

Body Image Dissatisfaction in Young Adults: Impact of Social Media Use

Dr. Nidhi Roy Choudhury [1]
Vishnu Nethra Reddy. N [2]

Abstract

Social media websites perpetuate unrealistic body ideals, reinforcing toxic beauty standards that shape body image perception of users. Body dissatisfaction, negative perceptions towards one's own body image, may originate from perceived pressure to curate an ideal appearance. Images promoting an unattainable body ideal on social media may be internalized by its users, leading to lowered self-esteem and self-worth. The impact may manifest as increased body surveillance, emphasis on evaluation of self by physical features and a predisposition to the onset of eating disorders. Comparisons centering on appearance, internalization of a body ideal and body dissatisfaction have been reported to vary based on user profile and activity on social media platform. The review aims to study the differential impact social media usage plays in contributing to body image dissatisfaction based on user profile data (male/female). The scope of the review includes understanding the relationship, if any, between the duration of social media use and body image perception in young adults.

Key words: Social media, body image dissatisfaction, body image, ideal body, social comparison theory

Article History: Submitted: 14th August, 2021, Revised: 27th August, 2021, Accepted: 08th September, 2021,
Published: 30th September, 2021.

I. INTRODUCTION

Body image, is defined as a multidimensional construct which constitutes cognitions, affect, behaviors and emotions towards physical appearance. This includes a behavioral aspect (e.g., social grooming), perceptual aspect (e.g., body weight estimation, perception of body shape) and an affective-cognitive aspect which constitutes emotions, attitudes, and cognitions towards one's body [1]. Discontent towards one's body, present as negative thoughts and feelings, refers to body dissatisfaction.

With the emergence of social media websites, 94% of young adult users on the internet actively use at least one account on a social media platform, the average duration of use estimates to 1.97 hours per day [2]. Young adults use their presence on social media to curate and manage their self-presentation to peer networks. Expression of identity and peer approval seem to hold increased importance and value.

Highly visual mediums place emphasis on physical attractiveness, which too, is shaped by societal standards. Users of social media choose to upload manipulated images using filters to ensure their best self is represented on the platform. Recent studies have found that viewing flawlessly, ideal photographs on social media may lead to concerns centering body image [3]. Dissatisfaction with one's body is notably higher in individuals who have access to social media, with this relationship being most significant in females [5]. Social media portrayal of men uses hyper-muscularity and the impact on perceived body image is not widely documented. However, young adult males experience body image dissatisfaction [6] and are prone to developing eating disorder symptoms [6].

The objectives of present review are to (a) study the role of social media in contributing toward body image dissatisfaction based on user profile (male/female); and (b) investigate the relationship concerning duration of social media use in shaping body image dissatisfaction. The review attempts to address the following research questions, if (a) female social media users experience significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction with body image in comparison to male social media users; and if (b) increased time on social media accounts for greater body image dissatisfaction.

II. BODY IMAGE THEORIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE

Sociocultural theorists posit that ideal bodies are held to a standard communicated through influential channels (social media, family, peers). A well-known model, the Tripartite Influence Model suggests that media, peers, and family reinforce unrealistic ideals, such as slenderness for women and muscularity for men, leading to internalization by the individual and subsequent perception of body image dissatisfaction [7].

Cognitive behavioral perspectives pioneered by Thomas Cash suggest body image is shaped in part by the individual and may also be influenced by environmental factors. At an individual level, body image may be shaped by cognitive processes, such thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. However, conditioning towards held beliefs are shaped by channels in the environment, social media being one such force. Objectification theory, however, is centered on reducing

^[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, School of Allied Healthcare and Sciences, Jain Deemed-to-be University, Bangalore, India.
Email: rc.nidhi@jainuniversity.ac.in

^[2] MSc Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, School of Allied Healthcare and Sciences, Jain Deemed-to-be University, Bangalore, India.
Email: nethranallari@gmail.com

bodies to physical objects, allowing for constant body surveillance and monitoring, body shame and dissatisfaction.

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals draw comparisons of themselves to other people. Downward comparison involves comparisons with an individual who is positioned to be of less worth in the social hierarchy, whereas upward comparisons occur when an individual perceives another to have higher value. Social comparisons grounded on physical attributes positively correlate with higher reported levels of body dissatisfaction [8]. Media portrayal of bodies may compel individuals to compare themselves with the portrayed ideal bodies, comparison may manifest as objectification of one's own body. Social grooming behaviors may be adopted to cope with the pressure to fit into social schemas involving peers, friends, and family.

Social comparison theory, therefore, is the most accepted theoretical framework to study the underpinnings of social media exposure towards shaping body image perception. Appearance related comparisons are based on perceived physical attractiveness of peers or individual's in one's social network. Comparison leads an individual becomes cognizant of the discrepancy between their real body and said ideal body, viewing their own bodies in negative light.

III. BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION: ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Body image dissatisfaction: Social media user profile analyses

Body image perception may be shaped by social media usage however it is key to understand how user profiles are differentially impacted in this regard. The measures centering on varied facets of body image perception supplemented with data on participant sex, allow investigators to delve into the gendered impact social media use may have. In a study on Indian undergraduate students (age=19-23) from educational institutions in Delhi, India, Male, and female social media users were observed to endorse starkly different attitudes towards body image [9]. Data revealed young females were significantly more likely to engage in body comparison on social media ($t=4.53$, 0.01). Significant differences between female and male social media users were reported on dimensions of social grooming ($t=6.82$, 0.05), fatness evaluation ($t=3.22$, 0.05) and negative affect ($t=2.37$, 0.05), with females more likely to attend to self-grooming, endorse negative perceptions about body image and perceive their body image as fat.

Paralleling the findings reported, differences in perceived body image based on user profile were reported in a study using Social Cultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-3) in undergraduate medical students in Delhi [10]. Media influence was assessed using metrics that center on assessing acceptance of body ideal depicted on media, inclination to accept an athletic body idea, perceived media pressure experienced to attain an ideal body and assessment of the significance ascribed to information related to appearances. Findings from the study report that males reported significantly higher media pressure ($p=0.039$) to achieve ideal body in comparison to females. Females reported higher abnormal body image perception in

comparison to males, however these findings were not significant.

A comparative study to assess the impact of social media revealed that females reported significantly greater body shame) compared to male users [11]. Body surveillance and appearance self-worth were also significantly higher in female participants in comparison to males. The study employed measures to assess the importance participants ascribe to Facebook as a part of their social life, the value attributed to one's appearance, body shame and the degree to which participants regularly monitor self-presentation. The consequences of internalizing body ideals depicted in social media were more severe for females, however the study is limited by the recruitment of predominantly European-Caucasian participants, with a lack of cultural representation.

Online profiles on social media can alter perceived body image. Experiments recruited young adults to analyze the effects of profile photographs on body image satisfaction, using social comparison theory [12]. With groups viewing attractive user photographs and another group exposed to profiles with unattractive photographs, body image satisfaction was assessed. The measures employed assessed the differences a participant may perceive between their own bodies and the body ideal; other measures estimate satisfaction with one's body. Participants who viewed attractive photographs were more likely to report higher disagreement with their own body build and less satisfaction with body image, compared to participants who viewed unattractive photographs. Unlike earlier findings reported, the study reveals that both male and female participants reported a lower body image satisfaction after viewing attractive profiles.

Body image dissatisfaction: Role of Duration of Social Media Use

Body image dissatisfaction that finds its origins in social media use may be attributed to the time a user invests on a platform. Research revealed that frequency of social media usage (Facebook) in undergraduates showed positive correlation with body image concerns [13]. Facebook usage was measured by self-reports on frequency of checking Facebook and the average time spent. The measures used focused on assessing body image dissatisfaction and an inclination to attain a thin-body ideal.

Consistent with the hypothesis, the analysis revealed longer durations of social media use contributed to increased dissatisfaction with body image ($r=.14$, $p=.03$). It should be noted that causation cannot be inferred from the correlational study. It is possible that women who have greater concern about their appearance spend increased time on social media. Further research directions could explore if heightened concerns centering body image attributed to personality traits, moderate the influence of social media. Participants in this study exclusively include female participants and use only Facebook as a social media platform. Platforms with more image-based content, such as Instagram and Tumbler may reveal plausible research directions to understand the relationship between time invested on social media and body image perception.

In contradictory light, research indicates that duration of social media use (Facebook) did not bear a relationship with

concerns pertaining to body image [14]. Their findings suggest that other online metrics (visiting, viewing profiles, and commenting on peer profiles) were positively correlate with drive for thinness. Social media exposure, as a function of time may not be a stressor leading to body image dissatisfaction; however, specific social grooming behaviors may positively correlate with body image perception. The study suggests duration of activity on a social media platform may not confidently explain the diverse aspects of social media use. Users may use the platform for behaviors motivated by varied reasons (status updates, groups, games, news). Consequently, using duration of activity on a social media platform as a measure, may not offer insight in understanding relationship with body image concerns, if any. Limitations of this study include its lack of racial diversity; sociocultural differences may influence user perception of their bodies. Analyzing activity profiles on social media platforms may serve to be a more holistic approach to assess the role of social media contributing towards body image perception.

Using varied social media metrics, could be a potential route to comprehend how social media use may shape a user's perception of their body image. Adopting this approach, research examined three social media (Facebook) metrics- friends in network, duration of use and emotional investment and their association with body image [15]. The study assessed the perceptions towards appearance evaluation and involvement in appearance-related concerns. The data reported does not support the concern of plausible negative role of social media use in shaping body image. The correlational analysis using social media metrics revealed that concerns with body image cropped up when the user was not active on social media, implying lesser durations of activity. It may be that individuals limit usage to avoid social comparisons and subsequent appearance concerns. Social media use may not influence appearance evaluation if an individual's social network largely comprises of close contacts. The individual may not indulge in negative body evaluation because they acknowledge the differences between a curated virtual self and their real self. An important limitation of the study being that it did not analyze activity profile on social media, the users may have spent time texting, reading, game or picture sharing. A further research direction could be in understanding which aspect of social media use is relevant for body image study.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social media allows for curated self-presentation of oneself, the constant exposure of body ideal has had detrimental effects on body image perception, in both males and females. Body image dissatisfaction, however, is reported at significantly higher levels in female social media users in comparison to male social media users. Social comparison theory contends that females increasingly engage in upward appearance related comparisons with their social media network, leading to relative negative body image perception. Body dissatisfaction in females may arise due to negative affect, higher fatness evaluation, altered body perception, body shame and thin ideal internalization.

Time spent on social media does not seem to positively correlate with body dissatisfaction experienced by social

media users. This could be because a measure of time spent could be an aggregate of various activities on a social media platform, not exclusively photograph viewing and comparisons. Individuals may consciously limit their exposure to social media platforms to avoid engaging in appearance related concerns and internalization of body ideals propagated. Alternatively, it could be suggested that individuals investing longer durations in social media activity have a predisposition to endorse body image consciousness. Further research in assessing this parameter (i.e., time spent on social media) could involve tracking activity profiles, to assess time spent on exclusively photograph sharing activities. The findings from the review highlight that the social media use may disproportionately impact dissatisfaction with body image in young adult women. Future research could identify pathways to curate inclusive representation of body ideals on social media, to minimize the reductive representation of a thin body monolith and promote a body positivity culture.

V. REFERENCES

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