

Social Media on Women's Health

Social Media on Women's Health and Body Image

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**Abstract:**

The aim of this study is to look into female's perspectives to view how social media affects the way they judge their bodies and others. Details include body comparison, what influences this type of behavior and how it may enable eating disorders. To go further in research, photos from popular social media accounts such as celebrity models will be observed for positive and negative comments.

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### **III: Introduction**

Throughout a period of time, trends have been set to create critical views on a female's appearance. Social media has been one of the biggest technological successes of this generation and individuals, especially young women, have spent an immense amount of time scrolling through photos posted from famous celebrities to popular bloggers. In this case, this activity promotes negativity in female's lives because it introduces them to unrealistic/photoshopped bodies and an obsession over having a thin and fit physique. Nowadays, beauty has been corrupted because slim and underweight body types are seen as the most attractive. This factor causes women to feel unconfident and dissatisfied with their looks as it lowers their self esteem. Therefore, they try to change their bodies in unhealthy and negative ways that can potentially be harmful and life risking. Social media and body images have influenced eating disorders, extreme dieting and body dissatisfaction for young women which puts a damage on their physical, mental health, self esteem and overall well being.

### **IV. Thesis Statement & Research Questions**

**Thesis Statement:** Social media and body images have influenced eating disorders, extreme dieting and body dissatisfaction for young women which puts a damage on their physical, mental health, self esteem and overall well being.

#### **Research Questions**

How does social media and body image coincide with one another?

Does the amount of time spent on social media affect women's views on their appearance?

How does this whole idea relate to mental and physical health?

How is media the new form of social acceptance?

How does media open doors for social comparison?

How does campaigns such as Victoria Secret affect women's perspectives on themselves?

What types of eating disorders are out there and how does it affect a female?

How can online communities or seeking help be a positive enforcement with those who have eating disorders?

What are some positive ways to view beauty and change the norm?

## **V. Methods**

The method being used in this study focuses on the Instagram/Twitter comments and interactions on popular photos that display model-like physiques. One of the main focuses is to look at the majority of the comments to see whether it's positive or negative and view the common behavior amongst what people think about the displayed photo. Gender and general age groups of the accounts will also be taken down. To check Twitter comments, popular model pages who post photos will be viewed to see feedback. Hashtags such as the upcoming #VictoriaSecretFashionShow or #thinspiration will also be researched to see what kind of positive or negative responses these topics are receiving. The hypothesis of the study is that most of the comments are going to be teenage girls negatively comparing themselves to the photo and teenage boys complimenting the photo. Not only will the females be affected by the picture, but

the male comments as well. It puts a great amount of pressure for them to alter their appearance.

## **VI. Review of Literature**

There have been questions and research studying whether social media has any effect on women's mental health and body dissatisfaction. Social media is one of the most popular forms of communication/entertainment nowadays and one of the common activities are uploading photos to one's own account/blog. The research questions that appear to be asked is if the time spent on social media is affecting a female's mental state, whether the young age exposure has an effect on the way girls feel about their appearance, how physical health conflicts such as eating disorders may start up due to body comparisons, and how women feel about their body image while looking at model like/photoshopped images. The following literature review is to help support and explain these research topics to get a better look into a young female's mind.

Social media and body images have influenced eating disorders, extreme dieting and body dissatisfaction for young women which puts a damage on their physical, mental health, self esteem and overall well being. To explain further, this first article by Trekels, J., & Eggermont, S. (2017), discusses the exposure of social media at a young age and its impact. Teen media exposure to young girls can influence their behavior as young as 13. As females grow up and begin stages of maturity, they look for ideas of femininity to aspire. However, the media has the power to send critical messages that oversexualizes females in which girls start looking for an unrealistic appearance to idealize. As young teenagers, these girls are only growing and don't

understands the means of maturity. Therefore, being exposed to fashion trends such as crop tops and high heels are influencing girls heavily. The aim of this study is to find out young girl's opinions on their value for self image. The participants were asked about their exposure to media and how important it is to wear make-up, heels, exercise, fix hair etc. This resulted in half of the girls stating that make-up and heels were important in enhancing their appearance. Also, those who didn't have appearance management behavior then developed it after the study was conducted. Therefore at some point in time, girls are very concerned about their looks. As for the media aspect, *"girls who watched teen television programs once to twice per week were four times more likely to initiate in hairstyling and twice as likely to start applying make-up compared to girls who never watched teen programming."*

In a research article by Verma, A., & Avgoulas (2015), this article goes into the mental and physical health risks of eating disorders. The focus of this study is to look into women's perspective on social media and how it relates to the concept of eating disorders, including topics such as Bulimia, Anorexia, and Binge eating. The reason women focus so much on their appearance is because *"being thin was linked with beauty and success."* This study used participants in which they compared the relationship with social media and experiences with eating disorders to view women's full perspective on the case. Questions included examples such as: What are the beliefs and understandings of eat disorders? Do young women turn to social media to show that they're going through some sort of eating disorder? The study response displayed that eating disorders is a mental health condition and a misleading perception of one's self, and women tend to celebrate their weight loss through social media such as blogs to show that they've achieved a certain look.

These first two articles connect in which individuals can see what how a girl as young as 13 can feel after exposure from social media. Their mental/physical health can be destructive as they're only growing and are being influenced greatly on how they think they should look. Little do they know, developing an eating disorder/mental health issue as a young teen is very damaging and acts a big distraction from education, friendships, and recovery.

Leaning towards the eating disorders aspect, this research topic focuses on other mental health issues as well. This next research article by Santarossa & Woodruff (2017), depicts a study to see if social media sites is problematic to subjects such as again, eating disorders, but self esteem and body image as well. A new phenomenon claims that social media use leads to decreased happiness and satisfaction as well as increased depression. It seems that in this generation, more social media sites are more appearance and image based which involves more social comparison. According to this article, *“for females, the Sociocultural Model suggests that BI (body image) disturbances are the result of pervasive societal pressure to be thin (Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; Stice, 1994; Vandereycken, 1993) and lose weight.”* Likes and comments on social media indicate a virtual form of acceptance and popularity for individuals. This experiment included questionnaires that asked about the attitudes of appearance, a body image scale and an eating attitude scale. Study results included that posting a photo is social media's form of communication and that these “appearance conversations” encourage eating disorders and mental health issues/beliefs.

The fourth article by Ferguson, C. Cjf. co., Muñoz, M., Garza, A., & Galindo, M (2014) examined whether social media has an influence on women and girl's body dissatisfaction. The reason body dissatisfaction exist is because of Westernized ideas of beauty, which includes



having a slim physique and how individuals are driven by media portrayals. According to this article, "*Grabe et al. (2008) point out that increased incidence of eating disorders across the early and mid-twentieth century seem to coincide with trends in the media toward emphasizing thinness in women.*" Because both men and females nowadays have a critical view on female appearance, it leads to higher body dissatisfaction. So not only does the pressure come from themselves, but the ones females seek out for attraction as well. This study included influences of social media with females who have preexisting concerns over their body. Participants were asked about height/weight, exposure to television and social media as well as how often it was being used, and if they felt in competition with other females. Results included that social media correlates with anxiety and that body dissatisfaction correlates with life satisfaction. In other words, having a thin, ideal physique will increase female's happiness and life goal. Another effect that pressures women is peer competition. Peer competition is a negative aspect of the study in which comparing oneself to another had a strong impact on women. Social media was also said to be an open door or a new avenue to peer competition, making peer competition more severe and known than it is.

Continuing on with the mental health and eating disorder aspect, this fifth article by Wang, T., Brede, M., Ianni, A., & Mentzakis, E. (2018) focuses on the recovery and help seeking part of the issue. People who suffer from eating disorders have turned to online communities for help, but not all online communities have offered healthy/positive advice. Some of these websites and media blogs have offered health threatening guidance. For example, not all celebrity endorsements such as body corsets and fit teas that subside hunger are the best guidance to follow. Psychologists have found that online content has encouraged an unrealistic

body image goal for individuals which influences people to lose weight. Another reason why online networks aren't so trustworthy is because there are people who write about eating disorders who don't even obtain the mental illness, writing a superficial perspective on it. The purpose of this study is to examine different media blogs and their treatment advice/support towards eating disorders. According to this article, "*social networks play an important role when interpreting health-related behaviours, as our concerns, behaviours and health states are influenced by the network of people with whom we interact.*" This study included the popular social media site Twitter and how people indirectly talk about their eating disorders without experimenters asking. Experimenters looked into the language behavior between Twitter interactions. Results showed that hashtags such as "weight loss" or "thinspiration" to promote ideas of eating disorders. Study also found groups of people in which they'd hashtag recovery words to help promote recuperation. Between the two groups, those who are pro recovery rather than pro eating disorder have better connections with one another, proving that people who are looking to recover from eating disorders have stronger communications skills and means for connecting with one another.

The sixth article by Mond, J. M., Marks, P., Hay, P. J., Rodgers, B., Kelly, C., Owen, C., & Paxton, S. J. (2007) looks into the mental health issues with young girls who are seeking treatment from eating disorders. According to this article, seeking treatment is low because females tend to hide the fact that they have a mental issue and keep it in secrecy. The aim of this study is to look at girl's knowledge on eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa. Experimenters were given presentations to a group of young females on body image, body image displayed in media, confidence and women who were recovering from an eating disorder. The audience was

then given a questionnaire asking about which treatments they found most effective. The most helpful treatment that a female with an eating disorder can receive is the support from their mother, next is a mental health professional, and the least helpful voted by the participants was the use of medication.

In the next article by Rothschild-Yakar, L., Peled, M., Enoch-Levy, A., Gur, E., & Stein, D. (2018), the article examines the mental impact on young women with eat disorders.

Mentalization is defined as one's interpretation on their own behavior and how it affects their thoughts and emotions. Without a stable mental state, emotions are irregular. The aim of this study was to look into the relationships between mentalization, mentalization towards the self, and its effect on emotions. Experimenters anticipated that emotional regulation will be stronger with those who don't have eating disorders and that they'll also have a higher ability to function. Participants were divided into groups; some who've experienced eating disorders to a high extent and some who haven't. Each were given a series of tests that asked about their anxiety, depression and overall emotions while the control group received tests that had nothing to do with self feelings. Participants were also examined by a clinical psychologist who had no previous information on the participants. Results concluded that those who had an eating disorder have low levels of emotion regulation and reflective function.

The last few articles had to do with mental and physical health issues from social media, but there are focuses on media itself. In an article by Chrisler, J. C., Fung, K. T., Lopez, A. M., & Gorman, J. A. (2013), they discuss body image issues due to popular media sources such as the clothing and lingerie brand, Victoria Secret. The social comparison theory is used in this study in which females who compare their physique with these fashion models tend to feel worse

about their bodies. Two social media websites were used (Twitter & Topsy) to look into people's thoughts about the Victoria Secret Fashion Show. The researchers looked into the positive/negative feedback of the show and other topics such as personal experiences, eating disorders, social comparison, etc. Results concluded that the television program had mostly negative feedback and there were "*tweets about the models themselves and about body image, eating disorders, weight, desires for food or alcohol, and urges to commit self-harm.*" Body dissatisfaction and thoughts of eating disorders are popular when viewing this show and experimenters encourage women to spread positivity and reject beauty norms especially during this time.

Other social media aspects play a big role in this study as well. In a study by Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2017), they compared social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to body image for young women in their late teens to their late twenties. This article suggests that the media's sexual objectification of females cause women to focus so much on their body image and social media use enhances it. It's hypothesized that the more views of friend's photographs on Facebook or Instagram, the more self comparison. The feeling of body dissatisfaction then leads to a higher influence on eating disorders. In this experiment, participants were asked about their motivation for being thin, self objectification, weight dissatisfaction, and how much time spent on social media. In other words, they were asked to complete self questionnaires. The results concluded that almost all or more than half of the participants had a Facebook or Instagram account that they check multiple times a day. The amount of social media time didn't correlate with body dissatisfaction, but the amount of time engaging in photo activities did.

In the study by Want, S. swant@ryerson. c., Botres, A., Vahedi, Z., & Middleton, J. (2015), the topic of this article is on social comparisons. When women see pictures of ideal slim bodies, their negativity increases. However, these comparisons are unrealistic because these photos are most likely touched up and airbrushed for advertisement. Social comparison is also known as an automatic mental process because women are unaware and come without conscious thought. When they see these photographs, they automatically become dissatisfied with their bodies without thinking about how photoshopped these images actually are. The other thought process, known as efficient process requires more conscious and attentive thinking. The purpose of the study is to see which kind of process is more common in social comparison; do individuals need to think about social comparison or does it subconsciously come when they see an image? Women in this study were exposed to media images while they had to talk about themselves as well. Results showed that social comparison can be both automatic and efficient. It's automatic because *"people are unaware of the comparisons they make with media images because they may process and react to media imagery on a nonconscious level"* and efficient because *"despite being cognitively busy, the participants still demonstrated the effects of having made social comparisons to the other student."* Therefore, social comparison doesn't require that much thought, but can come naturally whether the mind is occupied or not.

Nonetheless, all of these articles don't seem to have much disagreement with one another. Social media has greatly impacted females minds into changing their appearance; photo engagement being one of the biggest influence of all. But overtime, perspectives on beauty has been making a positive change. Plus sized models and campaigns by Aerie, a female clothing brand, has been making statements on how any type of figure has its own beauty and should be

displayed on advertisement. This type of publication is put out to help females believe that their physique doesn't need any major alterations and that "being thin" isn't the only form of beauty and success. Bodies come in all forms, shapes and sizes and that one should be proud of their natural appearance.

Conclusively, these research questions have been studied and proven to be effective to young girls and their outlook on body image. Their physical and mental health are being negatively impacted as young as 13 and grows as they mature, looking for role models of femininity to follow. Body and social comparison plays a big part in a women's life as they photo engage, seeking out likes and comments as a form of social acceptance. In this case, people live in a generation in which social media is in its highest form of communication and entertainment and that we have looked into young female's minds and how they feel about their self worth/appearance as they scroll from picture to picture.

## **VII. Analysis:**

### **I. Methods**

The method being used in this study focuses on the Instagram/Twitter comments and interactions on popular photos that display model like physiques. One of the main focuses is to look at the majority of the comments to see whether it's positive or negative and view the common behavior amongst what people think about the displayed photo. Gender and general age groups of the accounts will also be taken down. To check Twitter comments, popular model pages who post

photos will be viewed to see feedback. Hashtags such as the upcoming #VictoriaSecretFashionShow or #thinspiration will also be researched to see what kind of positive or negative responses these topics are receiving. The hypothesis of the study is that most of the comments are going to be teenage girls negatively comparing themselves to the photo and teenage boys complimenting the photo. Not only will the females be affected by the picture, but the male comments as well. It puts a great amount of pressure for them to alter their appearance.

## **II. Research Questions**

To answer the research questions, social media and body image coincide with one another.

Women tend to compare themselves to other females who obtain tall and slim physiques, wishing they had that same/similar appearance. The amount of time spent on social media only affects females if they're looking at pictures. Statuses and updates from celebrities don't have a comparison effect towards the public. Since the amount of time scrolling through pictures has an impact on females, it affects their mental and physical health, influencing them to change their diet and become obsessive over body image. Posting photos have become the new form of social acceptance as people delete their images if they don't obtain enough likes, and end up posting at a different time. After exploring the Victoria Secret Instagram page, a lot of the comments included young females from their teenage years to their early twenties saying "this is my body goal for 2019" or "wish I looked like this." There were also a lot of hate comments such as "we don't want to see this" or "get her off the runway". Therefore, there are people who don't want to see thin models in order to stop social comparison. After scrolling through Twitter photos and hashtags, the results were similar. People are upset that models promote unhealthy and unrealistic body types or comment on how they wish they looked as "perfect" as the models.

Those who wish their bodies were as slim have an influenced behavior and mental process to change their diets and unconsciously obtain an eating disorder. But the argumentative comments that want unrealistic body standards off the media can help promote body positivity and help others feel more comfortable within their own appearance. It was interesting to find a lot of comments trying to expand beauty norms and being against the “perfect” body.

### **VIII. Personal Reflection**

Throughout this research and analysis process, I've learned a lot about what other females think about their own appearance mixed with my opinion over my body as well. I have a hard judgement over my body because I have so much time to point out my flaws. Finding out that so many females go through treatment to end their body image obsession and eating disorder makes me see that I don't have it as harsh as other girls do. I grew up in a household where being skinny was the only form of being healthy. But after coming to Purchase, I felt more accepted with my body type and appearance. One of the classes that helped me grow is when I became a teaching assistant for a dance class. I've been doing it for almost two years and it allows me to do what I love while staying healthy. It built my confidence with dance and as an overall human. I've also grown to be more comfortable with my outfit choices and body image. I know I'm not the slimmest person, but as long as I'm eating balanced and exercising a couple times a week, I'm happy with myself. Although social media still causes me to body compare myself to others, I try not to let it influence my behavior. I know I have other appearance issues to work on



including raising my self confidence, but as long as I work on thinking positive over my body, I'll continue to progress surely.

## **IX. Conclusion**

Social media and body images have influenced eating disorders, extreme dieting and body dissatisfaction for young women which puts a damage on their physical, mental health, self esteem and overall well being.

This research has proven this thesis to be true. Women often compare themselves to others and want unrealistic and underweight body images because they believe it's the only way to be truly attractive. Although, many people are now going against this factor which wasn't hypothesized. This can help change the beauty community and help improve female's mental/physical health while raising their self esteem and comfortability within their own image.

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