

The Influence of Social Media Use on Females' Body Anxiety

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Abstract:

This research considers the impact of social networking sites on ascertaining the level of body image dissatisfaction among women of different ages. In many ways, social media adds to such standards through features such as selected posts, filters, and editing tools that have resulted in heightened body anxiety in women. Some of the studies reveal profound disparities between the types of body anxiety that adolescents, young adults, and middle-aged women undergo. It outlines factors like social comparison, self-discrepancy, and the effects of beauty standards set by influencers. The report also urges further research into the psychological mechanisms that underlie social media's negative effects on body image dissatisfaction as well as the most effective preventative measures, including legislation, education, and social media content modification. In doing so, the study hopes to fill gaps in knowledge, promote informed interventions to prevent body dissatisfaction, and support women's psychological health in the context of social media use.

Keywords: Social media use; body anxiety; body image; self-esteem; social comparison theory.

1. Introduction

Social media is a prevalent aspect of life, especially for young women and adolescent girls in today's technological world. Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat primarily focus on image sharing, and in this context, people act as they want to be seen by others, according to a study by Dotson [1]. They have also helped in the construction of social and cultural perceptions concerning beauty and body shapes [2, 3]. It was a tradition that women had to follow specific beauty standards before, but now, with social media, the pressures are much worse due to constant comparison within the social media platforms. The

constant use of filters, editing applications, and influencers presenting unattainable beauty standards only deepens this problem. Consequently, females often receive the reinforcement of a positive body image, but at the same time, they suffer from enhanced body image anxiety [4]. Contrary to promoting body-positivity and variety in the representation of beauty, social media has been accused of reinforcing stereotyped ideas about beauty, slender, smooth, and young women specifically, and have adversely affected females' self-esteem and body image anxiety [5]. In terms of how social media is affecting women's anxiety over their body image, new questions are being

raised by this cultural dialogue that has emerged from their everyday exposure to these photos.

A lot of attempts have been made to research the relationship between female body image concerns and “social media use” but there are still some challenges which needs to be addressed. Most of the study has been done on the impact of specific applications, including Facebook or Instagram, and less on fresher apps with more popularity among youngsters like TikTok or Snapchat. However, often there are questions about the impact of social networks on the increase in anxiety and worsening of body image in older women because most of the existing studies focus only on teenagers and young people. Furthermore, most studies are conducted in Western societies. Thus, researchers have limited information on how cultural factors impact body anxiety in societies with different beauty standards and use social media differently. Another drawback of the existing literature is its exclusiveness to the quantitative approach, which poses limitations when capturing detailed accounts of people’s experiences. This has invited more qualitative research that tries to explore people’s life narratives and their experience with body anxieties related to social media. Further, few studies can be done on the sustainable effect of good use of social media in stirring up body anxiety in a psychological manner. Such gaps will give a broad perception of the other ways through which the social media affects the body image of the female across age and ethnicity.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the existing research and address the lack of research on the effects of “social media use on female body anxiety”. In more detail, the following variables are emphasized in the present research: age, the social networking sites excluding the most popular site Facebook, and cultural differences. Hence, the present research will, employing the content analysis technique, with emphasis on qualitative

and quality approach, examine the effects of the long term exposure on body images on social media on the self -esteem and body stress of the participating females.

2. Method

2.1 Databases

The databases that were used to conduct the literature review included Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ProQuest. These platforms were chosen based on their full indexing of peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and social sciences and psychology academic papers. By employing these databases, the study provides access to the best and most up-to-date information regarding the impact of social media on female body anxiety“, thus undertaking a comprehensive and credible analysis of the available literature.

2.2 Keywords

The search terms used to identify the relevant research papers include: “social media,” “female body,” “women’s body image,” “self-esteem body anxiety,” “female self-image,” “Instagram,” “TikTok,” “Western and non-Western beauty standards,” “effect of social media on psychological health,” and “women body dissatisfaction.” These keywords were used to filter a broad yet specific scope of literature that deals with the kind of roles social media plays in increasing body image concerns and self-esteem issues in women from different age groups or cultural backgrounds.

2.3 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for selecting articles were as follows in Table 1. below.

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria for Selecting Articles

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and conference papers	Non-peer-reviewed articles, blogs, opinion pieces, or grey literature
Publication Date	Published within the last 10 years (2013-2023)	Published before 2013
Language	English-language publications	Non-English publications
Focus Area	Research focused on social media’s impact on female body image or body anxiety	Research not related to body image or social media
Demographic	Studies addressing females of various age groups	Studies focused on males or non-female gender identities
Cultural Context	Studies from both Western and non-Western cultural settings	Studies not specifying cultural context or irrelevant geographic areas
Study Design	Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies	Editorials, commentaries, or purely theoretical work without data

3. Literature Review

3.1 Definitions and Theories

3.1.1 Body Anxiety and Body Image

Body anxiety is a term used to describe concern or worry an individual feels regarding his or her body size, shape, weight, or any other noticeable characteristic or deformity [6, 7]. This is usually expressed as dissatisfaction with the size, shape, or specific attributes of the body and is correlated with psychological distress, low self-esteem, and even specific disorders [8]. Body image involves how a person and the surrounding world perceive him/her, including how the person perceives him/herself. Positive self-description leads to higher self-esteem [9]. On the other hand, negative self-description is likely to result in body image dissatisfaction and anxiety. In this case, social media can be defined as sites like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, among others, through which users post, interact, and disseminate pictures and videos [10]. These platforms tend to claim rational body images through influencers, celebrities and peer posts, thereby causing users, especially the female kind, to have higher levels of self-comparison and body dissatisfaction [10]. The presence of pictures and videos of skinny, beautiful, and perfectly toned bodies every day on social media creates conditions that enhance body worry, especially among female youth. Such reciprocal influence of social media and body anxiety constitutes a significant concern in studies of the psychological effects of social media usage.

3.1.2 Social Comparison Theory

Developed from the works of the American psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, the Social Comparison Theory holds that self and other's appraisal is based on comparisons that are made [11, 12]. This process commonly assume the pattern of upward social comparisons, whereby people compare themselves to others they assume to be better off in one way or the other, for instance, being beautiful or successful. Concerning the social media, users are always in contact with images, especially social influencers, celebrities, or friends who look as if their lives and looks are perfect. These comparisons can lead to adverse self-emotion and body emotion where women need to deny themselves and their bodies as they are, as they never portray these carefully selected images [13]. This is a factor which is generally associated with effects of time spent on social sites, using platforms with positive comparison attitudes therefore resulting to negative self-attribution and body distress [14]. That is why such upward comparison hinders women self-esteem and body image, and that is why body anxiety has increased in the

social media age.

3.1.3 Self-Discrepancy Theory

Self-discrepancy theory developed by Higgins in 1987 is based on the impact that an individual feels due to discrepancies between the actual self, ideal actual self and ought actual self. [15]. From the actual self, what is the person perceived to be, the ideal self, which is the person that the individual wants to be or the persona the individual admires and aspire to be and the finally the ought self which is the image of the person that is expected in a certain society or community to be. Therefore, discomfort with emotion is expected when people are in a state that elicits a large Social Comparison Orientation between the actual self and ideal self and actual self and ought self [16]. These self-distorting discrepancies are further magnified in social media, where women are constantly given the wrong perception of body size and beauty that they should strive to attain. This constant bombardment may cause them to perceive a more significant discrepancy between their real-life image and the models they see on social media, leading to increased body shame. Self-discrepancy theory gives an experimental background for how social media content affects internal conflicts regarding appearance, which in turn causes adverse emotional reactions and enhanced body dissatisfaction [17].

3.2 The Impact of Social Media on Female Body Anxiety

3.2.1 Social Comparison and Body Anxiety

Comparisons on social media, and especially upward comparisons, lead to a significant increase in body anxiety among female users [3, 18, 19]. The social comparison theory shows that people use other people as a frame of reference to determine their self-worth. This comes as young people who spend most of their time scrolling through social network platforms which include the highly used Instagram and TikTok are exposed to perfect images of influencers, celebrities, and friends. The research by Cohen and Blaszczynski shows that self-comparison is present in 88% of women who use social networks, and 50% of those women noted an increased level of body dissatisfaction [20]. This is even more apparent in upward comparisons, where users compare themselves to those whom they consider as better shaped, fitter, or more successful. These works indicate that increased consumption of such material contributes to increased self-criticism among women who do not consider themselves to be as beautiful as those depicted online. These feelings are further amplified by platforms such as Instagram, where influencers consistently endorse products related to beau-

ty and fitness for women, with over fifty percent of the female users claiming that those platforms cause them to feel pressure to adhere to a certain body shape [21]. As women compare themselves to these idealized figures, they adopt unrealistic physical expectations that give rise to negative body image and body anxiety. The cyclic approach to social comparison heightens these impacts, meaning users cannot easily escape these pressures on social media.

3.2.2 Self-Discrepancy and Social Media

Comparing themselves with these images, women develop a consistent discrepancy between the real and ideal or “ought” self-images, which causes body anxiety [22]. According to the self-discrepancy theory, a perceived lack of fit between “the actual self, ideal self, and ought self” results in negative effects with components of anxiety, guilt and shame [23]. Most of the social media sites, such as Instagram and TikTok show influencers and celebrities who fit what society recognizes as beauty: skinny, well-toned bodies with clear skin. In a poll, it was found out that 70 percent of women claimed that social media has worsened their body image perception due to the pressure of attaining unattainable beauty [24]. This leads to a perceived self-discrepancy due to the constant comparison between their actual bodies and the idealized images portrayed on social media, which are often photoshopped and filtered. For example, the face filters in Instagram and the Snapchat app enable users to change their appearance significantly [25], which is consistent with the misperception between how the women view themselves and the way they think they should look. This emotional cost is, therefore, a function of the growing discrepancy between their perceived self and the culturally imposed, media-fostered standards of beauty.

3.2.3 The Role of Filters, Editing, and Influencers

Social media applications such as “Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok” come with different filters and editing tools where users can change their appearance, get rid of skin imperfections, make their waists smaller, or change the shape of their faces [19, 25]. Research establishes that 55% of young women adjust their looks with filters or photo-editing apps before publishing photos to social media, thus continuing the culture of unrealistic beauty standards [26]. These reconstructed appearances depict a distorted perception of the real reality, making women believe that they have to satisfy such cutout images even though they are fake. It is important to understand that influencers are a mainstay in setting and maintaining these standards. Some of the filters and editing apps used by influencers, especially those in the beauty and fitness

niches, give an impression of perfect body shapes that may not be naturally achievable. Fardouly et al. conducted a survey, and according to the results of the study, a large number of women think that influencers promote unrealistic beauty standards that only weaken them. The aspect of the influencers posting edited pictures creates a feedback loop where the followers embrace the depicted culture and strive to achieve the same standards, thus increasing the levels of anxiety and negative body image [19]. Specifically, platforms such as Instagram, which have integrated an influencer model, have been associated with higher anxiety and self-esteem concerns and body image disturbances among teenage girls and young women in particular.

3.2.4 Age and Cultural Variations in Social Media’s Impact

The impact of age and cultural disparities on body concern is significant when it comes to social media use [27]. Young girls and adolescents are at high risk because of surveys that suggest that most girls aged 12-17 use social media and are exposed to ideal body images [28]. These young people are still in the process of developing their identities, and with daily bombardment by unrealistic beauty standards comes greater body dissatisfaction [29]. According to the study, 70% of teenage girls claimed they felt worse about their bodies after interacting with social media, as they tend to want to look like their role models-influencers or celebrities they see online [30]. For older women, while the pressure to meet societal beauty standards remains, body anxiety often manifests differently, focusing more on aging and the pressure to maintain youthfulness.

Cultural differences also play a role in how women experience body anxiety through social media [3]. For instance, in Western societies, beauty, especially that of women, often culminates in slimness, and women are constantly under pressure to reflect this slimness, which most influencers and celebrities uphold [31]. On the other hand, in many non-western societies, curvaceous or what some would refer to as “plus size” bodies may be more acceptable [32]. Nevertheless, a study by Perloff revealed that Western beauty norms have had adverse effects on the general populace’s body image and have been extended through social media applications like Instagram in non-Western countries [3]. For instance, various investigations from countries such as India reveal that youths, especially female, express heightened body anxiety after interacting with Western role models that advance thinness as the acceptable norm [33]. These cultural and age-related differences underscore how social media has a nuanced impact on body image for diverse groups.

3.2.5 Psychological Consequences of Social Media-Induced Body Anxiety

Anxiety associated with body appearance, made worse by social media use, can lead to particular eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia [3, 34]. Instagram and TikTok, for example, are full of “fitspiration” materials that describe strict dieting and training programs, weight loss, and unrealistic body goals [35]. This content makes thinness and fitness a sign of success. Hence, many women end up having a poor attitude towards eating and their bodies in general. According to the National Eating Disorders Association survey, 70% of women who followed fitness and beauty influencers had signs of unhealthy eating with symptoms like skipping meals or fasting [36]. These behaviours are usually closely related to an obsession with dieting and body size, which may develop into significant eating disorders. Specifically, TikTok is said to contribute to the increased incidence of eating disorders in teenage girls [36]. Most of these videos depict dramatic, unattainable changes to body appearance, thus contributing to body dissatisfaction and deleterious thin idealization. These disorders affect both mental and physical health in women and some of the physical effects are malnutrition, compromised immunity and organ dysfunction [37]. The increase in cases of social media-related eating disorders indicates the risks of the availability of unattainable body images online.

3.3 Body Anxiety among Different Age Groups of Females

Girls aged 12-18 are vulnerable to social media influence, especially during identity development [37]. They lack personal identity and seek approval, often through comparison on platforms like Instagram and TikTok [37]. Exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals can distort adolescents' self-perceptions [38]. Young adult women feel the pressure to be slim and beautiful as they attain adulthood, establish their careers, and search for intimate relationships [39]. Social networks like Instagram depict beauty, physical shape, and fashionable trends as something achievable, allowing only selected and meticulously filtered pictures that stimulate a continuous striving for comparison [40]. This exposure heightens feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction; a study by Perloff found that this group's body dissatisfaction increased with the amount of time spent on appearance-related content [3]. This model expresses pressure to achieve the perfect image online and offline, which consequently causes considerable stress and anxiety, making them fit into the unhealthy behaviors of dieting and rigorous exercising. For middle-aged women, body anxiety focuses on aging, weight change, and socie-

tal expectations to preserve young appearance. Social networking sites especially worsen these worries since they incorporate filters alongside editing apps to promote ideal beauty. Fardouly et al. also discovered that middle-aged women who frequently use social media are more likely to develop dissatisfaction and anxiety attributed to the young-looking portrayals of other individuals [19, 40].

4. Implications

Subsequent studies concentrating on body anxiety and social media should explore the outcomes of these mediating processes more effectively. Examining which kind of content in social media—fitness or beauty—will impact one's body image can give more detailed information. However, other types of research could provide more insight into the evolution of body anxiety as a result of prolonged use of social networks. It is also essential to find out how social media affects subjects differently depending on age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status to better understand how multiple factors interact in the case of body dissatisfaction. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data collection methods is suggested to enhance the comprehension of individual experiences and attitudes. Lastly, identifying new forms of social media and trends and how they influence body image will keep research updated with the latest developments.

To reduce body anxiety connected with social media, media literacy programs must be introduced in schools and the workplace. These programs can make people aware of what is confirmed in the production of content on the digital platform, for example, image editing and setting unrealistic goals. Platforms could also include tools that inform the consumer that the images are manipulated, making it easier to explain such content to people. Encouraging influencers and content creators to post body-positive and realistic content would also help decrease body anxiety. Combined, these strategies can effectively promote a more positive attitude toward using social networks, a healthier body image, and better mental health.

5. Conclusion

Social media has a wide-ranging and intricate impact on women's body image, affecting women of all ages and resulting in a variety of psychiatric issues. The findings of this study presents several implications regarding the urgent problem that seems to be on the rise each day. To begin with, social media leads to the distortion of the perception of reality because it is made up of only the best images that often lead to body dissatisfaction among the women. While body anxiety affects different age groups

differently, all participants noted that constant exposure to ideal images is problematic. Teenagers are vulnerable when forming their identities, and the pressure of building careers and finding partners defines young adulthood. This paper finds out that increased use of social media platforms presents higher levels of body anxiety and negative psychological ramifications, including lowered confidence levels, depressive disorders, and eating disorders. These effects are especially worrisome given how integrated social media has become in people's everyday lives and how much they influence the way they see themselves. It is, therefore, necessary that ways on how the effects of social media on body anxiety can be minimized should be devised to enhance the mental health of females. The initial strategies to take when eradicating body dissatisfaction include initiating the introduction of media literacy programs and encouraging the portrayal of better and diverse body images in media. Furthermore, the social media platforms that host these images must have measures that can prevent image manipulation and promote positive attitudes towards body image. Hence, it can be noted that in terms of theorizing and empirically positing the directions for addressing the problem of body anxiety brought by social media effects, the interdisciplinary approach seems successful. Therefore, with the enlightenment on the effects of social media on body image and the methods discussed above, we can help enhance the positive body image for women on social media platforms.

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