearance preoccupation, hours of leisure use of media (HLUM), and various psychosocial factors. Moreover, increased

HLUM is significantly associated with higher levels of appearance-related anxiety, depression symptoms, and state anxiety. However, HLUM does not show strong correlations with psychological general well-being or self-esteem. From the analysis of non-standardized and standardized coefficients in the linear regression model, several significant findings emerged. Self-esteem exhibited a significant negative relationship with SMAP ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while well-being displayed a significant negative relationship with SMAP ( $\beta = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that higher levels of psychological well-being and self-esteem are associated with lower scores of social

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics of studied variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	29.09	12.18
Years of education	13.61	5.34
Hours of leisure use of media	3.12	1.90
Hours of work/study of media	3.61	2.19
SMAP	60.94	11.43
Online self-presentation	25.91	8.14
Appearance-related activity	16.92	6.33
Appearance comparison	18.11	9.28
Psychological well-being	18.67	7.56
Self-esteem	22.09	7.01
Appearance-related anxiety	12.84	7.45
Beck Depression Inventory	10.01	2.70
State-Trait Anxiety Inventory	12.72	3.43

*Note.* SMAP – social media appearance preoccupation.

**Table 2**

*Pearson’s correlations between SMAPS and psychosocial factors*

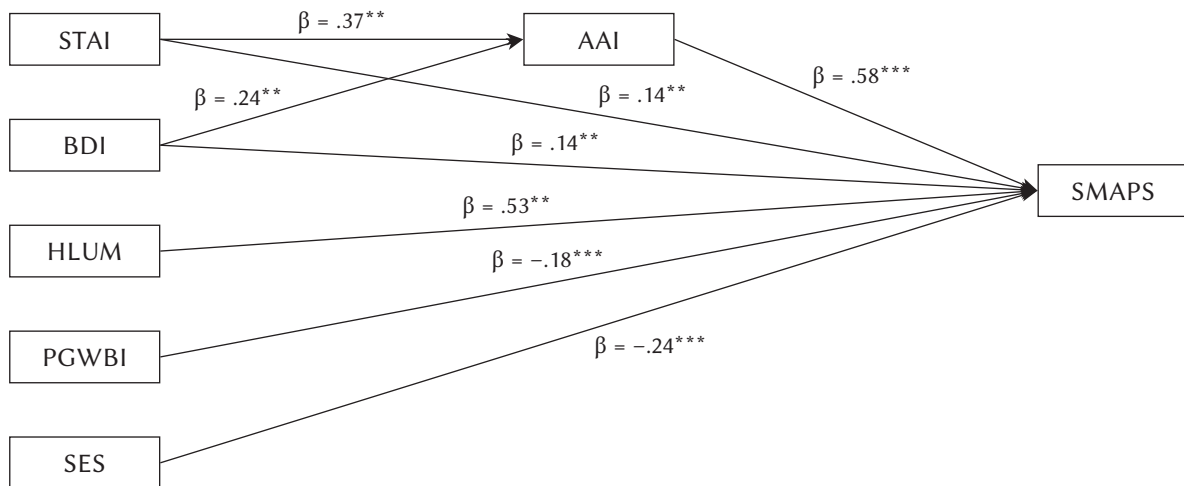
	SMAPS	PGWBI	SES	AAI	BDI	STAI	HLUM
SMAPS	1						
PGWBI	-.22***	1					
SES	-.34***	.54***	1				
AAI	.68***	-.41***	-.53***	1			
BDI	.27***	-.71***	-.51***	.42***	1		
STAI	.24***	-.63***	-.41***	.38***	.55***	1	
HLUM	.41***	.11	.10	.38***	.23*	.35***	1

*Note.* SMAPS – Social Media Appearance Preoccupation Scale; PGWBI – Psychological General Well-Being Index; SES – Self-Esteem Scale; AAI – Appearance Anxiety Inventory; BDI – Beck Depression Inventory; STAI – State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; HLUM – hours of leisure use of media.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Figure 1**

*Path analysis of studied variables on SMAPS*



Note. SMAPS – Social Media Appearance Preoccupation Scale; PGWBI – Psychological General Well-Being Index; HLUM – hours of leisure use of media; AAI – Appearance Anxiety Inventory; BDI – Beck Depression Inventory; STAI – State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; SES – Self-Esteem Scale.

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

media appearance preoccupation. The BDI, the AAI and HLUM each directly were associated with SMAP ( $\beta = .29, p < .001$ ;  $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ; and  $\beta = .68, p < .001$ ; and  $\beta = .53, p < .001$  respectively).

We conducted a path analysis to examine the relationships among SES, PGWBI, AAI, BDI, HLUM and SMAP (Figure 1). The path model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 26.32, df = 8, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.96$ ), indicating an acceptable model fit. Self-esteem exhibited a significant negative direct effect on SMAP ( $\beta = -.24, p < .001$ ), suggesting that higher self-esteem was associated with lower social media appearance preoccupation. Well-being also showed a significant negative direct effect on SMAP ( $\beta = -.18, p < .01$ ), indicating that individuals with higher well-being had lower levels of SMAP. AAI had a significant positive direct effect on SMAP ( $\beta = .58, p < .001$ ), demonstrating that higher levels of appearance-related anxiety were associated with greater social media appearance preoccupation. BDI exhibited a significant positive direct effect on SMAP ( $\beta = .16, p < .05$ ), suggesting that higher levels of depression were linked to increased SMAP. HLUM had a significant positive direct effect on SMAP ( $\beta = .53, p < .01$ ), indicating that higher levels of leisure hours of media use were associated with higher social media appearance preoccupation. Anxiety had a significant positive direct effect on SMAP ( $\beta = .14, p = .050$ ), indicating that higher levels of anxiety were associated with higher social media appearance preoccupation. AAI mediated the relationship between self-esteem and SMAP, with a significant indirect effect ( $\beta = -.10, p < .01$ ), suggesting that self-esteem influenced social media appearance preoccupation through its impact

on appearance anxiety. Similarly, AAI mediated the relationship between well-being and SMAP, with a significant indirect effect ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ), indicating that well-being affected social media appearance preoccupation via appearance anxiety.

## DISCUSSION

Our results indicate a significant negative correlation between self-esteem, well-being, and SMAP, suggesting that individuals with higher self-esteem and overall psychological well-being are less likely to exhibit appearance preoccupation on social media. This aligns with previous research highlighting the protective role of self-esteem and well-being against maladaptive behaviors associated with social media use (Diener et al., 1985; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a, b).

Furthermore, our study revealed a robust positive correlation between appearance-related anxiety and social media appearance preoccupation. This suggests that individuals experiencing heightened levels of appearance-related anxiety are more prone to engaging in appearance preoccupation behaviors on social media platforms. This finding underscores the role of appearance-related concerns as a driving force behind social media appearance preoccupation, consistent with prior literature highlighting the impact of appearance-related factors on social media behavior (Cash et al., 2004; Hawes et al., 2020).

Moreover, our results indicate positive associations between SMAP and both depression and anxiety. This implies that individuals with elevated levels of depression and anxiety may be more susceptible

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to experiencing social media appearance preoccupation, supporting the notion that psychological distress precedes and potentially exacerbates appearance preoccupation on social media (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Fabio & Suriano, 2021).

The path analysis further elucidated the direct and indirect effects of psychosocial factors on SMAP. Self-esteem and well-being exhibited significant negative direct effects on SMAP, indicating their protective roles against appearance preoccupation. Conversely, appearance-related anxiety, depression, and anxiety showed significant positive direct effects on social media appearance preoccupation, highlighting their contribution to heightened appearance preoccupation on social media platforms.

Theoretical frameworks such as the rich-get-richer and poor-get-richer hypotheses offer valuable perspectives for understanding the dynamics of social media use and its implications for psychological well-being.

In the context of the present study, the poor-get-richer theory was initially considered to be supported based on its premise that socially impoverished individuals, characterized by low levels of friendship support or high loneliness, may benefit more from social media use. However, our findings revealed a more nuanced interpretation. While individuals with low self-esteem, lower well-being, higher depression, and higher anxiety indeed exhibited a greater preoccupation with their social media appearance, this did not translate into tangible benefits from their intensive social media use. Instead, these users appeared to suffer from a phenomenon akin to the poor-get-poorer hypothesis, wherein those prone to social comparison online may experience exacerbated psychological distress due to the highlight-reel nature of social media.

Our study suggests that individuals facing psychological challenges may turn to social media as a compensatory mechanism to cope with their issues, seeking validation or distraction from their negative feelings. However, this compensatory use of social media may ultimately perpetuate feelings of inadequacy and exacerbate mental health issues, rather than providing meaningful support or alleviation.

Interestingly, while the poor-get-richer hypothesis was partially supported in our study, the rich-get-richer hypothesis was not confirmed. Contrary to expectations, individuals with higher levels of self-esteem and well-being did not exhibit less appearance preoccupation on social media, challenging the notion that socially affluent individuals necessarily benefit more from social media use.

Overall, these findings underscore the complex interactions between social media use, psychological well-being, and appearance preoccupation, highlighting the need for further research to elucidate the mechanisms underlying these associations.

## LIMITATIONS

The research relied on a non-representative sample of Italian individuals, limiting the generalizability of the results to other populations or cultural contexts. Moreover, most of the variables, such as appearance-related anxiety and depression, were assessed through participants' self-reports, which could affect the accuracy of the results due to the subjectivity of the reports.

The study used a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to infer causal relationships between the variables examined. A longitudinal design could provide a better understanding of the temporal dynamics between social media use and psychological variables. The research relied on self-reported measures of social media use, which may be subject to biases due to lack of precision or participants' tendency to provide socially desirable responses.

Future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach to explore the causal relationships between social media use and the psychological variables examined, allowing for a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Further research could also examine the impact of other factors, such as individual differences in social media use, body image perception, and coping strategies, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social media appearance preoccupation. Comparative studies across different cultures could provide valuable insights into cultural differences in social media use and its implications for psychological well-being. Based on the study's results, targeted interventions could be developed to promote healthy and mindful social media use and improve users' psychological well-being.

Finally, future research should continue to explore the longitudinal and bidirectional relationships between social media use and psychological well-being, considering the dynamic nature of online interactions and their impact on individuals' mental health outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of SMAP and its associations with various psychosocial factors. While higher levels of self-esteem and well-being were found to be protective against appearance preoccupation on social media, the positive correlation between appearance-related anxiety, media use, and SMAP highlights the potential role of social media in exacerbating psychological distress. These results provide partial support for the theory of the poor-get-richer hypothesis, suggesting that individuals facing psychological challenges may turn to social media as a coping mechanism, potentially intensifying their psychological distress. Overall,

these findings emphasize the importance of considering individual differences and psychosocial factors in understanding the implications of social media use for psychological well-being.

This understanding can inform interventions aimed at promoting healthy social media use and mitigating the potential negative consequences of excessive appearance preoccupation on these platforms. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of social media on mental health and well-being, highlighting the need for continued exploration in this area.

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#### DISCLOSURES

This research received no external funding. The study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Messina (Approval No. unime:/prot/2022/233675). The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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