

Social Media and Body Image:
How Social Media Will Affect the Body Image of Future Social Media Users

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Abstract

Social media platforms have played a large role in the way body image has been created and translated into expectations surrounding physical appearance¹. The cultural values of each society influence how social media constructs and communicates the ideal male and female bodies, lifestyles, and consumer habits. Psychologically, individuals' body images are sculpted by such messages. Even media messages intended to counter the hegemonic ideals in place may instead reinforce such ideals. As a result, individuals will often feel it necessary to alter their appearance/lifestyle in unhealthy and unrealistic ways. Many current issues are relevant to this discussion, including body image and eating disorders, thinspiration and the thin ideal, fitspiration and the fit ideal, etc.

Through an analysis of Social Comparison Theory and Objectification Theory as the framework for understanding some of the main ways in which expectations about physical appearance are communicated and upheld, this paper seeks to address the question: "How will social media's role in constructing body image and expectations of physical appearance affect and shape the body image of future social media users?" With adolescents' impressionable minds and increased vulnerability due to their entrance into the online sphere at an unprecedented early age, this question has never been more significant. Unhealthy behaviors are already occurring amongst social media users, and can only be expected to worsen as future generations are introduced to social media. Over the course of my research, I expect to gain a thorough understanding of how social media shapes individuals' body images and be able to substantially answer my research question.

Introduction

Body image is multi-dimensional in nature; body image disturbance (BID) can exist in the form of a disturbance of perception, cognition, behavior, or a combination of these things². Body image dissatisfaction is a widely prolific issue that is largely perpetuated by different forms of media³, and social media is no exception. Combined with societal and cultural values, social media acts as a powerful deciding entity for expectations of physical appearance, lifestyle, and consumption habits. Such expectations have a strong effect on body image. Individuals' emotions, behaviors, and perceptions pertaining to their bodies are internalized through idealized media images; fitness and lifestyle accounts on Instagram are just some of the many examples of media messages that convey body image standards. Even media messages intended to be counter-hegemonic may instead reinforce the existing hegemony of body image ideals. As a result, individuals (especially women) will often experience body image dissatisfaction, and consequently, alter their appearance and lifestyle in unhealthy and unrealistic ways. Examining social media's role in constructing body image and expectations of physical appearance is

¹ Ho, Shirley S., et al. "Social Network Sites, Friends, and Celebrities: The Roles of Social Comparison and Celebrity Involvement in Adolescents' Body Image Dissatisfaction." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016. doi: 10.1177/2056305116664216.

² Selwyn Delinsky, Sherrie. "Body Image and Anorexia Nervosa." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 279-304. Guilford Press, 2014.

³ Ho, Shirley S., et al. "Social Network Sites, Friends, and Celebrities: The Roles of Social Comparison and Celebrity Involvement in Adolescents' Body Image Dissatisfaction." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016. doi: 10.1177/2056305116664216.

important in understanding its potential impact on the next generation of social media users. Adolescents are being introduced to social media at an increasingly early age. Due to adolescents' impressionable minds and increased vulnerability to media messages, an examination of the relationship between social media use and body image is a necessary step to understanding the potential outcomes of their social media use.

Research Plan

I have decided to focus on social media, rather than media as a whole. Much more research exists on the relationship between body image and more traditional forms of media, while social media is less frequently examined. While a type of media, social media should be examined as separate from other types of media as it is a powerful tool through which body image expectations are communicated in ways that are new and unique to social media. Social media gives its users the unique and unprecedented ability to create their own content and communicate messages on a vast scale. Other, traditional forms of media do not allow this level of user interactivity and customization. With this freedom to create and spread content comes a level of responsibility that I believe has not been fully realized. Messages about physical appearance have been around long before social media was introduced, but now media consumers are just as responsible for communicating those messages as they are receiving them. I plan to examine how this unique position of both media consumer and creator relates to the body image of social media users.

In approaching this research topic, I have decided to use Social Comparison Theory and Objectification Theory as the framework for understanding some of the main ways in which expectations about physical appearance are communicated and upheld. The objectification of individuals' bodies asserts that value is derived from physical appearance, and it is through social comparison that individuals gauge their own attractiveness in relation to others. They then use this information to form opinions about their own self-worth. A focus on physical appearance and an association between attractiveness and self-worth can often lead to serious, negative impacts on a person's mental well-being. Eating disorders like Anorexia Nervosa, social media trends such as "Thinspiration" and "Fitspiration," and Body Dysmorphic Disorder are some of the common harmful effects of social comparison and social media messages pertaining to appearance; therefore, I have included these topics in my research and discussion as well. Since it is impossible to determine with absolute certainty what will occur in the future, I will use this research to estimate the impacts future social media users will face and how I believe they will approach body image.

Social Comparison & Objectification Theories

Social Comparison Theory is the concept that individuals determine their own self-worth based on comparisons between themselves and others they perceive as either better or worse than themselves⁴. I chose to focus on this theory because social comparison can often be damaging to

⁴ "Social Comparison Theory." Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/social-comparison-theory>.

one's self-image⁵, and social media's proliferation has only heightened the issue. Social Comparison Theory is a good lens through which Body Images issues can be viewed because most, if not all, of the information we receive about appearance comes from viewing others in relation to ourselves. Individuals have become increasingly aware of their bodies and what they look like in comparison to that of their peers and celebrities, and expectations have become much more rigid. In reference to Leon Festinger's paper at the second annual symposium on motivation held by the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska, Jerry Suls states that social comparison can also lead to pressures toward uniformity⁶. This is evident in much of the content that can be seen on social media platforms, including user content and online advertisements. Whitewashing, or "removing visible minorities in popular media by making their skin appear lighter, or even replacing them altogether with white [counterparts]"⁷, is one of the ways in which uniformity is effectuated online. Whitewashing occurs in a variety of ways online, but some of the most common include: the use of white models in online advertisements that are targeting a non-white demographic, cultural appropriation of ethnic practices and traditional garments into social media trends, the "widely accepted notion that 'White' is the default race"⁸, and the perpetuation of whiteness and stereotypical white traits as the ideal for physical beauty.

Uniformity is also reinforced through the selection of one ideal that everyone must strive to embody. Trends unfailingly change, but hegemony constantly exists to communicate messages about what is ideal and expected. The most recent trend social media users are being pressured to achieve is a seemingly effortless and healthy lifestyle, or the "fit ideal." This includes a simultaneously fit and toned, yet muscular and curvy body, and a perfectly balanced and healthy diet. Before and after photos are increasingly apparent throughout many social media platforms, displaying (and sometimes faking) weight-loss and muscle-building achievements. Staged photos of bright, colorful, and healthy meals are posted online as well. These posts are labeled as "inspiration" for others to achieve the fit body and healthy lifestyle they have always wanted (or are told they have always wanted); yet, they are often the source of others' negative and self-degrading thoughts about their appearance and self-worth as opposed to positive motivation to make healthy changes. While scrolling through social media, one usually sees an endless feed of photos portraying others' seemingly flawless and put-together lives. Social media users see their friends' outfits, meals, homes, social activities, and more; however, the content posted to social media is carefully curated by each user to exhibit only the good, most presentable parts of their lives. This is a common phenomenon, leading social media to be widely referred to as a "highlight reel." Because the term "highlight reel" has become so common, it is difficult to determine its origin. Yet, the concept speaks for itself: people present the best parts of their lives online and leave out the rest. For this reason, social comparison can become particularly dangerous. Social media users are comparing their real, unfiltered lives and bodies to their peers' so-called highlights, and when they fail to live up to the unrealistic ideals that are portrayed online, they are left to feel that their bodies fail to meet beauty standards and

⁵ Argo, Jennifer T., Katherine White, and Darren W. Dahl. "Social Comparison Theory and Deception in the Interpersonal Exchange of Consumption Information." *Journal of Consumer Research* 33, no. 1 (June 2006): 99-108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/504140>.

⁶ Suls, Jerry, and Ladd Wheeler. *Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001.

⁷ Nelson, Kai, "Where's the Representation?: The Impact of White Washing on Black Children" (2016). Academic Symposium of Undergraduate Scholarship. Paper 35. http://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/ac_symposium/35

⁸ *ibid*

their self-image is degenerated. As a result, “body image disturbance, such as body shame and dissatisfaction, is experienced by many women who feel that their body falls short of the thin, youthful ideal and view this discrepancy as reflecting the inadequacy of their body⁹.” Essentially, evaluation of self-worth based in social comparison of appearance is a form of objectification of the human body.

Objectification theory states that women are regularly objectified. They are not treated as a whole person, but rather as bodies or an accumulation of body parts. As a result, their physical appearance is emphasized over their inner qualities¹⁰, suggesting their value is derived from their external features. Social media is a common platform on which women’s bodies are objectified. As discussed above, much of the content posted to social media sites like Instagram and Facebook pertains to women’s appearance; users post their weight-loss goals, gym routines, healthy lifestyles, makeup tutorials, etc. This emphasis on ideal physical appearance puts great value on women’s bodies, while overlooking any internal qualities they possess.

Body image dissatisfaction as a result of social comparison and objectification on social media is harmful to anyone, but the effects children experience have the potential to be detrimental to their body image and well-being in general. Due to the association between children and the development of eating disorder symptoms, “BID and the drive to achieve the perfect body may pose a serious threat to adolescents’ health¹¹.” It is important to consider children in this discussion of social media and body image because as they grow and continue to use social media, they will evolve into the next generation of social media users. Studying this new generation of social media users will be the key to understanding and predicting the possible future impacts of social media use on body image.

Social Media Platforms & Their Messages

Social media allows for extensive visibility and is inherently comparative as users are provided with a mass collection of their friends’ content that they see alongside and in the same contexts as their own posts. As mentioned above, the Social Comparison Theory states that individuals determine their own self-worth by comparing themselves to others¹². Extensive research has been done to examine the relationship between social comparison of appearance through media and body image dissatisfaction; however, this research has been mostly limited to traditional forms of media rather than social media. Facebook is one social media platform that is exemplary of the social comparison that occurs online.

In general, Facebook is linked to higher body image dissatisfaction, including greater appearance concerns, dieting behavior, levels of objectification, internalization of the thin ideal

⁹ Tylka, Tracy L., and Natalie J. Sabik. "Integrating Social Comparison Theory and Self-Esteem within Objectification Theory to Predict Women's Disordered Eating." SpringerLink. April 25, 2010. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-010-9785-3>.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Ho, Shirley S., et al. “Social Network Sites, Friends, and Celebrities: The Roles of Social Comparison and Celebrity Involvement in Adolescents' Body Image Dissatisfaction.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016. doi: 10.1177/2056305116664216.

¹² "Social Comparison Theory." Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/social-comparison-theory>.

and drive for thinness¹³. Before the advent of Facebook in 2004, other social networking sites did exist; however, the introduction of Facebook was the start of how we use social media to compare ourselves to others today. Through a study of Australian, female primary and high school students, the relationship between Facebook use and body image dissatisfaction has been determined as causal. In other words, the amount of time a person spends on Facebook is directly related to their level of body image dissatisfaction¹⁴. Social comparison and other factors are responsible for this causation. One important factor is upward comparison, which occurs when someone compares their appearance to that of someone they view as better or more attractive than themselves¹⁵. Due to the volume of picture uploads to Facebook every day, the opportunities for upward comparison are virtually unlimited. Pictures of friends' bodies, faces, outfits, makeup, gym routines, etc. are readily available for comparison to Facebook users' own lives and appearances.

Another social media platform that facilitates body image dissatisfaction is Instagram. Instagram is a widely-used photo-sharing social media platform, with 800 million users as of September 2017¹⁶. When broken down by age group, 71% of U.S. adults age 18-24 use Instagram, which is far more than any other age demographic¹⁷. Visually-oriented social media like Instagram are female-dominated¹⁸, and sixty percent of Instagram users visit the site once or more per day¹⁹. This means out of all Instagram users, young women are the most susceptible group to messages about appearance expectations. Instagram is highly visually-oriented, as content consists mainly of photos and videos. Instagram content can be problematic because many images uploaded to the platform are edited to be more attractive/ideal. Filters are applied, imperfections are removed, physiques are slimmed, and other details are completely altered. So-called "candid" photos are staged, giving an effortless appearance to images that have, in fact, taken a great deal of effort to achieve. As a result, social comparison (especially upward comparison) occurs regularly by Instagram users to others that are posting doctored content. Such comparisons can lead Instagram users to judge their appearances as less attractive, and their lifestyles as less ideal than that of their friends and peers. Consequently, body image is degraded, while levels of body image dissatisfaction and objectification increase.

Like Instagram, Snapchat is also highly visually-oriented. Snapchat focuses on appearance by encouraging users to share pictures of themselves with their friends. The launch

¹³ Fardouly, Jasmine, and Lenny R. Vartanian. "Negative Comparisons about One's Appearance Mediate the Relationship between Facebook Usage and Body Image Concerns." *Body Image*. November 17, 2014. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1740144514001375>.

¹⁴ Tiggemann, Marika, and Jessica Miller. "The Internet and Adolescent Girls' Weight Satisfaction and Drive for Thinness." *Sex Roles* 63, no. 1-2 (April 28, 2010): 79-90. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9789-z.

¹⁵ Fardouly, Jasmine, and Lenny R. Vartanian. "Negative Comparisons about One's Appearance Mediate the Relationship between Facebook Usage and Body Image Concerns." *Body Image*. November 17, 2014. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1740144514001375>.

¹⁶ Instagram, and TechCrunch. *Number of monthly active Instagram users from January 2013 to September 2017 (in millions)*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/> (accessed May 7, 2018).

¹⁷ Smith, Aaron, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2018." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. March 01, 2018. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.

¹⁸ Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. April 09, 2015. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>.

¹⁹ Smith, Aaron, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2018." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. March 01, 2018. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.

of Snapchat's selfie filters was innovative as it introduced a feature built into the platform that encourages the alteration of users' faces. Said filters smooth skin, erase blemishes, add makeup, and more. They change facial proportions so that the user's eyes and lips are bigger, while making other features like the chin and nose smaller. These filters are a clear example of social media conveying messages about appearance expectations as they accentuate ideal features and minimize supposedly unattractive features. With the addition of snapchat stories it became possible for users to share filtered images of themselves with all of their friends, and depending on their selected settings, the general Snapchat public. This sharing of ideal self-images creates vast opportunity for social and upward comparison.

Tinder takes objectification and emphasis on appearance one step further as it combines the usual social media characteristics with its primary function as a way for users to connect for dating purposes (here, "dating" refers to various levels of correspondence including messaging, meeting up for a date, intimate relations, and other actions that may or may not lead to a relationship). The focus on dating leads to high levels of objectification as users choose to accept or reject other users by "swiping" right or left based solely on their appearance. Objectification occurs as users judge the appearance of others, but also as they create their own Tinder profiles. Users select the images of themselves they think are the most attractive and most likely to impress other Tinder users. In this way, Tinder users are objectifying themselves by selecting pictures that emphasize their ideal physical features. The various ways in which objectification occurs on Tinder results in a complete exclusion of internal traits that could be significantly more important in a dating scenario than appearance.

Effects on Current, Adult Social Media Users

A new phenomenon that is occurring amongst social media users, especially those from the youngest generations, is the hesitation to post pictures of themselves without selfie filters and/or editing. While seemingly insignificant, the act of posting a selfie serves a certain purpose to the selfie-taker, as they are seeking specific gratification as they actively choose to pose, snap a picture of themselves, and post their image to a social media platform²⁰. The pressure to maintain a flawless appearance online stems from the aforementioned messages social media platforms convey about body image.

Many social media users will use the term "goals" to refer to things that are ideal; things they wish they possessed or resembled. For example, one might comment "goals" on another person's picture of their "bikini body" if they think it looks good. One dangerous way that social media users are creating and receiving messages about body image "goals" is through "#Thinspiration." Thinspiration glamorizes eating disorder lifestyles and encourages women to lose weight by featuring pictures of emaciated women²¹ and communicating these images as "inspiration" and "goals." While Thinspiration is confined to smaller online communities, mainly people who already have eating disorders, "#Fitspiration" is another, more prolific example that embodies the "goals" concept by encouraging people to share photos and other

²⁰ Kearney, Amanda. *Uses and Gratification of Posting Selfies on Social Media*. Master's thesis, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2017. RIT Scholar Works.

<http://scholarworks.rit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10871&context=theses>

²¹ Tiggemann, Marika, and Mia Zaccardo. "'Strong Is the New Skinny': A Content Analysis of #Fitspiration Images on Instagram." *Journal of Health Psychology*, 31 Mar. 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316639436>.

content intended to motivate people to pursue a healthier, more ideal lifestyle²². Since the trend promotes health and well-being instead of thinness and weight loss, it has been utilized by many social media users as a way to oppose thinspiration and the unhealthy ideals it promotes²³. As a result, fitness, health and lifestyle goals have become increasingly popular content on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. However, fitspiration is also problematic. Though it favors a “healthy” physique rather than extreme thinness and other physical characteristics associated with eating disorders, it still emphasizes one body type as the ideal body type people should strive for. Fitspiration aims to inspire a healthy lifestyle, but instead leads to objectification of individuals’ bodies and the rejection of physiques outside the established norm²⁴. This is just one example of messages intended to be counter-hegemonic instead proving to reinforce the existing hegemony. Fitspiration tells people they should be lean and muscular and glorifies a healthy lifestyle, leading to unrealistic standards for individuals’ diet and exercise regimen. Fitspiration is present in much of the social media content in existence today, not just photos specifically intended to showcase a fit physique. Since it promotes an all-around healthy lifestyle, fitspiration elements influence posts about exercise routines, diet plans, skincare, workout clothes, grocery shopping, etc. A healthy lifestyle has become the new goal, whereas in the past, extreme thinness and other lifestyles have been considered ideal.

Eating and body image disorders are common effects of social media messages about body image. As discussed earlier, social comparison can lead individuals to the conclusion that their bodies are not ideal when compared to that of their peers or celebrities that represent the ideal body image. Social media users receive messages about body image regularly, and much of the content they see on platforms such as Instagram consists of celebrities, influencers, and peers showing off their figures and healthy lifestyles. As a result, many social media users develop an unhealthy attitude toward their own bodies resulting in a body image or eating disorder. One eating disorder that is particularly common is Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder in which an individual refuses to maintain a healthy body weight. It is also characterized by an extreme fear of weight-gain and “disturbance in the way in which one’s body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight²⁵.” Anorexia Nervosa has become quite common amongst teenage girls and young women, as they are the most susceptible to messages about appearance expectations as established on page 6 of this paper.

As I was compiling my research, I searched for the trend #Thinspiration (also referred to as #Thinspo) on Instagram. It became apparent that Instagram has disabled users from using the hashtag. I then began looking for a statement from Instagram about their decision to ban thinspiration from their platform. I came across a guideline Instagram introduced with the thinspo ban that took place in 2016: “Don’t promote or glorify self-harm...any account found encouraging or urging users to embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or to cut, harm themselves, or commit suicide will result in a disabled account without warning²⁶.” The ban on thinspiration was part of a larger movement to ban content glorifying self-harm in any

²² ibid

²³ ibid

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ Selwyn Delinsky, Sherrie. "Body Image and Anorexia Nervosa." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 279-304. Guilford Press, 2014.

²⁶ Hasan, Heba. "Instagram Bans Thinspo Content." Time. April 26, 2012.
<http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/04/26/instagram-bans-thinspo-content/>.

form, including eating disorders. However, the ban was not successful. When I searched for the trend #Thinspiration on Instagram, over a dozen alternative hashtags appeared that pertained to thinspiration with names such as “#AnaThinspiration and #AnaThinspo” (referring to Anorexia Nervosa), “#BeautifulThinspiration,” and several others. These tags serve as a way for users to still promote the thin ideal and eating disorders despite Instagram’s attempt to ban thinspiration. As I looked deeper into these tags, I came across many images of extremely thin bodies, posed in ways that exaggerated their already-protruding bones and thinness. Research has shown that after viewing thin media images, young women’s body image is significantly more negative than after viewing images of average models, plus size models, or other images of inanimate objects²⁷. In this way, viewing thinspiration content can be very harmful to social media users’ body image. Additionally, I came across many tags that appeared to be counter-hegemonic: “ReverseThinspo,” “HealthInspo,” “NotThinspiration,” “FitAndThinspo,” etc. The names of these tags appear to be promoting health and rejecting the glamorization of eating disorders; however, upon further inspection, I found content very similar to that of the thinspiration tags. All of these tags contain content that has the potential to be very damaging to body image as they promote unhealthy body image and emphasize one body type as the ideal, with intent to “inspire” social media users to strive toward this ideal.

Unlike #Thinspiration, #Fitspiration is present and thriving on Instagram with over 15 million posts tagged. When I searched for #Fitspiration on Instagram, I found a plethora of gym selfies, fitness progress posts, and awkwardly posed photos with the clear intention of exaggerating the appearance of certain features (especially legs and glutes).

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is another body image disorder that can be a result of social media messages about appearance. BDD is defined as a “preoccupation with an imagined defect in appearance,” and can also include excessive concern over a slight deviation from the physical norm²⁸. For an individual to be diagnosed with BDD, the preoccupation with their appearance must cause “significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning,” and cannot be credited to another body image or eating disorder²⁹. BDD is a common phenomenon amongst social media users as they can tend to fixate on their own physical characteristics that do not “live up” to the ideal body type. For example, an individual may feel that they have excess stomach fat and are overweight if their abdominal muscles are not as defined as that of someone else they see online. Such perceptions of deviation from the norm are one harmful result of the thinspiration and fitspiration tags discussed above. As a result of said perceptions, the individual may do excessive abdominal workouts and go on an extreme diet to eliminate any stomach fat they may or may not have. In addition, diet and workout tips are common on Instagram, many of which make false claims about tricks that can help you lose weight quickly and gain muscle in specific areas.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder and fitspiration have a dangerous relationship. Like other body image “goals” of the past, the recent social media fixation on fitspiration is leading social media users to see flaws in their physical appearance where there are none. According to the “fit ideal,” the current ideal female body is lean, yet fit; with low body fat and high muscle mass and

²⁷ Morris, Anne M, and Debra K Katzman. “The Impact of the Media on Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents.” *Paediatrics & Child Health*, Pulsus Group Inc, 2003, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2792687/.

²⁸ Phillips, Katharine A. "Body Image and Body Dysmorphic Disorder." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 305-20. Guilford Press, 2014.

²⁹ *ibid*

definition. Individuals whose bodies lack this difficult-to-achieve physical ideal perceive themselves as flawed. This “imagined defect in appearance” is characteristic of Body Dysmorphic Disorder.

How Children’s Body Image is Shaped Through Social Media

While the effects discussed above can be applied to most social media users, at least in some capacity, they are particularly prominent among children and adolescents. It is already clear that adolescents are especially vulnerable to messages and images on social media, this is in part due to the fact that they usually cannot differentiate between what they see and what is real³⁰. For example, adolescents tend to be unaware of the fact that images they are seeing online have been altered digitally and with makeup and airbrush to fit the ideal body type. They believe the models and influencers they are seeing online look the same in real life as they do in their altered pictures. Since adolescents are unaware of these enhancements, such images promote unrealistic expectations for appearance that cannot be achieved naturally by the average person.

There are different ways we can intervene to combat social media’s negative impact on body image. Approaches can include: “health communication campaigns, entertainment education, media advocacy and media literacy training³¹.” Media literacy, a “process of understanding and using mass media [which] has been shown to help young people evaluate program and advertising content more critically³²,” is an important skill for adolescents to have to counter their inability to distinguish between what is real and what is fake online. However, it is also crucial that any approaches to social media’s negative impacts are evaluated with respect to social media’s portrayal of the idealized and unrealistic images of beauty that young social media users are exposed to and its impact on disordered eating behaviors and eating disorders³³.

Conclusion

After completing my research and reflecting on what I now know about social comparison and the effects of social media messages about physical appearance, I predict that if social media stays prevalent and continues to grow in prominence at the current rate, then I believe future social media users will continue to be increasingly focused on appearance. Though the specific qualities that are determined as attractive may change, I believe there will always be certain features that are communicated as the standard for everyone to live up to; since humans are inherently social, social comparison will always occur at least in some capacity. I also believe that social media will continue to evolve. As a result, I predict that it will allow for even more visibility, meaning people will be sharing more of their lives online and live-streaming and similar features will be incorporated more heavily into everyday life. I think this will result in even more pressure for people to constantly look their best, and I believe the “highlight reel” concept that I mentioned above will start applying to life in general, instead of

³⁰ Morris, Anne M, and Debra K Katzman. “The Impact of the Media on Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents.” *Paediatrics & Child Health*, Pulsus Group Inc, 2003, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2792687/.

³¹ *ibid*

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

being confined to social media. By this, I mean that since visibility will increase and even more of people's lives will be made public online, there will be more pressure to always be presentable and have the ideal lifestyle, not just in single images that are posted. Additionally, since children's brains will still be underdeveloped and they still will not be able to differentiate between what is real online and what is not, the effects they experience (such as eating disorders and Body Dysmorphic Disorder) will be even more severe. In addition, as these children grow up and social media continues to be a prominent part of their lives, it is very possible that body image dissatisfaction will be even more common than it is today as this new generation of social media users continues to spend more time comparing themselves to others and objectifying their own and others' bodies.

Annotated Bibliography

I have compiled a list of sources that contribute to my research of social media use and body image. Not all sources are cited in my paper, but I have used them all to further my own knowledge of the subject. Many of these sources pertain to areas that are directly related to my research question. While others are slightly off-topic, I have included them in my bibliography as I still consider them to be relevant to my research. I came across a lot of additional sources that provided great information on body image dissatisfaction; however, they dealt more with traditional forms of media which is why I have chosen to leave them out of my discussion and bibliography.

Argo, Jennifer T., Katherine White, and Darren W. Dahl. "Social Comparison Theory and Deception in the Interpersonal Exchange of Consumption Information." *Journal of Consumer Research* 33, no. 1 (June 2006): 99-108.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/504140>.

This article is relevant to my research because it looks at Social Comparison Theory and its relationship to consumption. It discusses how social comparison can lead consumers to engage in deception, which pertains to my research and my discussion of misleading content on social media sites.

Cashen, Emily. "The Instagram Effect: How Social Media Is Fashioning Modern Retail." *World Finance*. June 30, 2017. <http://www.worldfinance.com/markets/the-instagram-effect->

This article looks at how Instagram is shaping how modern retail works. The fashion industry has a huge impact on body image and is responsible for perpetuating many of the body image standards that are in place today. Studying the Instagram Effect will help me understand the relationship between social media and body image.

Fardouly, Jasmine, and Lenny R. Vartanian. "Negative Comparisons about One's Appearance Mediate the Relationship between Facebook Usage and Body Image Concerns." *Body Image*. November 17, 2014.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1740144514001375>.

This study is extremely relevant to my research because it discusses the Social Comparison Theory, and how social media users' body images can be severely impacted through the ways in which they compare themselves to their friends, family, celebrities and peers online.

Fardouly, Jasmine, Brydie K. Willburger, and Lenny R. Vartanian. "Instagram Use and Young Women's Body Image Concerns and Self-objectification: Testing Mediation Pathways." *New Media & Society*. February 1, 2017. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444817694499>.

This study is relevant and important to my research because it examines the relationship between Instagram use and body image concerns and self-objectification among women.

Grabe, Shelly, L. Monique Ward, and Janet Shibley Hyde. "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies." *Psychological Bulletin*. June 2008. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.134.3.460.

This article discusses the relationship between exposure to the thin ideal in media and body image disturbance in women.

Hasan, Heba. "Instagram Bans Thinspo Content." *Time*. April 26, 2012. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/04/26/instagram-bans-thinspo-content/>.

This article is relevant to my research because it served as a source of information on Instagram's ban on #Thinspiration and self-harm content.

Ho, Shirley S., et al. "Social Network Sites, Friends, and Celebrities: The Roles of Social Comparison and Celebrity Involvement in Adolescents' Body Image Dissatisfaction." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016. doi: 10.1177/2056305116664216.

This study is a crucial addition to my research as it uses the Social Comparison Theory to study how adolescents engage with friends and celebrities online, and the effects of these interactions on their body image. These effects include the drive for thinness and muscularity, which tie into my focus on lifestyle expectations and how that ties into body image in general.

Huh, HaengRyang, et al. "Facial Width-to-Height Ratio and Celebrity Endorsements." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 68, 4 May 2014, pp. 43–47., doi:10.1016/j.paid.2014.03.044.

This study examines the relationship between physical features and monetary income. It looks at the connection between facial Width-to-Height ratio (WHR) and income, specifically within the entertainment industry. In some cultures, facial WHR is extremely sought after. Many people will undergo cosmetic surgery to achieve their ideal facial

WHR. This study is a good addition to my research because facial WHR is something that while cultural, it is largely proliferated and commented on through social media.

Instagram, and TechCrunch. *Number of monthly active Instagram users from January 2013 to September 2017 (in millions)*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/> (accessed May 7, 2018).

This source was utilized to validate the information I gave about the number of people who used Instagram as of 2017.

Kearney, Amanda. *Uses and Gratification of Posting Selfies on Social Media*. Master's thesis, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2017. RIT Scholar Works. <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10871&context=theses>

This article is relevant to my research because it discusses the act of posting selfies, and the motivations that many social media users experience for posting selfies and what purpose those selfies are serving for the people who post them.

Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. April 09, 2015. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>.

I used this information from the Pew Research Center to establish demographic statistics pertaining to social media use.

Morris, Anne M, and Debra K Katzman. "The Impact of the Media on Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents." *Paediatrics & Child Health*, Pulsus Group Inc, 2003, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2792687/.

This article contributes to my research into media's effects on children. Understanding how today's children are impacted by media will help me predict the effects future children will experience.

Murnen, S.K., and R. Seabrook. "Feminist Perspectives on Body Image and Physical Appearance." *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, 2012, pp. 438–443., doi:10.1016/b978-0-12-384925-0.00070-5.

This article examines Feminist Theory in association with Body Image, which is an important theory I plan on including in my research. It seeks to answer the question: "Why are women so consumed with their appearance that they will undergo expensive and painful surgery?" This question directly relates to media's involvement in body image, as media are largely responsible for constructing the expectations and standards responsible for women's body image.

Nelson, Kai, "Where's the Representation?: The Impact of White Washing on Black Children"

(2016). Academic Symposium of Undergraduate Scholarship. Paper 35.
http://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/ac_symposium/35

This undergraduate paper is relevant to my discussion of Whitewashing on social media, and some of the potential effects it can have.

Petrie, Trent A., and Christy Greenleaf. "Body Image and Athleticism." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 206-13. Guilford Press, 2014.

This chapter establishes the relationship between athleticism and body image. It makes the connection between the time athletes spend working on their bodies and the way they see them. The hyper-awareness they develop of their bodies through training can lead them to experience adverse effects, such as eating pathology and the desire to change their physique. This chapter is a valuable addition to my body of research because it relates to lifestyle and fitness trends, as well as the Social Comparison theory and Body Dysmorphic Disorder, that I plan to discuss further.

Phillips, Katharine A. "Body Image and Body Dysmorphic Disorder." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 305-20. Guilford Press, 2014.

My previous study of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is what led me to choose this research topic, and it is a crucial aspect of understanding media's effect on individuals' body images as it is one of the most common disorders resulting from messages surrounding body image that are spread on media platforms.

Rodgers, Rachel F., et al. "Drive for Muscularity and Disordered Eating among French Adolescent Boys: A Sociocultural Model." *Body Image*, vol. 9, no. 3, 5 Mar. 2012, pp. 318–323., doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2012.03.002.

I want my research to be representative of both male and female genders, and this article which focuses on adolescent French boys helps me accomplish that. It examines the relationship between the drive for muscularity and eating pathology in adolescent boys, which again ties into the lifestyle aspect I want to study.

Sainsbury, Amanda, and Phillipa Hay. "Call for an Urgent Rethink of the 'Health at Every Size' Concept." *Journal of Eating Disorders*, BioMed Central, 18 Mar. 2014, jeatdisord.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/2050-2974-2-8.

As stated in my abstract, messages intended to be counter-hegemonic are sometimes problematic. While this concept aims to tear down the expectations for all individuals to embody the ideal physiques displayed across media platforms, it instead enforces the notion that *any* lifestyle/physique is healthy. "Health at Every Size" is relevant to my research because while it intends to break down the body image expectations in place and include all bodies in our joint understanding of beautiful, it sometimes ends up glorifying lifestyles that are extremely dangerous and unhealthy. This ties into my research into

many areas, including eating disorders, BDD, and lifestyle expectations such as #thinspiration.

Sarwer, David B., Canice E. Crerand, and Leanne Magee. "Cosmetic Surgery and Changes in Body Image." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 394-403. Guilford Press, 2014.

Plastic surgery has become increasingly common for people who want to change their appearance. It is undeniable that body image plays a monumental role in many people's decision to undergo plastic surgery. This chapter examines the psychological aspects of plastic surgery procedures, and the relationship between body image and cosmetic surgery.

Selwyn Delinsky, Sherrie. "Body Image and Anorexia Nervosa." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 279-304. Guilford Press, 2014.

This chapter outlines Anorexia Nervosa's (AN) relationship to Body Image Disturbance. It explains the criteria used to diagnose AN and the risks/effects associated with the disorder. This information contributes to my research an understanding of one of the most common disorders associated with body image.

Sepúlveda, Ana R., and María Calado. "Westernization: The Role of Mass Media on Body Image and Eating Disorders." *Westernization: The Role of Mass Media on Body Image and Eating Disorders*, InTech, 22 Feb. 2012, www.intechopen.com/books/relevant-topics-in-eating-disorders/westernization-the-role-of-mass-media-on-body-image-and-eating-disorders.

This article focuses on the Western ideals for male and female beauty and how mass media are responsible for the Westernization of beauty standards in other parts of the world. Its emphasis on "culturally-induced manifestations of eating and body image disorders" is a great contribution to my research on medias' effects on body image globally.

Smith, Aaron, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2018." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. March 01, 2018.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.

I used this information from the Pew Research Center to establish demographic statistics pertaining to social media use.

"Social Comparison Theory." Psychology Today.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/social-comparison-theory>.

This article is relevant to my research as I used it to establish basic information about Social Comparison Theory, before diving deeper into research on the theory.

Suls, Jerry, and Ladd Wheeler. *Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001.

This article is relevant to my research because it discusses Social Comparison Theory in more depth than some of my other sources. Suls' discussion of social media's tendency toward uniformity was particularly helpful in formulating my own discussion of social media use and body image as it deals with the way body image ideals are portrayed and represented online.

Thompson, Andrew R. "Body Images in Dermatology." In *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, 323-32. Guilford Press, 2014.

This chapter examines the relationship between body image and skin conditions. Instagram, magazines, and other forms of media glorify healthy skin to the point where individuals feel shame surrounding any imperfections they may experience with their skin. This is an important concept to include as I look further into retouched images and the effects media have when they such retouched images.

Tiggemann, Marika, and Jessica Miller. "The Internet and Adolescent Girls' Weight Satisfaction and Drive for Thinness." *Sex Roles* 63, no. 1-2 (April 28, 2010): 79-90. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9789-z.

This article is relevant to my research because it discusses body image dissatisfaction and its relationship to social media and the internet. I used it to establish the direct relationship between Facebook use and body image dissatisfaction in adolescent girls.

Tiggemann, Marika, and Mia Zaccardo. "'Strong Is the New Skinny': A Content Analysis of #Fitspiration Images on Instagram." *Journal of Health Psychology*, 31 Mar. 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316639436>.

"Fitspiration" is one of the key trends responsible for influencing body image on platforms like Instagram. Though this trend aims to inspire a healthy lifestyle, it instead leads to objectification of individuals' bodies and the rejection of physiques outside the established norm. Understanding how fitspiration psychologically affects individuals and shapes their body images is key to studying my research question and predicting the effects for future generations.

Tylka, Tracy L., and Natalie J. Sabik. "Integrating Social Comparison Theory and Self-Esteem within Objectification Theory to Predict Women's Disordered Eating." SpringerLink. April 25, 2010. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-010-9785-3>.

This article discusses the social comparison theory, objectification theory, and objectification and its relationship with body image and disordered eating; all of which are extremely relevant to my discussion of body image and social media use.

Wiederman, Michael W. "Body Image and Sexual Functioning." In *Body Image: A Handbook of*

Science, Practice, and Prevention, 271-77. Guilford Press, 2014.

This chapter is important to my research because it explores the link between body image and sexual functioning. Body image as it pertains to sexual functioning can be differentiated as either one's physical attractiveness/desirability or how they feel about their genitals/erogenous zones. Both are important to the discussion of body image and are greatly impacted by media.