Social Media, Body Image, and Self-Esteem: A Study on How to Press “Like” in Real Life

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As college students encounter a plethora of newfound responsibilities, the rise of social media has granted a space of connectedness and relaxation. However, the usage of such platforms resulted in the rise of photo editing apps and a standard of beauty that has become a means of comparison for users. Piling onto the academic and extracurricular priorities of college students, social media’s subliminal messaging regarding body image affects the perspective students hold for themselves. In analyzing a series of studies, the effects and consequences of absorbing such media connecting to body image are brought to light.

The expectations created on social media revolving around body image in this age bracket are important and researchable. If this unattainable image of beauty persists as the upcoming generation joins these platforms, they may be forced into the same problematic perspectives current college students face. Considering this form of media is still considerably new, it is imperative to understand the full implications. To research the topic, anonymous surveys can be gathered and secondary data analysis conducted. By understanding the power of these platforms through research, the societal impacts of it can be harnessed.

Literature Review

A two-part qualitative study conducted in 2021 by researchers Timothy Piatkowski, Katherine White, Leanne Hides, and Patricia Obst analyzes the effects that muscular imagery posted on social media has on men. Interviews were held with several young men—including those posted to a fitness Facebook page—and researchers observed engagement with the aforementioned posts. The study revealed that a majority of the comments posted under each image were either humorous or negative (Piatkowski et. al, 2021, p. 730). These comments were later reflected on in the interviews as having a negative impact on the self-esteem of the person in the image. It is evident through these interviews that both the men displayed on the page and viewers of such struggle to achieve the representation of other men who are posted online (Piatkowski et. al, 2021, p. 732). While posting one’s fitness journey offers a chance to establish an association with others, the analysis of research directed copious concern to the effects that comparison through these pages have on these young men attempting to achieve the body of another (Piatkowski et. al, 2021, 733). While it may be assumed that body image discrepancies are only present in the female population, it is evident that men also struggle to build the perfect body. Beauty standards still apply to men which leads them to cast self-doubt on their appearance and, as a result, resort to extreme methods. Through this layered research observing men’s perceptions of personal body image on social media, specifically Facebook, it is evident that social media molds how one perceives the ideal male body and affects the attitude in attaining this image.

Generally, it is assumed that the image of the thin, conventionally attractive female displayed in advertisements harms women’s perception of their bodies. In 2020, researchers Joshua Hendrickse, Russell B. Clayton, Elizabeth C. Ray, Jessica L. Ridgway, and Rachel Secharan challenged this belief by studying the effects that weight inclusivity and positive slogans have on young women. It was predicted that the size range displayed in these ads would increase a woman’s self-body satisfaction and upbeat phrases would improve a woman’s sexual image of herself (Hendrickse et. al., 2020, p. 1418). They provided university subjects with different images and slogans, each representative of a thin or plus-size model (Hendrickse et. al, 2020, p. 1420). Including factors such as personal body perspectives, the research concluded that women do experience greater body satisfaction when size is varied among models, but the association between internalized messaging and slogans did not prove conclusive (Hendrickse et.
al, 2020, 1421). While the study conducted was limited to a short-term analysis of this subset of university students, it is evident that the inclusivity of models considered plus-size improved the subject’s outlook on themselves and their bodies. Since social media ads are more prominent throughout platforms, the incorporation of all body types proves to have a positive effect on young college-aged women. Through this conclusion, it is apparent that a lack of diversity results in a negative mentality from college-aged females.

As referenced before, previous studies have displayed a connection between social media and body image dissatisfaction. A literature review conducted in 2020 by a team of researchers attempts to see the correlation between this association and food choices in young adults. After narrowing texts with clear predetermined criteria, the researchers observed both qualitative and quantitative published material that addressed the topic in young women and men of all sizes who participated in social media (Rouncefell et. al, 2020, p. 21). 30 texts were observed and it was concluded that viewing idealized images on social media results in body disapproval and corresponding negative or extreme eating habits (Rouncefell et. al, 2020, p. 36). While promoting a healthy food or routine may be done so with positive intent, the repercussions display that the messaging is internalized by the young audience to take health too far. It furthers their dislike of themselves and their physical appearance. The topic of food is a difficult discussion for many young adults as they struggle with everyday insecurities associated with body image. For men, this may be exhibited through the need to bulk up and build their muscles. For women, it means restricting their food to match the extremely thin model in ads. This self-treatment is correlated to dieting and images of food that are presented on social media. The usage of social media is another layer that then increases comparison to others, resulting in damaging eating practices that social media praises.

Through examining the previous studies, research evidently points to body image issues as a result of social media in college-aged young adults. These insecurities that rise as a reaction to negativity online can lead to dangerous eating habits or radical fitness routines to achieve the perceived ideal body. While this response may not be the intent of those posting, delicate marketing on behalf of companies and consideration by influencers is needed to avoid these adverse effects on the youth. Further research is needed to fully understand the limitations and outcomes of social media usage to benefit future generations.

**Methodology**

In order to conduct research to determine a plausible relationship between social media and body image, a mixed methodology should be used consisting of surveying and secondary data analysis. By using both methods, prior research regarding the topic can be contrasted with newly obtained data. The usage of surveying as intended through this research will remain anonymous and target college-aged students on social media. This method allows researchers “to get information about certain groups of people representative of some larger group of interest” (Berger, 2020, p. 322). By getting answers from a sample group, an understanding of the larger group at hand can be understood. In developing the survey questions, it is essential to reflect on a participant’s interpretation of the questions. Since everyone has different perspectives, being direct will allow the survey to most accurately represent the questions with the intended purpose. This does not imply swaying the survey results, but providing clear and concise questions. Ultimately, “it’s surprising how people can misunderstand, misinterpret, and become confused about questions you thought were simple to answer” (Berger, 2020, p. 338). Rather than assume the simpleness of a question, it is better to be more precise than not. Therefore, through a survey, a broad understanding of a population can be developed and applied to research.
To correspond with the intentions of conducting a survey, secondary data analysis includes a review of other available research. Considering an understanding of the effects of social media on body image is beginning to be established, there is some available research that provides various views. This form of research relies on “the re-use of pre-existing … data derived from previous research studies. These data include material such as semi-structured interviews, responses to open-ended questions in questionnaires, field notes, and research diaries” (Heaton, 2008, p. 34). The usage of already available research permits a heightened development of the research question at hand.

To perform the survey, the first step is to develop the questions. In this instance, the research sanctions the usage of the Likert scale. This scale allows participants to rank their agreement with a particular statement. This form of response “enables you to quantify opinions and beliefs and thus obtain more precise indications than with many other methodologies” (Berger, 2020, p. 337). In addition to these questions, there will also be open-ended questions that provide a qualitative component to the survey. The intended statements corresponding to a five-point Likert scale format are as follows:

- I frequently view posts of others on social media.
- I am an active poster on social media.
- I take a long time to determine what I will post based on how I believe I will be perceived by others.
- I compare myself to others based on what they post on social media.
- My body image has been influenced by social media.
- I feel bad about my body since using social media.
- I have attempted to change myself due to social media influence.

Through these survey questions, a deeper understanding of users’ habits will be formed. By observing how social media is present in college students’ lives, the influence social media may have on body image is revealed. In addition to the above statements, the following open-ended questions will be asked:

- How has social media influenced the way you perceive yourself?
- How has social media influenced the way you perceive others?
- What effects has social media had on changing your habits relating to body image?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

By incorporating the above questions, participants can elaborate on their responses. Including both the Likert scale and open-ended questions allows a full picture to be provided. Once the survey is developed, it will be sent to Ramapo College of New Jersey students via social media platforms and text message services.

Secondary data analysis will be completed through the usage of databases including Academic Search Premier and JSTOR. From there, statements such as “social media and body image in young adults” and “effects of social media on body image” will be searched. To narrow down what texts are used, only those published since 2000 will be considered. Preferably, only journal articles or peer-reviewed sources will be incorporated into the analysis. After reading each selected article, the text will be analyzed specifically for the potential correlation between body image and social media.

Both the anonymous survey and secondary data analysis are appropriate methodologies for this study. Granted the research will be administered over the course of approximately a month, it is doable for the timeframe. The survey will be released for about a week and the
results analyzed. Since the survey is anonymous and confidentiality ensured, it is ethical. The data being gathered via secondary research will also be reviewed in this time period. Only ethical research will be selected to be analyzed. Overall, the usage of both of these research methods best shine a light on the relationship between body image and social media.

By focusing on both a survey and secondary data analysis, the impact social media content has on how college students perceive their bodies can be identified. The information accumulated can then be compared to determine the possible association between body image and social media usage. Given the research uncovers a negative correlation, additional research or advocacy can be done to reform the role of social media in a young adult’s life.

**Findings**

Both secondary data analysis and surveying were used to conduct this research. Searches for the selection of the texts to analyze were completed through *Academic Search Premier*, *JSTOR*, and *Google Scholar*. The two ensuing articles were selected given their recency, reliability, and relevancy. The survey was spread via word of mouth and social media. A possible flaw in the research design may be found in seeking subjects via social media. This may influence the results but proved to be the most effective way to reach the target audience. Furthermore, the survey was only completed by Ramapo College of New Jersey students. This may be a limitation in analyzing the results. Ultimately, subjects were selected randomly and completed the survey on their own accord.

The first article examined for secondary analysis was conducted by Marika Tiggemann and Isabella Anderberg. They analyzed the impact that unedited photos of bodies posted against altered ones have on women, referencing it as “Instagram vs. reality.” Published in 2019, 305 young women participated in evaluating previously selected images. The women were given statements regarding how these images made them feel toward their bodies and used the Linkert scale to rate their agreement with each statement. Through these answers, it was concluded that “the real and paired images resulted in less body dissatisfaction than the ideal images” (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). As indicated through this study, the increase of real, unedited images on social media platforms correlates to positive body image. By adjusting the standards on social media to determine natural photographs as the norm, negative comparison would seemingly be decreased. These findings were expected. If looking at unattainable body types makes a person feel unsatisfactory toward themselves, then viewing realistic bodies would make a person feel content. Considering people are trained to compare, social media allows insecurities to flourish. Rather than create a negative atmosphere around these insecurities, the parts of us deemed unacceptable by society should be highlighted and celebrated. While this study displays that social media can have negative effects on body image, it also shows that if content is inclusive and accepting, people can find comfort on these platforms.

Noting dissatisfaction with body image expands past concerns of weight, researchers Shiela Reaves, Jacqueline Bush Hitchon, Sung-Yeon Park, and Gi Woong Yun correlate image editing and body dissatisfaction to size, race, and leg length. Evidently, how the media depicts an ideal body correlates to a person’s understanding of themselves and may result in disordered eating. While this research is strongly tied to the impact magazine messaging has, it corresponds to social media as the modern means of entertainment for the young generation and can also be identified as part of the “Digital Revolution” (Reaves et. al, 2004, 144). These new technologies have the ability to alter everything about a person, from weight to skin tone. After surveying 25 college students, it was revealed that body satisfaction increased when unedited photographs were shown over edited ones (Reaves et. al, 2004, 148). By viewing photographs that resembled
themselves, these college students became less isolated. One participant stated: "Making models appear to be more thin and altering their appearance is wrong, but it will continue to happen until the of girls dying from eating disorders increases. The changing of their racial heritage is immoral and should stop” (Reaves et. al, 2004, 151). While edited images may fit a certain aesthetic of the brand, it is overt audiences prefer authenticity. Showing these unaltered pictures would also alleviate adverse effects including plausible eating disorders or low self-esteem. Once again, these findings are expected. College students are at a malleable stage where a slight poke at their insecurities would allow negative thoughts to snowball. While models are already seen as the pinnacle of beauty, editing their bodies furthers an unrealistic and unattainable vision of that beauty.

Additionally, a survey was conducted and completed anonymously and optionally by Ramapo College of New Jersey students. With 8 students participating in the quantitative component of the survey and 7 students answering the qualitative questions, the results indicate similar findings to the secondary data analysis. Students were asked for the quantitative portion of the survey to rank statements on the Linkert scale per their agreement. These results were fairly split, demonstrating that all the students use social media to some degree but the effects of social media on body image varied. 87.5% of those surveyed listed somewhat agree or higher with the statement “I take a long time to determine what I will post based on how I believe I will be perceived by others.” 62.5% selected somewhat agree or higher for the statement “I compare myself to others based on what they post on social media.” Against expectations, results for the statement “I feel bad about my body since using social media” indicated no pattern, therefore displaying the viable variation between the effects of social media on users. The qualitative component of the survey reveals just how impactful social media is on how college students view themselves. One student wrote:

“Social media has influenced the way I perceive myself by seeing others who look other ways, like skinnier or taller. For some reason, I feel like social media has a norm of what people, especially women should look like, and if you don’t live up to that standard, then you will be perceived differently.”

This student recognizes that social media has profound impacts on self-esteem and the establishment of norms. Falling outside of these expectations often results in ostracization or isolation. If this norm was changed to reflect reality rather than edits, users would be inclined to accept themselves. Another student stated that “people exclusively show what's good in their life and never post about hardship. This can cause an unrealistic expectation to others and make them feel lower self-esteem.” As emphasized by this response, all users—not just companies—have access to display only the best parts of themselves whether that be through editing, lighting, or particular poses. There is then this added pressure to only post what others would perceive in a positive light, leading to an unfortunate and seemingly unstoppable cycle of the consequences of social media. These results, similar to the secondary data analysis, were expected but proved that the effects of social media on users will vary. These results, however, prove there is an overwhelming majority that is negatively affected by social media and would relate poor self-esteem to online platforms.

This research was conducted ethically as the survey sent to college students did not collect any personal information and the research used for secondary data analysis was confirmed reputable. Out of this research, it is hoped the atmosphere of social media will be changed. Large companies set the standards for trends and inclusivity, realism, and authenticity should be valued over edited models. People are beautiful in their natural state and by limiting
computer enhancements, this innate beauty can become the norm once again, alleviating unnecessary societal standards. Aside from eliminating digital alterations, users should be taught before engaging in these sites how to find self-esteem outside of the internet.

**Analysis**

Given these findings, the usage of social media overwhelmingly casts doubt on college students' body images. Their self-confidence is then greatly impacted, resulting in unforeseen consequences. As indicated in the survey, some of these consequences include increased consumerism, disordered eating or extreme dieting, and intensified comparison. The secondary data analysis further supports the survey results, adding the importance of representation on social media. If college students are inclined to replicate or determine their personal value off social media pages, then increasing inclusivity online would create a more welcoming atmosphere where these adverse effects would not persist.

Based on these findings, there are many benefits to assist the future generation on social media. Granted current technology conglomerates and businesses understand the extent to which their marketing impacts the younger generation, extreme photo editing could come to a halt, allowing social media to express reality over fiction. Considering the intense effects social media has on the young mind, these platforms can change the narrative and become a safe space for students over a means of comparison. The only shortcoming to the research conducted could be found in the limited population surveyed. If more people are surveyed from vastly different regions, a better representation can be established. Ultimately, the benefits of this research cannot be overlooked by a lack of action. The companies that set the norm for social media should be held accountable and users should display their real self online rather than a false image.

**Summarization**

Overall, social media for college students has the potential to connect and expand horizons, but given the current usage of these platforms, it is evident that these sources increase bodily comparison, adding unnecessary additional stressors. There needs to be a large-scale change on these sites to prioritize the value of natural beauty. While research indicates natural beauty is preferred to that of edited, young minds still gravitate toward these unrealistic definitions of beauty. By increasing the amount of unedited content on social media, adverse effects can be prohibited and people can return to appreciating life at the moment rather than obsessing over images on a screen. Current research already indicates the negative power social media holds over college-aged students, but additional research is needed to monitor these effects and ensure improvements are made on these platforms. Without updating research and advancing our understanding of the correlation between social media and body image, the plausible enforced solutions pose the threat of becoming stagnant, allowing the problems already seen to persist.
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