Photo editing on Instagram: Effects on body image, coping and well-being in young Spanish women*

Edición de fotos en Instagram: efectos sobre la imagen corporal, el afrontamiento y el bienestar en mujeres jóvenes españolas.

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ABSTRACT
Image-centric social media, such as Instagram, are key platforms for self-presentation. Users can edit their photographs to achieve an idealized appearance, which may impact their psychological well-being. The aim of this study was twofold: a) to analyze photo-editing behaviors on Instagram and b) to examine the differences in positive body image, coping strategies, self-esteem, and well-being between young Spanish women who engage in high- and low-frequency photo editing. A descriptive, cross-sectional design was used with a sample of 395 women (ages 18-35). The results indicate that participants who edited their photos more frequently (e.g., using filters or altering their body shape) reported a poorer body image, a greater tendency to define themselves by their physical appearance, higher use of maladaptive coping strategies (such as denial and substance use), and lower subjective and psychological well-being compared to those who edited their photos less often. These findings underscore the importance of addressing photo-editing behaviors in mental health interventions for young populations.

Keywords
photo editing; Instagram; body image; coping; well-being; women.

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RESUMEN
Las redes sociales centradas en la imagen, como Instagram, son plataformas clave para la auto-presentación. Las personas usuarias pueden editar sus fotografías para alcanzar una apariencia idealizada, lo que puede impactar en su bienestar psicológico. El objetivo de este estudio fue doble: a) analizar los comportamientos de edición fotográfica en Instagram y b) examinar las diferencias en la imagen corporal positiva, las estrategias de afrontamiento, la autoestima y el bienestar entre mujeres jóvenes españolas que editan sus fotos en alta y baja frecuencia. Se empleó un diseño descriptivo y transversal con una muestra de 395 mujeres (edades 18-35). Los resultados indican que las participantes que editan sus fotos con mayor frecuencia (p. ej., usando filtros o modificando su cuerpo) presentaron una imagen corporal más negativa, una mayor tendencia a definirse por su apariencia física, un uso más elevado de estrategias de afrontamiento desadaptativas (como la negación y el uso de

sustancias) y un menor bienestar subjetivo y psicológico en comparación con quienes editaban sus fotos en menor grado. Estos hallazgos subrayan la importancia de abordar los comportamientos de edición fotográfica en las intervenciones sobre salud mental en poblaciones jóvenes.
Palabras clave
edición de fotos; Instagram; imagen corporal; afrontamiento; bienestar; mujeres.

Body image is a complex and multifaceted construct that represents how individuals perceive, think, and feel about their physical selves. This concept is shaped by numerous sociocultural and individual factors, including societal beauty standards, media exposure, and personal experiences (Voelker et al., 2015). Historically, traditional media outlets such as television and magazines played a significant role in shaping body image by predominantly featuring thin, tall, and youthful models as the epitome of beauty (Grabe et al., 2008). While these influences persist, the rapid rise of digital technology and the ubiquity of social media platforms have changed the way body image is constructed and perceived in contemporary society.

Social media platforms, particularly those focused on visual content such as Instagram, have emerged as powerful tools for self-presentation and comparison. Unlike traditional media, where the audience primarily consumed content, social media users are both creators and consumers of content. In Spain, Instagram is the second most used social network, with 74.9 % of the population using it, and the majority of users are young people and women (Martínez-Pérez et al., 2024). This dynamic exposes individuals not only to idealized images of celebrities but also to the curated and often highly idealized representations of their peers (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). This peer-driven comparative dynamic makes beauty standards seem more attainable and personally relevant, even if they remain unrealistic (Skowronski et al., 2021). The inherent "affordances" of these platforms, such as editing tools and artificial intelligence (AI) filters, have normalized image manipulation to a point where unattainable beauty ideals have become pervasive (Song et al., 2025).

The impact of *exposure* to idealized content on body dissatisfaction is well-documented. However, a less explored area concerns the psychological consequences of *active participation* in photo editing. The process of selection, retouching, and alteration that precedes posting a *selfie* constitutes an under-researched phenomenon that requires deeper analysis (O'Neill, 2021). Evidence suggests photo editing is associated with greater acceptance of cosmetic surgery and symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (McGovern et al., 2022). Recent literature underscores the importance of distinguishing between frequent and infrequent editors, as these groups often differ in their levels of body satisfaction, coping mechanisms, and psychological outcomes (Çınaroğlu & Yılmazer, 2025). In Spain, studies have already linked Instagram use with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and self-criticism scores in young women and the adult population (González et al., 2025; Varaona et al., 2024).

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) provides a valuable framework for understanding how social media influences body image. On platforms such as Instagram, where images are often heavily edited and filtered, the natural inclination to compare can lead to feelings of inadequacy, lower self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction (Lee & Lee, 2021). This theoretical framework has been validated by recent empirical research. A meta-analysis of experimental and longitudinal studies found a causal and negative effect of viewing appearance-ideal images on body image, suggesting that the social comparison process is the key explanatory mechanism (McComb et al., 2023). Similarly, another meta-analysis found a moderate to strong correlation between greater online social comparison and higher body image concerns (Bonfanti et al, 2025).

Instagram's variety of editing tools and filters allows users to enhance their physical appearance, from smoothing skin to reshaping body proportions (Othman et al., 2021). While these tools provide creative control,

they also contribute to the normalization of photo manipulation and the proliferation of unattainable beauty ideals. Frequent engagement in photo editing has been linked to increased body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem, and greater psychological distress (Lee-Won et al., 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2020).

To understand how individuals manage the stress arising from these pressures, it is essential to analyze coping strategies. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress, coping is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands that are appraised as taxing. A distinction is made between adaptive strategies (e.g., problem-solving) and maladaptive strategies (e.g., avoidance, denial), which can exacerbate distress. In the context of Instagram, the perceived discrepancy between the "real self" and the "idealized self" acts as a psychological stressor, and photo editing itself can be construed as a coping behavior aimed at reducing this dissonance. However, women who frequently engage in photo editing are more likely to rely on maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as denial and self-distraction, which often perpetuates a cycle of appearance-related anxiety (Lee & Lee, 2021; Tiggemann et al., 2020).

Personality traits also play a crucial role; for example, individuals with high levels of neuroticism are more prone to frequent photo editing due to a heightened sensitivity to appearance-related stress and social feedback (Tiggemann et al., 2020). The impact of these behaviors extends beyond body image, significantly affecting both internal states and interpersonal relationships. Regarding social support, research indicates that individuals who frequently edit their photos experience greater pressure to conform to aesthetic norms, leading to a dependency on external validation through likes and comments (González et al., 2025). This competitive dynamic can foster feelings of isolation and a lower perception of affective and confidant support (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023).

This phenomenon aligns with a general decline in psychological well-being. According to O'Neill (2021), frequent editors report significantly lower levels of autonomy, self-acceptance, and life satisfaction. The psychological investment in photo editing is predictive of higher anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem, as it intensifies self-objectification and body dissatisfaction. Studies focusing on young Spanish women confirm that this behavior is directly associated with psychological distress, weakening emotional support networks (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023).

Gender differences are particularly pronounced, as women are disproportionately affected by the pressures of appearance-focused platforms. Studies have shown that women are more likely to use photo editing tools to enhance their online presence, reflecting societal expectations that place a high value on female beauty (Othman et al., 2021). The consequences also extend to social relationships, as frequent photo editors report lower levels of perceived social support (Skowronski et al., 2021).

Recent research emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between frequent and infrequent photo editors, as these groups often differ in their levels of body satisfaction, psychological outcomes, and coping mechanisms (Lee & Lee, 2021; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Women who edit their photos more extensively are more likely to define themselves through their physical appearance and report lower psychological well-being, including reduced autonomy and self-acceptance (Othman et al., 2021). In contrast, those who engage less frequently in photo editing tend to have higher levels of self-esteem and more adaptive coping strategies.

The central research problem, therefore, is not simply how viewing images affects users, but how the act of creating and curating a digitally perfected version of oneself impacts body image, coping strategies, and overall well-being. Although the literature has identified correlations between photo editing and negative outcomes, a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms is still needed, especially regarding how the frequency of editing modulates these effects.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are twofold: a) to analyze the behaviors related to

photo editing of images uploaded to Instagram; and b) to analyze the differences between women who are heavy editors and those who edit their images to a lesser extent, in terms of positive body image and personal well-being. Based on these objectives, we predicted the following hypotheses:

H1: Women who edit their self-images to a greater extent, will show less positive body image.

H2: Women who edit their self-images to a greater extent, will show a higher involvement in behaviors to manage physical appearance and definition of themselves.

H3: Women who edit self-images to a greater extent, will tend to use less adaptive coping strategies, mainly focused on avoiding problems, denial, or self-distraction.

H4: Women who edit their self-images to a greater extent, will show worse well-being (subjective, psychological, self-esteem, and social support) than those who edit their images to a lesser extent.

Methods

Participants

The study sample consisted of 395 female Instagram users, recruited via non-probability snowball sampling. The age range was between 18 and 35 years (M = 23.00, SD = 4.60). All participants were of Spanish nationality and confirmed they had not suffered from an eating disorder, in line with the inclusion criteria. Regarding the sociodemographic profile, the majority of participants resided in urban areas (82 %). In terms of educational level, 15 % had completed secondary education, 68 % were currently enrolled in or had completed an undergraduate university degree, and 17 % had completed postgraduate studies. Concerning their employment status, 55 % were students, 30 % were employed full-time, 10 % were employed part-time, and 5 % were unemployed. Regarding the time invested on Instagram, 31.9 % reported spending less than one hour a day on the application, 42.3 % between one and two hours, 16.7 % between two and three hours, and 8.4 % more than three hours a day.

A sensitivity power analysis was conducted using GPower (Version 3.1; Faul et al., 2007; Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum effect size the study was powered to detect. With a sample size of N = 395, an alpha of α = 0.05, and power of $(1 - \beta)$ = 0.80, the analysis indicated that the study was sensitive enough to detect small-to-medium effect sizes for the primary analyses: Pearson's correlations of $r \geq 0.14$ and mean differences in independent t-tests of Cohen's $d \geq 0.28$. This suggests the sample size was adequate for detecting effects of a magnitude typically considered meaningful in this field of research.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview. Developed by the authors, this interview included questions about demographics (age, sex, academic level, occupation, nationality) and social media use. To ensure content validity, items assessing photo-editing behaviors were systematically adapted from the previously validated interview for Facebook use by Meier and Gray (2014). This adaptation process, conducted by the research team, involved modifying the items to reflect the specific functionalities and user practices of Instagram, thereby ensuring their relevance and clarity for the target population.

Body Appreciation Scale (BAS; Avalos, et al., 2005). The translated version of Lobera and Ríos (2011) has been used, which consists of 13 items, whose factorial structure includes a single dimension of Positive body image, showing adequate internal consistency and construct validity to study the positive aspects of body image. The questionnaire must be answered using a Likert scale, with five alternatives (1= "I never do this", 5= "I always do this"). Scores on the BAS have been found to be internally consistent, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93.

Appearance Scheme Inventory - Revised (ASI-R; Cash & Grasso, 2005). Spanish

adaptation of Silva et.al. (2016). It consists of 20 items that assess two facets of body image: (i) Self-assessed Significance, made up of 12 items that examine the extent to which individuals define themselves through their physical appearance, which will influence their social and emotional experiences; (ii) Motivational Significance, consisting of 8 items that assess the extent to which people engage in behaviors to care for and manage their physical appearance. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (1= "I completely disagree", 5= "I completely agree"). Scores on the ASI-R shown an accurate internal consistency in its two factors, Self-Assessed Significance ($\alpha = 0.88$) and Motivational Significance ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Brief Cope Inventory (COPE-28; Carver, 1997). Spanish adaptation of Morán-Astorga et al., (2010). It consists of 14 subscales, each with two items: Active coping, Planning, Positive reframing, Acceptance, Humor, Religion, Using emotional support, Using instrumental support, Self-distraction, Denial, Venting, Substance, Behavioral disengagement and Self-blame. The items are presented in terms of the action and the response that people make on an ordinal scale with four alternatives (0= "I never do this", 3= "I always do this"). The internal consistency indexes were accurate for most scales (Active Coping $\alpha = 0.64$, Planning $\alpha = 0.65$, Positive Reframing $\alpha = 0.63$, Acceptance $\alpha = 0.58$, Humor $\alpha = 0.78$, Religion $\alpha = 0.78$, Using Emotional Support $\alpha = 0.72$, Self-Distraction $\alpha = 0.53$, Denial $\alpha = 0.62$, Substance $\alpha = 0.93$, Behavioral Disengagement $\alpha = 0.66$, and Self-Blame $\alpha = 0.65$, except for Venting (0.39).

Big Five Inventory 10 (BFI-10; Rammstedt & John, 2007). It is the short version of the BFI-44, translated into Spanish by Benet-Martínez and John (1998). It is a reduced scale, with 10 items, designed for contexts with limited time and to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". It assesses the big five factors: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to experience. Cronbach's alphas were Extraversion $\alpha = 0.72$, Agreeableness $\alpha = 0.13$, Conscientiousness $\alpha = 0.46$, Neuroticism $\alpha = 0.67$, and Openness $\alpha = 0.47$.

Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) adapted to the adult Spanish population (Martín-Albo, et al., 2007) to measure Self-esteem. It consists of 10 items that express positive and negative thoughts about personal worth, to be answered on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Scores on the RSES have been found to be internally consistent, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.64.

Subjective Well-Being. The following scales were used to assess subjective well-being: I) Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), specifically the Spanish adaptation of López-Gómez et al. (2015) was used. It consists of 20 qualifiers: 10 measuring positive emotions and 10 negative emotions that may have been present in the individual during the last month. Every item is scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 5 (a lot), depending on the presence of each emotion at that moment. The reliability through the Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicates a good internal consistency (Positive Affect, $\alpha = 0.88$ and Negative Affect, $\alpha = 0.88$). II) Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). Spanish adaptation of Vázquez et al. (2013), consisting of 5 items that evaluate the individuals' cognitive judgment about their global satisfaction with life, comparing their life circumstances with a particular standard. Each item is answered on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 7 (very satisfied). The reliability through the Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicates a good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.88$). III) Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). For the present work the Spanish adaptation of Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal (2014) was used. The SHS consists of 4 items with a 7-point response format: from 1 (not happy) to 7 (very happy). The reliability through the Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicates a good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS; Ryff, 1989), adapted and validated for the Spanish

population (Díaz et.al., 2006). It measures, through a 6-point Likert scale, the six dimensions proposed by the Ryff model: Self-acceptance, Positive relationships with others, Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Purpose in life and Personal growth. The short version, with 29 items, consisted of a Likert scale with five alternatives (1 = "I completely disagree", 6 = "I completely agree"). The scales showed good internal reliabilities, (Self-Acceptance α = 0.86, Autonomy α = 0.73, Environmental Mastery α = 0.66, Purpose in Life α = 0.82; and Personal Growth α = 0.64), except for Positive Relationships with Others (α = 0.04).

The Duke-UNC Functional Social Support Questionnaire (Duke-UNK-11; Broadhead et al., 1988). The Spanish adaptation of Bellón-Saameño et al., (1996) was used. It assesses the perceived functional or qualitative social support, with the advantage of being multidimensional and characterized by its simplicity and brevity. It includes two scales: Confidant Support (possibility of having people to communicate with) and Affective Support (demonstrations of love, affection, and empathy). The questionnaire has to be answered on a Likert scale with five alternatives (1 = "Much less than I would like", 5 = "As much as I would like"). Internal consistency in the present sample was good for both Confidant Support (α = 0.88) and Affective Support (α = 0.85).

Procedure

The evaluation battery has been administered electronically and includes the previously described questionnaires to analyse the variables in young female Instagram users. The tests protocol was applied to the participants after screening, based on the following inclusion criteria: (i) to be between 18 and 35 years old; (ii) to have an active Instagram account; (iii) to have Spanish nationality; (iv) not have suffered from an eating disorder. Participants were provided information about the conditions of the study and the ethical treatment of the data —its anonymous nature, and the use of the data for research purposes only —, proceeding to give their informed consent.

The semi-structured interview included the items included in Table 1, which had to be answered on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = "almost never or never", 4 = "almost always or always").

Table 1
Items related with modifications the women make in their photographs

Domain	Item
Adopting a flattering posture	When I take a photograph of myself, I try to adopt postures that favor my figure
Using Instagram filters	I use Instagram filters to improve my appearance in photographs
	I use a filter when I upload a story of myself
Using editing programs	I use mobile applications (Facetune, VSCO, etc.) to improve my appearance in photographs
	I use photo editors (Photoshop, Lightroom, etc.) to improve my appearance in photographs
Body editing	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my jaw
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my neck
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my nose
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my lips
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my arms
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my breasts
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my breasts
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my waist
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my buttocks
	When I retouch my photographs, I usually modify the size or shape of my legs

Note. Items related to photo modifications: These items, based on Meier and Gray's (2014) interview for Facebook use, were included in the semi-structured interview and answered on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = 'almost never or never', 4 = 'almost always or always'). The authors also created scales (Adopting a Flattering Posture, Using Instagram Filters, Using Editing Programs, and Body Editing) to assess the overall frequency of photo modifications. The items of the different scales (Adopting a flattering posture, Using Instagram filters, Using editing programs and body editing) were then summed to obtain a global perception score of women's modifications of their photographs.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24.0; IBM Corp., 2016). Prior to the main analyses, the assumptions for parametric testing were assessed. The normality of the distribution for all continuous variables was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk test, as it is recommended for its high power. The assumption of homogeneity of variances for the independent samples t-tests was assessed using Levene's test. For the correlational analyses, linearity was assessed via scatterplots. In cases where the assumption of homogeneity of variance was

violated, the Welch t-test statistic (which does not assume equal variances) was reported, as indicated by the adjusted degrees of freedom in the results.

Pearson's r correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the associations between photo-editing behaviors and the psychological variables. Subsequently, participants were divided into low-frequency (responses of "almost never" or "rarely") and high-frequency (responses of "often" or "almost always") editing groups for each of the four modification behaviors. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare these groups on the outcome variables. Given the large number of t-tests conducted across the four editing behaviors (a total of 42 comparisons), a Bonferroni correction was applied to control for the family-wise error rate. The alpha level for determining statistical significance was adjusted to $\alpha = 0.05/42 = .0012$. All reported analyses include 95 % confidence intervals [CI_s] and relevant effect size measures (Pearson's r for correlations and Cohen's *d* for t-tests) to provide information on the magnitude and precision of the findings.

Results

Correlational analyzes have been carried out between the different scales from the summation of the items related to photo modification and the variables included in this research. Table 2 includes the significant correlations among them.

Table 2

Correlational analyses among the behaviors on photographs uploaded to IG, body image, schemes of appearance, personality, coping and well-being

Variables	Adopting a flattering posture	Using Instagram filters	Using editing programs	Body editing
Positive body image	-0.143**	-0.181***		-0.173***
Appearance Schemas				
Self-assessed significance	0.304***	0.205***	0.181***	0.180***
Motivational significance	0.345**	0.227***	0.285***	0.152**
Personality				
Neuroticism	0.171***	0.141**	0.137**	
Coping				
Active coping		-0.136**		
Positive reframing		-0.131**		
Religion				0.103*
Using emotional support	0.146**			
Self-distraction	0.134**		0.178***	
Denial		0.126*		
Substance	0.139**	0.161***	0.150**	0.197***
Behavioral disengagement		0.181**		0.177**
Subjective Well-being				
Positive affect		-0.155**		
Negative affect	0.200***	0.131**	0.124*	
Life Satisfaction		-0.152**		-0.164***
Self-esteem		-0.120*		
Social Support				
Affective Support		-0.106*		
Psychological Well-Being				
Self-acceptance		-0.171***		-0.162***
Autonomy	0.143**	-0.163***		
Environmental mastery	-0.099*	-0.170***		
Purpose in life		-0.153**		
Personal growth		-0.112**		-0.143**

Note. *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$.

Several significant correlations were identified. A negative association was found between the use of Instagram filters and positive body image. Positive correlations were observed between adopting a flattering posture and both self-assessed significance and motivational significance, as well as negative affect. Similarly, the use of Instagram filters was positively related to self-assessed significance and motivational significance. Using editing programs showed positive associations with self-assessed significance, motivational significance, and self-distraction. Finally, body editing was positively correlated with self-assessed significance and substance use. These findings highlight the strong relationships between these variables.

In order to observe whether there were differences between the four types of body modification, we created two extreme groups for each of these variables with the scores: (i) women who modify their photos from “almost never” to “rarely”, and (ii) women who modify their photos from “often” to “almost always”. Once the groups were formed, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare low-frequency and high-

frequency editors across the four modification behaviors. After applying a Bonferroni correction for 42 comparisons, the threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.0012$. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
T-test between women who tend to adopt more often a flattering posture and those who do this in a minor way

Variables	*M* / *SD*	*t*	*df*	Sig	*d*	95% CI [LL, UL]
Positive body image	$M_{(1)}$=49.15; *SD*=11.72 $M_{(2)}$=46.12; *SD*=9.91	2.46	393	0.014	0.28	[0.08, 0.48]
Appearance Scheme						
Self-assessed Significance	$M_{(1)}$=23.96; *SD*=7.33 $M_{(2)}$=27.63; *SD*=7.52	-4.13	393	0.000	-0.49	[-0.69, -0.29]
Motivational Significance	$M_{(1)}$=20.43; *SD*=5.51 $M_{(2)}$=23.96; *SD*=4.94	-5.84	393	0.000	-0.67	[-0.87, -0.47]
Personality						
Neuroticism	$M_{(1)}$=6.32; *SD*=2.02 $M_{(2)}$=6.95; *SD*=2.10	-2.56	393	0.011	-0.31	[-0.51, -0.11]
Coping						
Denial	$M_{(1)}$=3.16; *SD*=1.25 $M_{(2)}$=3.55; *SD*=1.47	-2.52	174.55	0.013	-0.29	[-0.53, -0.05]
Self-distraction	$M_{(1)}$=5.59; *SD*=1.73 $M_{(2)}$=6.03; *SD*=1.41	-2.22	129.65	0.028	-0.28	[-0.55, -0.01]
Substance use	$M_{(1)}$=2.23; SD=0.65 $M_{(2)}$=2.50; *SD*=1.19	-2.77	284.03	0.006	-0.28	[-0.50, -0.06]
Affect						
Negative Affect	$M_{(1)}$=22.33; *SD*=8.68 $M_{(2)}$=25.21; *SD*=7.91	-3.00	393	0.003	-0.35	[-0.55, -0.15]
Psychological Well-Being						
Autonomy	$M_{(1)}$=26.12; *SD*=5.25 $M_{(2)}$=24.68; *SD*=5.51	2.22	393	0.027	0.27	[0.07, 0.47]

Note. (1) Group 1: Lower levels in the scale Adopting a flattering posture. (2) Group 2: Higher levels in the scale Adopting a flattering posture. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

Overall, a consistent pattern emerged wherein women who engaged more frequently in photo-editing behaviors reported poorer psychological outcomes.

Adopting a flattering posture was associated with lower positive body image and autonomy, and higher scores on appearance schemes, neuroticism, negative affect, and maladaptive coping (denial, self-distraction, and substance use). The detailed statistical comparisons are in Table 3.

Using Instagram filters was linked to poorer results across most variables, including lower positive body image, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and multiple dimensions of psychological well-being. The high-frequency group also reported higher levels of neuroticism, negative affect, and greater use of maladaptive coping strategies. Full details are available in Table 4.

Table 4
T-test between women who tend to use more often Instagram filters and those who do this in a minor way

Variables	*M* / *SD*	*t*	*df*	Sig	*d*	95% CI [LL, UL]
Positive body image	$M_{(1)}$=48.31; *SD*=10.42 $M_{(2)}$=44.93; *SD*=10.15	3.23	393	0.001	0.33	[0.13, 0.53]
Appearance Scheme						
Self-assessed Significance	$M_{(1)}$=25.50; *SD*=7.72 $M_{(2)}$=28.41; *SD*=7.20	-3.83	393	0.000	-0.39	[-0.59, -0.19]
Motivational Significance	$M_{(1)}$=22.24; *SD*=5.47 $M_{(2)}$=24.29; *SD*=4.81	-3.96	387.39	0.000	-0.40	[-0.60, -0.20]
Personality						
Neuroticism	$M_{(1)}$=6.59; *SD*=2.10 $M_{(2)}$=7.08; *SD*=2.06	-2.34	393	0.020	-0.24	[-0.44, -0.04]
Coping						
Active coping	$M_{(1)}$=6.66; *SD*=1.23 $M_{(2)}$=6.37; *SD*=1.14	2.39	393	0.018	0.24	[0.04, 0.44]
Positive reframing	$M_{(1)}$=6.12; *SD*=1.48 $M_{(2)}$=5.77; *SD*=1.40	2.38	393	0.018	0.24	[0.04, 0.44]
Denial	$M_{(1)}$=3.27; *SD*=1.36 $M_{(2)}$=3.71; *SD*=1.50	-3.06	393	0.002	-0.31	[-0.51, -0.11]
Behavioral disengagement	$M_{(1)}$=3.07; *SD*=1.30 $M_{(2)}$=3.46; *SD*=1.42	-2.34	231.90	0.020	-0.31	[-0.57, -0.05]
Substance use	$M_{(1)}$=2.30; *SD*=0.90 $M_{(2)}$=2.61; *SD*=1.29	-2.69	294.26	0.007	-0.31	[-0.54, -0.08]
Self- esteem	$M_{(1)}$=27.44; *SD*=4.06 $M_{(2)}$=26.59; *SD*=4.16	2.36	393	0.042	0.24	[0.04, 0.44]
Affect						
Positive affect	$M_{(1)}$=34.55; *SD*=8.25 $M_{(2)}$=32.71; *SD*=7.18	2.33	393	0.020	0.24	[0.04, 0.44]
Negative Affect	$M_{(1)}$=23.68; *SD*=8.63 $M_{(2)}$=25.64; *SD*=7.43	-2.42	389.06	0.016	-0.25	[-0.45, -0.05]
Functional Social Support						
Affective support	$M_{(1)}$=16.22; *SD*=2.88 $M_{(2)}$=15.60; *SD*=3.23	1.98	347.49	0.048	0.21	[0.00, 0.42]
Life Satisfaction	$M_{(1)}$=24.57; *SD*=6.16 $M_{(2)}$=22.83; *SD*=6.56	2.69	358.11	0.008	0.28	[0.07, 0.49]
Happiness	$M_{(1)}$=19.34; *SD*=4.77 $M_{(2)}$=18.35; *SD*=4.43	2.11	393	0.035	0.21	[0.01, 0.41]
Psychological Well-Being						
Self-acceptance	$M_{(1)}$=18.82; *SD*=3.86 $M_{(2)}$=17.51; *SD*=3.91	3.33	393	0.001	0.34	[0.14, 0.54]
Autonomy	$M_{(1)}$=25.62; *SD*=5.82 $M_{(2)}$=24.23; *SD*=4.91	2.57	390.52	0.010	0.26	[0.06, 0.46]
Environmental mastery	$M_{(1)}$=21.86; *SD*=4.32 $M_{(2)}$=20.31; *SD*=4.07	2.93	393	0.004	0.30	[0.10, 0.50]
Personal growth	$M_{(1)}$=20.40; *SD*=3.09 $M_{(2)}$=19.77; *SD*=3.11	1.99	393	0.047	0.20	[0.00, 0.40]
Purpose in life	$M_{(1)}$=22.78; *SD*=4.57 $M_{(2)}$=21.46; *SD*=5.00	2.70	352.32	0.007	0.29	[0.08, 0.50]

Note. (1) Group 1: Lower levels in the scale Using Instagram filters. (2) Group 2: Higher levels in the scale Using Instagram filters. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

Using editing programs was significantly associated with a greater emphasis on appearance (both self-assessed and motivational significance), higher neuroticism, and more frequent use of substances as a coping strategy. Specific statistical data can be found in Table 5.

Table 5
T-test between women who tend to use more often editing programs and those who do this in a minor way

Variables	*M* / *SD*	*t*	*df*	Sig	*d*	95% CI [LL, UL]
Appearance Scheme						
Self-assessed Significance	$M_{(1)}$=26.14; *SD*=7.29 $M_{(2)}$=28.61; *SD*=8.29	-2.67	158.68	0.008	-0.42	[-0.73, -0.11]
Motivational Significance	$M_{(1)}$=22.33; *SD*=5.11 $M_{(2)}$=25.45; *SD*=5.10	-5.31	393	0.000	-0.54	[-0.74, -0.34]
Personality						
Neuroticism	$M_{(1)}$=6.69; *SD*=2.19 $M_{(2)}$=7.14; *SD*=1.79	-2.07	213.05	0.040	-0.28	[-0.55, -0.01]
Coping						
Substance use	$M_{(1)}$=2.35; *SD*=0.97 $M_{(2)}$=2.67; *SD*=1.38	-2.13	137.00	0.035	-0.36	[-0.70, -0.02]

Note. (1) Group 1: Lower levels in the scale Using editing programs. (2) Group 2: Higher levels in the scale Using editing programs. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

Body editing was associated with the most adverse outcomes, including significantly lower positive body image, life satisfaction, social support, and psychological well-being. This group also scored higher on self-assessed significance of appearance and substance use. Complete results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
T-test between women who tend to edit more often their bodies and those who do this in a minor way

Variables	*M* / *SD*	*t*	*df*	Sig	*d*	95% CI [LL, UL]
Positive body image	$M_{(1)}$=46.96; *SD*=10.42 $M_{(2)}$=36.80; *SD*=4.15	5.27	4.67	0.004	1.28	[0.49, 2.07]
Appearance Scheme						
Self-assessed Significance	$M_{(1)}$=26.65; *SD*=7.55 $M_{(2)}$=36.80; *SD*=7.85	-2.99	393	0.003	-0.30	[-0.50, -0.10]
Coping						
Substance use	$M_{(1)}$=2.41; *SD*=1.08 $M_{(2)}$=4.20; *SD*=1.30	-3.69	393	0.000	-0.37	[-0.57, -0.17]
Functional Social Support						
Affective support	$M_{(1)}$=15.99; *SD*=3.03 $M_{(2)}$=13.00; *SD*=4.00	2.18	393	0.030	0.22	[0.02, 0.42]
Confidant Support	$M_{(1)}$=28.06; *SD*=5.41 $M_{(2)}$=23.00; *SD*=7.71	2.07	393	0.039	0.21	[0.01, 0.41]
Life Satisfaction	$M_{(1)}$=23.93; *SD*=6.32 $M_{(2)}$=14.80; *SD*=5.76	3.21	393	0.001	0.32	[0.12, 0.52]
Psychological Well-Being						
Self-acceptance	$M_{(1)}$=18.32; *SD*=3.88 $M_{(2)}$=12.60; *SD*=4.04	3.27	393	0.001	0.33	[0.13, 0.53]
Personal growth	$M_{(1)}$=20.18; *SD*=3.09 $M_{(2)}$=15.80; *SD*=1.64	3.16	393	0.002	0.32	[0.12, 0.52]
Purpose in life	$M_{(1)}$=22.26; *SD*=4.78 $M_{(2)}$=17.60; *SD*=4.45	2.17	393	0.031	0.22	[0.02, 0.42]

Note. (1) Group 1: Lower levels in the scale Body editing. (2) Group 2: Higher levels in the scale Body editing.CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit.

Discussion

This study explored the relationship between photo-editing behaviors on Instagram and the psychological well-being of young Spanish women. The primary objectives were to identify common editing practices and to examine how these behaviors relate to body image, coping strategies, and overall well-being. Our findings indicate that frequent engagement in photo editing—specifically adopting flattering poses, using filters, and altering body shape—is significantly associated with poorer body image, a greater tendency to define oneself by physical appearance, reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms, and lower psychological well-being. These results align with our initial hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, and H4) and are consistent with a substantial body of literature linking the internalization of idealized beauty standards with negative mental health outcomes (Çınaroğlu & Yılmazer, 2025; Lee & Lee, 2021; Tiggemann et al., 2020).

The strong connection observed between photo editing and self-objectification extends existing theoretical frameworks. In line with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the peer-driven dynamics of Instagram appear to intensify appearance-based comparisons, as users are measured against the curated and perfected images of others. Our findings suggest that the act of editing itself is a critical component of this process. When individuals meticulously alter their own images, they actively engage in a form of self-objectification, reinforcing the belief that their value is contingent on their appearance (Chen et al., 2019). Notably, direct body editing emerged as a particularly potent behavior, showing strong correlations with body dissatisfaction and lower well-being. This suggests that the deliberate modification of one's physical form creates a significant discrepancy between the "real" and "ideal" self, a gap that may be more psychologically distressing than the use of pre-made filters (Lee-Won et al., 2020).

In terms of psychological functioning, frequent editors demonstrated a clear pattern of negative outcomes. They reported lower self-

esteem, reduced autonomy, and diminished life satisfaction, supporting H4. Furthermore, these individuals were more likely to employ maladaptive coping strategies such as denial, self-distraction, and substance use, confirming H3. This suggests that photo editing may function as a short-term avoidance mechanism to manage the anxiety of not meeting appearance ideals, but one that ultimately exacerbates distress by preventing more constructive forms of coping (Lonergan et al., 2019). The association with higher neuroticism is also telling, as this personality trait is characterized by emotional instability and a heightened sensitivity to stress, which may render individuals more vulnerable to the pressures of social comparison and negative feedback online (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

While our findings align with the predominant narrative about the detrimental effects of photo editing, it is crucial to place them in a critical dialogue with the literature, acknowledging the complexities of the digital ecosystem. For instance, the "body positivity" movement has emerged as a significant counter-force to hegemonic beauty ideals. Some meta-analyses suggest that exposure to body-positive content can produce short-term improvements in body satisfaction (Jiménez-García et al., 2025). However, this finding is not without nuance. More recent research indicates that such content does not always have a protective effect and may even perpetuate a focus on appearance, as many "body positive" posts still feature conventionally attractive individuals (Sanzari et al., 2023). Thus, while the movement offers a valuable alternative, its impact is complex and does not invalidate our findings; rather, it suggests that interventions must move beyond simply diversifying visual content.

Similarly, while our study associated photo editing with lower social support, this does not negate the extensive evidence showing that social media can be a powerful tool for social connection and support, particularly for marginalized groups (Marciano et al., 2022). This paradox can be resolved by distinguishing between different modalities of use. Research increasingly separates active, socially connective behaviors (e.g., direct messaging) from passive or appearance-focused behaviors (e.g., scrolling, editing). The former is often linked to enhanced well-being, while the latter correlates with negative social comparison (Nagata et al., 2024). Our study isolates the consequences of a specific, appearance-focused modality of use, which can coexist with, yet function independently from, the healthier, more connective functions of these platforms.

Limitations and Future Directions

The interpretation of this study's results must be tempered by several methodological limitations. First, the study relies exclusively on self-report measures for Instagram use and photo editing. A significant body of evidence shows a large discrepancy between self-reported and objectively logged behavioral data, with users often inaccurately estimating their time on platforms (Parry et al., 2022). This inaccuracy is not random and may introduce systematic bias, as it could be related to the very psychological traits under investigation (Johannes et al., 2021). Future research should aim to integrate objective behavioral data to validate findings based on self-reports.

Second, the study's cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences (McComb et al., 2023). We cannot determine whether photo editing causes lower well-being or if individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities (e.g., higher neuroticism, lower self-esteem) are more inclined to engage in such behaviors as a coping mechanism. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the co-evolution of editing behaviors and mental health outcomes over time, alongside experimental designs that manipulate editing behavior to observe its causal effects.

Finally, the sample, consisting of young Spanish women, limits the generalizability of our findings. Cultural norms play a powerful role in shaping beauty ideals and social media practices (Song et al., 2025). Additionally, our study did not control for key sociodemographic variables, such as socioeconomic status, or differentiate by

the type of content consumed (e.g., "fitspiration" vs. body positivity), which recent research suggests is a more potent predictor of body image outcomes than total usage time (Sanzari et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, our findings suggest the need for a multi-level approach to mitigate the negative effects of photo editing. It is imperative to foster advanced media literacy skills that go beyond simply identifying "fake" images. Evidence-based programs like Butterfly's Body Kind Online Education or the Dove Self-Esteem Project provide a model for equipping young people with the tools to understand how algorithms, AI-generated content, and the performative nature of online identities function (Butterfly Foundation, 2023). The goal is to cultivate a critical mindset that enables users to deconstruct idealized online realities rather than passively internalizing them.

For those already experiencing distress, specific psychological interventions are needed. Techniques from Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can help challenge dysfunctional beliefs about appearance (e.g., "I must look perfect to be accepted") (Ramzan & Siddiqui, 2021). Complementarily, approaches like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and mindfulness can foster psychological flexibility, teaching individuals to accept appearance-related thoughts without judgment and to reorient their behavior toward core values not dependent on external validation (To, 2016).

The problem is not solely individual but also environmental. In line with recommendations from the American Psychological Association (APA), advocacy is needed for developmentally appropriate platform design changes (American Psychological Association, 2023). This could include design modifications that reduce compulsive social comparison, such as removing default "like" counts and "endless scrolling" features, and increasing transparency around recommendation algorithms (Chhabra et al., 2025). A comprehensive approach must combine individual empowerment with the promotion of a healthier digital environment.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature by identifying specific photo-editing behaviors that are linked with body dissatisfaction and maladaptive coping among young women. By integrating social comparison theory with contemporary research, our findings highlight how the act of digital self-curation intensifies peer-driven comparisons and self-objectification. Women who frequently edit their photos report significantly poorer well-being, suggesting these behaviors may signal a distinct form of psychological distress. These findings underscore the urgent need for multi-faceted interventions that include critical media literacy, targeted psychological support, and a push for healthier platform design to mitigate the mental health risks associated with idealized self-presentation in a digital age.

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Notes

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