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Amy Wang

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The Impacts of Social Media on Young Adults' Body Images in the United States

by

Amy Wang

Dr. Sa'ed Atshan
Adviser

Anthropology

Dr. Sa'ed Atshan
Adviser

Dr. Erica Kanesaka
Committee Member

Dr. Peter Little
Committee Member

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Amy Wang

Dr. Sa'ed Atshan

Adviser

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Abstract

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Traditionally, media has been treated as a form of communication to large audiences, and this communication was largely one-sided, from performer to audience. However, the rise of social media has changed the ways that media can reach and affect individuals, as social media creates a platform for users to interact with the content they consume and allows regular users to produce content as well. The prominence and use of social media has grown exponentially in the past decade, and these platforms include, but are not limited to, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat and Twitter. As social media emerged, there have been multiple studies that relate young adults' development of body image to their social media usage, although there lacks more holistic studies that investigate this relationship through the lens of the user. The goals of this study were to investigate how social media presented body images to young adults, how young adults consume and react to this content, and what sorts of implications this may bring about. In this study, the relationship between social media and body image was studied through digital ethnography, autoethnography, and participant interviews. Through analyzing the interviews and ethnography data through the lens of theories such as Festinger's social comparison theory and the social contagion theory, it was found that social media both amplifies external, pre-existing factors that can shape body image and creates new environments where individuals' body images can be affected. This, in turn, can affect young adults' body images through either reinforcing or diminishing pre-existing notions of body image issues. We can see these effects implemented through social media users' real-life applications of social media content and their mental health states. With mental health issues on the rise and social media only becoming increasingly prevalent, these findings can be important to consider when introducing future generations to social media and teaching them how to more safely navigate the internet.

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Introduction

Social Media and Body Image

The prominence and use of social media has grown exponentially in the past decade, as well as its effects on the young adult population (ages 18-22), for both people who use and do not regularly use social media in the contemporary United States. These platforms include, but are not limited to, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat and Twitter. As these platforms rise to higher relevance in young adults' everyday lives, its effects on young adults' thoughts, ideas, and perceptions grow as well. These platforms provide content and information across an extremely broad spectrum of social media users' interests, like current events, pop culture, fashion, lifestyle, gaming, and more. When these platforms become young adults' primary source of information and entertainment, this gives social media a great amount of power to influence individuals in many ways.

In particular, these platforms can set the trends, beauty standards, and lifestyle habits for users, in ways that can be both harmful and beneficial. There are positive spaces online that can provide users with a supportive community to engage with. There are also harmful spaces online that perpetuate unrealistic beauty expectations and body standards. Whether these spaces or social media content are harmful or beneficial can be subjective to the user. Current research findings have investigated the way peers react to other peers' social media platforms, showing a more negative body image as a result (Hogue and Mills 2018)¹. And there has been an emphasis on increased negative moods and appearance discrepancies that Facebook, especially, evokes from users (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, and Halliwell 2015)². The effects of social media on

¹ In Hogue and Mill's study, 56 undergraduate young adult women were asked to interact with an attractive female peer on a social media site, and 62 undergraduate young adult women were asked to interact with a family member on social media. Those who engaged in interactions with the peer showed an increase in negative body image, whereas those who engaged the family member did not.

² In Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, and Halliwell's research on women's Facebook usage, they found that female participants who spent 10 minutes on Facebook rather than a magazine website, or an appearance-neutral control

body image seem to be particularly more salient for women (Fardouly and Vartanian 2016)³.

With these findings in mind, I wanted to develop a holistic view on how social media affects the way that young adults view their physical appearances and the way they make decisions based on what they see online, thereby contributing to sociocultural anthropology and the anthropology of media, gender, and health.

Literature Review

In anthropology, media has been traditionally treated as not only the traditional idea of radio and television broadcasts, but also culturally, economically, or politically-driven forms of communication as well as spaces for social interactions (Spitulnik 1993). Media can have a great amount of power, as they can play a significant role in “reinforcing or changing the audiences, values, and behaviors of media audiences” (Spitulnik 1993). In other words, the media can act as an influential force in how individuals process and perceive information and how they interact with the world around them. In recent years, with the rise of social media, the expansiveness of the media and the impact it can have on consumers of the media has grown. In fact, some would argue that social media should be seen as a place where individuals spend a large portion of their lives rather than just as a form of the media or as a communication method (Miller et al. 2016). And if social media can be viewed as a space where people spend their time being a part of, it is only natural that social injustices and inequalities that are prevalent in the tangible world are carried over to this virtual space. In terms of gender, traditionally, women have been treated as “a problem requiring some kind of special attention” whereas men are “more or less taken for granted, or at least not focused upon in a comparably explicit way” (Shapiro 1981). We can see

website reported being in a worse mood. Women who were high in appearance comparison tendency reported greater amounts of appearance discrepancies after using Facebook than those who used the control website.

³ In Fardouly and Vartanian’s overview of research on social media and body image, many research studies have found that body image concerns are more significant for women, so more studies have focused on women than men,

this “special attention” towards how much the media focuses on women in terms of beauty and body expectations in comparison to men. Physical appearances are now seen as extremely malleable through the help of exercise or cosmetic surgeries, which is often only financially realistic for individuals above a certain socioeconomic status, and this perceived malleability can certainly intensify these expectations (Anderson-Fye 2012). Because social media is a space where individuals see idealized posts of others (including celebrities, influencers, and peers) and also post idealized posts of themselves, it can thus be interesting to investigate how the various components of social media platforms can shape individuals’ ideas of beauty, how gender differences may play a role in this relationship, and how impactful social media usage may be in feelings of body satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Methodology

To study the relationship between social media and body image, I gathered information through three different approaches: digital ethnography, personal observations, and interviews. Through digital ethnography and personal experiences, I was able to understand how social media presents body image, and through interviews with other young adults, I was able to develop an idea of how users’ body images may be affected by social media and the implications that those effects can have.

Digital Ethnography

In order to investigate the relationship between social media and young adults’ body images, it was important to first develop an understanding of what sorts of information and content there is on social media that can potentially affect a users’ sense of body image. Digital ethnography is rooted in how online data is holistically studied to provide a broader understanding of the topic of interest (Varis 2014). In the context of this study, I decided to create

a new, anonymous TikTok account, and I browsed through this account's feed, taking note of whatever content there was that could potentially shape a user's sense of body image. The TikTok platform is especially quick to develop an understanding of a user's interests and cater that type of content towards the user, which allowed me to cater my "for you page" (the page where users watch through their recommended TikTok videos) towards content more focused on beauty standards and body image. Because I created a new TikTok account, I was able to have a fresh start on curating the types of videos that show up on my feed, so that account was heavily associated with videos prevalent to my research.

Using my personal experiences with social media as well as the experiences of individuals who were interviewed (research approach described in the next section), I was careful to curate the TikTok content not only to content that may seem obviously related to body image, but also content that may be more subtly or covertly related. When imagining online content that is overtly related to body image, one may think of workout routines or thin models. However, content that may be more subtly related to affecting a user's body image could include dancing videos, people who go viral online just because they look a certain way, or "What I Eat in a Day" videos. Because there are so many different types of content that could affect a user's body image, it was important to try to curate a relatively comprehensive "for you page."

In addition to curating my TikTok "for you page," I was also careful in observing many aspects of the content outside of just the video or visuals that were posted. I especially paid attention to the comment section by looking at what sorts of comments received the most likes and how the content creator may be responding to comments. The comment section is extremely telling of how users process and interpret the content posted, and the number of likes on those comments can be representative of how accurate that comment is to how non-commenters are

also reacting to the content. I also paid attention to the way the content creator framed the content they posted for users. For example, if the caption they use is worded in a certain way or the text they edit over the video is pushing certain implied assertions, then that may be biasing the user's interpretation of the content and potentially perception of body image as well.

Personal Observations

As someone who has been actively on at least some form of social media since age five, dating back to early YouTube videos, I also took from my personal experiences on social media to interpret the ways that social media and body image could be related. Therefore, my research is somewhat autoethnographic, as I already have ties with social media usage. I used my knowledge that I have developed over time through my personal platforms, on Instagram and Youtube especially, to develop an understanding of the types of content that not only play a role in how others' body images could be affected, but also my personal sense of body image. Using what I already know about social media was also helpful when navigating the anonymous TikTok account that I made for the purposes of this study, as I was more familiar with what was important to look for when scrolling and collecting data.

Interviews

To understand users' experiences on their sense of body image and social media, I extensively interviewed 21 undergraduate students at Emory University. The individuals that I interviewed were majority people who were a part of my personal social network. The table below is the demographic breakdown of the 21 participants:

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Research Participants

Gender	Number (of participants out of 21)	Percentage (%)
Women	11	52.4
Men	10	47.6

Race	Number (of participants out of 21)	Percentage (%)
White	4	19.0
Black	1	4.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	17	81.0
Age (in years)	Number (of participants out of 21)	Percentage (%)
19	2	9.5
20	4	19.0
21	15	71.4
22	1	4.8

I asked participants to share their personal experiences of body image, like what factors have been significant in affecting their sense of body satisfaction and dissatisfaction. I also asked them to share about their history of social media usage and their regular usage habits. Finally, I asked them how social media has, if at all, affected their personal sense of body image, what they notice on social media that has played a significant role in their body image, and how they have taken what they have seen online into their real life.

I recognize that my research being somewhat autoethnographic can produce certain biases, which is why I chose to interview other young adults to gather knowledge on their experiences on social media. Additionally, it is important to point out that over 80% of the research participants were Asian/Pacific Islander. While interviewing majority Asian Americans was not the initial intention for my research, the individuals who were willing to participate resulted in being majority Asian. Therefore, I will frame what race the participants that I discuss in my research are, as race may play a role in the way that participants perceive social media and themselves. I used the information that I gathered through their interviews to also help the curation of the content that I would observe through TikTok and the types of content that I would later categorize as playing particularly significant roles in developing body image.

Positionality and Research Experience

When I initially decided to take on this research study, I felt intimidated by the whole process: submitting the IRB proposal, recruiting participants, performing an autoethnography, and most of all, writing the thesis itself. Over the summer, I submitted and re-submitted my IRB proposal a couple of times, and each time, I learned something new about what was needed in order to recruit participants and interview and/or survey them. When my proposal was finally approved at the end of the summer, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief and was excited to take on this project. The interview portion of my thesis was my favorite part of this whole process, as I got to talk to individuals around campus about their experiences with social media and body image. I was really intrigued by the similarities and differences between everyone's stories and also in comparison to my own. It was a fulfilling experience to really connect with and understand the broader picture of people's social media and body image experiences, as I got to follow their stories beyond just what they scroll through on their phone or see in the mirror, but also how their families, friends, upbringing and other external factors played a role in their social media usage and body image formation.

Performing the digital ethnography and autoethnography was a part of my research that I tried my best to maintain as objective of a positionality as possible, especially with the new TikTok account that I created. For the digital ethnography of the newly-created TikTok account, I was careful not to let my own preferences affect the content that I consumed on that account, while also trying not to dismiss my own thoughts and experiences either. For my autoethnography, taking my seventeen years of experiences of social media usage and putting them observations into words was somewhat challenging, as I was worried that the observations I took from my personal experiences with body image and social media were difficult to

understand for someone who may not use social media as regularly or may not be a part of social media at all. I was also concerned that I would hold a biased opinion on how the two (social media and body image) are related, as my personal experiences may lean more towards believing that social media has overall harmful effects on body image. However, sociocultural anthropologist Dr. Sa'ed Atshan describes how autoethnography is supposed to be shaped by one's personal proximity and positionality on the studied material (Atshan 2020). And keeping that in mind enabled my journey of gathering autoethnographic research to highlight more of my personal experiences and positionalities, and in conjunction with the experiences described by the research participants, the autoethnographic portion of my research allowed for the development of an overall more holistic and personalistic take on how social media and body image are related.

Study Overview

From pre-existing studies on body image, I believed that those who were easily influenced would likely experience worsening of body image through social media consumption, especially for women. However, as my research progressed, I realized that the relationship between social media and body image was more complex than I previously thought. The ways that young adults' body images are influenced by social media are also tied to how their body images have been shaped by factors outside of social media, and their preconceived notions of body image can play a role in the types of online content that they consume, which can then further affect their development of body image. In this thesis, my argument is that social media both amplifies external, pre-existing factors that can shape body image and creates new environments where individuals' body images can be affected. This, in turn, can affect young adults' body images through either reinforcing or diminishing pre-existing notions of body image

issues, and we can see these effects implemented through social media users' real-life applications of social media content and their mental health states.

The first chapter, "Social Media's Presentation of Body Image," discusses various factors outside of social media that could affect an individual's development of body image and how social media ultimately plays a role in conjunction with those external factors. Additionally, the first chapter describes how social media passively or actively sets the beauty standards for society, and how figures on social media (i.e. influencers and traditional celebrities) play into realistic and unrealistic expectations of body image. The second chapter, "How Users Consume and React to Online Content," focuses on how users consume the types of content related to body image and how this consumption may play a role in how they view themselves and others. This chapter also covers how regular users post on social media and how they themselves may contribute to the presentation of body image to others. The final chapter, "Implications of Social Media," describes how individuals apply what they see online into their lives, both tangibly and intangibly. This chapter covers how lifestyle habits, conversations with peers, and mental health related to body satisfaction and dissatisfaction can be influenced as a result of social media usage. Because social media is still a relatively new and developing environment for individuals to navigate, the knowledge we gain from these three chapters can ultimately be used for helping future generations of social media users in forming a healthier and safer space to interact online.

Chapter 1: Social Media's Presentation of Body Image

Introduction

This chapter highlights the various ways that social media presents beauty standards to users and how this presentation can thus play a role in how users' body images are shaped. The analyses drawn in this chapter are primarily derived from my personal experiences and from my digital ethnography. Traditionally, individuals' body images were shaped by factors, like Hollywood, familial influence, and peer influence. However, as social media has grown to the vastly influential entity that it is today, it can incorporate all those previous factors into a space where users can be constantly bombarded with content that can affect their body images. In addition to those previous factors, social media also creates new environments that set societal beauty standards, such as areas of body critique and praise, social media influencers, and both harmful and healthy online movements related to body image. Before delving into this chapter, it is important to clarify the use of the term "consumer" or "consumers." Unless explicitly stated otherwise, "consumer" and "consumers" are used under the definition of individuals who consume social media, not individuals who partake in economic or capitalistic activity, and these terms are used synonymously with the terms "users" and "viewers."

When looking at the ways that social media can shape beauty standards and individual's body images, it can be important to investigate how this can even happen in the first place. Festinger's social comparison theory states that individuals will inherently compare themselves to others as a way to reflect on themselves (Festinger 1954). Therefore, when individuals see others online, it is only natural that they notice what is different and similar between themselves and those online. Especially when focusing on people who are well-received or poorly-received in terms of their physical appearances, individuals can take the associations with those people

and use it to shape their own ideas of what is or is not beautiful about themselves. In addition, social contagion theory states that similar behaviors and attitudes are spread throughout social networks without necessarily needing the intent for the spread (Scherer and Cho 2003). When applying social contagion theory to a virtual social network, like social media, the network and reach becomes expansive. When ideas of body image and beauty standards are introduced on social media, the community of people that those ideas reach online can increase at exponential rates, and therefore, no matter if posts are healthy or harmful, social media can introduce those pieces of content to a vast amount of people, affecting all of their perceptions of beauty and body image. Thus, much of this chapter's argument is built on the assumption of both social comparison and social contagion theory.

Domains of Body Image Origins

There are many facets from which body image and societal beauty standards are portrayed and set. Before the rise of social media, much of beauty standards and body image expectations were set through influences of traditional Hollywood, family, and peers. These domains that develop an individual's body image all play different roles in the way that can affect an individual. However, there is now a new glue that can tie all of these domains together: social media. Social media does not trump the traditional ways that people develop their sense of body image, but rather it creates a space that allows for individuals to be increasingly exposed to these domains and also completely new spaces that can shape an individual's body image.

Hollywood

Traditionally, Hollywood has played a large role in the way that societal beauty expectations are set and what sorts of body shapes are glamorized. Interwoven with the rise of Hollywood was the rise of weight loss, especially for women, in the early 20th century (Addison

2003, 6). Before the internet and the rise of social media, what made Hollywood so important in the formation of one's body image was its monopoly over Western popular culture. What one saw on the big screen or on magazines was the main way in which people consumed media. Therefore, if movies were presenting thin and lean women to be perceived as attractive, then thin and lean women became the beauty standard. And if only men with muscular, broad shoulders were portrayed as attractive in movies, then that became the beauty standard for men. And often, that was the case. However, the relationship between societal beauty standards and Hollywood also went the other way. If the general public was perceiving a curvy woman or a slim man as the standard, then Hollywood would recruit more curvy women or slim men into films. The result of this bidirectional relationship between Hollywood stars and beauty standards was how fans fawned over and would strive to look like Hollywood stars, such as Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, and John Travolta. Thus, the rise of Hollywood led to the fixation on diet culture and exercise regimens to achieve this celebrity-set ideals of beauty (Addison 2003, 2).

Originally, most forms of body image were a result of the people they would see in their day-to-day lives. So what made Hollywood different was how they greatly expanded individuals' ideas of what a person could or should look like, especially in the sense that films introduced people to an unattainable ideal of beauty. To look the way that Hollywood celebrities looked was often unachievable because of an endless amount of reasons: genetics, diet, makeup, photo-editing, and more. However, even though these were apparent, people nonetheless strived to look like these celebrities, and thus began the formation of body image as a result of the consumption of Hollywood media.

Family

Familial influence has also played an integral role in building an individual's body image, especially in the earlier stages of one's life. Words that are said and actions that are performed towards someone throughout their development can shape the way that a person self reflects on their appearance (Curtis 2014). In particular, family can play an interesting role because of how unique and potentially significant familial relationships can be. Within a family, both extremely supportive and unsupportive environments have the potential to be fostered, and it is easy to place heavy emphasis on words and actions that come from family due to the commonly significant role that family plays in an individual's upbringing. Outside of the social relationship that one has with their family, there is also the aspect of genetic similarity, at least within a biologically-related family. This genetic connection can be significant in that if an individual shares physical similarities to their family, it is also easier to take what other family members say about their appearances more seriously because in a way, it can feel like they are also saying those things about themselves. Thus, on both a social and a physical level, family can play an important role in the formation of an individual's body image.

Peers

Unlike family, peers are not usually biologically related to one another on a significant level. However, peers are able to play such an important role in an individual's life because they can set a certain standard of what people in real life should look like. Unlike celebrities in Hollywood, peers are individuals whom people see in everyday life, and therefore, what one sees is an unedited, unfiltered form of what their peers look like. This can easily translate to a "what I should look like" mentality because peers are around the same age as each other and are usually similar to each other in various ways. Young girls, especially, are influenced by peer influence through peer body comparison, especially if they see that girls who are conventionally attractive

and thinner are more popular and successful in their social environments (Carey, Donaghue, Broderick 2014). In this context, social comparison theory not only applies to comparisons related to physical appearances but also to the social success of peers. Through the associations between and comparisons of physical appearance and social success, individuals are then able to build their idea of what they may lack or need to improve on to be considered beautiful in relation to their peers. Peers are also unique in that one does not necessarily grow out of them the way one may a family. With family, one may eventually grow older, establish more independence, and their familial influence may lessen. However, there is a high chance that one will be surrounded by their peers for a large part of their life, and so the influence of a peer may remain ongoing.

Social Media

While all of the above domains play a large role in the formation of people's body images, the rise of social media arguably plays the largest role in facilitating the formation of young adults' body images. However, social media is not a separate entity from the other domains but rather an encapsulation of all of them into an extremely accessible form. In addition to the above mentioned domains, social media has also created an entirely new environment for people to interact with an endless amount of individuals around the world and thus a new environment in which beauty standards can be created and re-confirmed.

Social media has helped Hollywood celebrities attract more attention. As these celebrities post on platforms like Instagram or Tiktok, viewers can not only keep up with their upcoming projects, like new films, but viewers can also get to know the celebrity on a more personal level that they do not normally see through traditional cinema and entertainment. The relationship between the traditional celebrity and social media are mutually beneficial. The celebrity is able

to connect with and expand their fanbase as well as use the platform for promotions or marketing purposes, and the social media platforms will gain users who want to keep up with these celebrities' lives. In this way, social media is very much tied together with Hollywood and even broadens the reach of Hollywood.

In addition, social media creates a space where family and friends can keep up with each other without necessarily needing direct contact with those individuals. In both cases, social media serves as a way for individuals to stay in touch with people who they may not necessarily see often in their everyday lives anymore, and in that way, it keeps people connected despite physical distance. Before social media, it would be difficult to stay connected to friends and family who may have moved away, but now, as social media is such a common place for people to post and connect with each other, it is so easy to get absorbed in the influx of posts and the feeling of needing to keep up with everyone. In addition to friends and family, the ability to search up *anyone* with just a few taps on one's phone is so novel and yet so crucial now to the social worlds of young adults, and it only further adds to the diverse amount of social connections that social media is able to provide to users.

Because social media platforms give rise to so many new forms of social connections, the way that individuals form their sense of body image is now evolving as well, in both positive and negative ways. Individuals are met with an unlimited amount of content and access to people's pictures and videos that they post, and that can have so many different implications for the user. Therefore, social media is both an embodiment of the different domains of body image origins as well as a completely new environment for body image to be fostered.

Content Creators in Social Media

In order to grasp how social media may influence body image, one must first understand the people behind the posts that are on social media and how these people may advertently or inadvertently set the beauty standard for online viewers. Viewers are constantly bombarded online with so many different types of content from varying types of creators, and these sources of online content can hold different meanings in terms of how they may shape an individual's perception of body image. Each group of people who post on social media have fluctuating levels of relatability to the consumer, and those levels of relatability are what determines how each group shapes societal beauty standards and personal body image. Those who are less relatable are less likely to induce comparison and more likely to spread attitudes or certain behaviors that users may mimic, and those who are more relatable are more likely to cause comparisons for the user.

Celebrities

Celebrities on social media are those who did not gain rise to fame due to platform usage. They became famous through a way separate from social media, and so social media serves as another outlet to channel their fame. That is not to say that celebrities do not *need* social media to grow their name and brand, but it is to say that social media is likely not their only source of income. For example, Kim Kardashian rose to fame because she worked under Paris Hilton and because her sex tape was leaked. That led to her fame and wealth, and it earned her a well-known show, *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, as well as a very successful clothing brand called Skims. Therefore, celebrities, like Kim, are not financially dependent on their social media platforms and are more likely to use their accounts to steer the public perception of themselves more freely in the direction that they desire.

Users who come across celebrities' accounts usually have a sort of understanding that these celebrities already come from a place of wealth and fame, and so the pictures they post, the way they look, and the lives they live are all on a level that is not perceived to be easily attainable. However, because many celebrities do exist in a place of privilege and people like to strive towards privilege, the social and wealth gap does not always stop users from trying to achieve even a little bit of proximity to them. Especially because on social media, celebrities get to form a closer bond to their fanbase and be more vulnerable, the connection that they share with their fans can then be capitalized on, whether by the celebrities or by others. In a material sense, if a celebrity wears a certain piece of clothing, then the company who makes that piece can then post images of the celebrity and use them as pieces of promotion for their company (Albert, Ambroise, Valette-Florence 2017). Having the legitimacy of a well-known individual back up the company's reliability can then be beneficial on a number of levels through a marketing lens. And often, the root of consumption in this context can be traced back to individuals trying to reach a certain proximity to their idolized celebrities.

In the same way that celebrities can influence the consumption habits of social media users, celebrities can also influence what sorts of body types and physical appearances are the most "attractive" at the time. This is apparent as different body types are trendy for different time periods, particularly for women. In the 1990s, the "heroin chic," emaciated-looking bodies were trendy, so more people would try to lose weight and achieve that look (Arnold, 1999, 280). In the early 2000s, low-rise bottoms became very trendy, so having a flat, toned stomach and body was glamorized, as seen by celebrities like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. In the later 2000s and early 2010s, the rise of curvy bodies became trendy, so people strived to have a small waist and wide hips, otherwise known as the "hourglass" figure. In particular for the time period of the

curvy, hourglass figure, social media had become extremely prevalent, and for a certain group of celebrities, posting content in which their bodies look effortlessly hourglass became very popular.

As mentioned before, Kim Kardashian and the entire Kardashian Jenner family in general have paved the way for these trendy body types throughout the years. The reason why the Kardashians are chosen in this research as such emblematic figures towards paving beauty standards is because of their expansive audience reach and their position of privilege that allows them to change their bodies very quickly. The five Kardashian Jenner sisters stretch across a large range of ages, from 25 to 43, and they also all have varying body builds, from tall, slim, and muscular (Kendall Jenner) to shorter and curvier (Kim and Kourtney Kardashian). However, no matter how different they may look, all of the sisters' bodies are perfectly sculpted and hourglass, and their bodies have been able to change drastically throughout the years, whether from cosmetic procedures or diet and exercise changes. Their appearances play into their unique position as an extremely influential family, with at least two hundred million followers per Instagram account. With the sisters' diversity in age and different body sizes and builds, a vast amount of people, women in particular, can feel as if they can choose a sister to like the most or strive to look like, and the sisters' extensive presence on social media allows their family to play a large role in shaping people's body images through the way they look in the pictures that they post.

Therefore, as celebrities like the Kardashians and Jenners started getting cosmetic procedures done, like liposuction or the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) in order to achieve the hourglass figure, more of the general population became inclined to get cosmetic surgeries done as well. This rise in prevalence of cosmetic procedures shows how social contagion theory

applies to social media users. According to the Aesthetic Plastic Surgery National Data Bank statistics from 2016, there has been a 711.2% increase in breast lifts, 342% increase in buttock lifts, 517.2% increase in thigh lifts, and 433.9% increase in tummy tucks since 1997. In terms of nonsurgical procedures, injectables have been very popular, with an increase of 6,956.6% increase in such procedures between 1997 and 2016 (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery 2016).

The increase in the usage of these cosmetic procedures can be attributed to a number of factors, including faster recovery times, better technologies suited for these procedures, and media popularity. Media popularity is in part a result of celebrities getting procedures done or having their bodies treated like a goal or inspiration for others to base off what they want their body to look like. When an individual sees people like the Kardashians, who have undergone these procedures, receiving so much social media engagement (likes, comments, reposts on other social media accounts) from the pictures they post, viewers will likely develop the idea in their minds that the way the Kardashians look is what society deems as attractive. Additionally, when celebrities' bodies are so closely followed and analyzed with both praise and criticism, it becomes easy for consumers to develop a mental image in their head of what's "hot" and what's "not." And while getting cosmetic surgery may only be accessible to those who are in a higher financial class, cosmetic surgery due to celebrity influence can serve as an indicator that the way people want to look is constantly changing. Because celebrities set the trends for body types, the posts that they make on social media can be socially contagious and thus largely influential to the way that regular consumers build their own sense of body image.

Influencers

The rise of social media influencers unlocked a completely new realm of people for everyday consumers to idolize and develop an online connection with. Unlike celebrities, social media influencers are those who became famous due to their presence on social media, and oftentimes, their presence on social media becomes a source of income for these individuals. Influencers can become famous due to a variety of different reasons: fashion, gaming, sports, makeup, and more. What makes influencers special is the level of relatability that they hold for consumers. It gives consumers, on some level, an underlying sense that they can also do and achieve what influencers do and achieve. Moreover, because influencers build their brand and platform based off of content they choose to create and audience members choose to consume an influencer's content due to their own interests, the relationship between an influencer and their fanbase can be a lot more personal than regular celebrities (Edström, Kenyon, Svensson 2016, 156). Influencers can make their audience feel very connected to them, almost as if they are each other's friends, thereby forming a level of trust between an influencer and their audience.

Depending on the way that influencer uses this relationship, this trust can be helpful, harmful, or somewhere in between. Influencers can abuse this trust and mislead their audience for their own economic gain, or they can use this trust as a way to help their audience. For the purposes of this chapter, the aspect of trust that is between an influencer and their audience that is relevant is the ways in which it can drive consumers to mimic their favorite influencer. For example, if their influencer recommends a certain product, then their audience may be more inclined to purchase that product, whether or not that product is actually helpful to the consumer. These recommendations are seen through the major way that influencers make money on social media: brand deals. Through brand deals, influencers will promote certain brands and recommend various products to their fanbase. Because of an influencer's close bond with their

audience, fans are more likely to trust the influencer and take the recommendations that they make.

Depending on the type of content that influencers create, consumers will likely compare themselves to the way influencers look. While there are many reasons why people can become famous online, being *both* conventionally attractive and being good at the type of content that they create seems to be a popular combination. Some influencers who give gym and health-related advice very much actively set the standard and provide inspiration for how viewers wish to look. Other influencers may be more into providing lifestyle and fashion related content and so both the way that they look and live are used as inspiration for a viewer. In recent cases with TikTok, some influencers are people who go viral on TikTok from videos of them lip syncing or dancing to a song, and their virality is oftentimes primarily tied to how attractive the audience perceives them to be. When comparing oneself to an influencer, it can be easy for a consumer to think things like, “Oh, I can make a dancing video on TikTok too” or “I can give decent fashion advice as well.” But the difference between an influencer and the consumer is that the influencer is actually achieving success from doing what they do, and the consumer may not be. And while not all content consumers necessarily strive to also become an influencer, consumers may still believe that to be an influencer is an easily achievable job because of the level of relatability that the influencer shares with the consumer. Therefore, when viewers consume influencer content, they feel like they *can* be the influencer, but for some reason, the influencer lifestyle is just out of reach for them because they can never quite achieve the level that that their influencer is at. This dynamic between being relatable but also out of reach is what can really affect viewers’ perceptions of themselves because they can feel like despite doing

everything they can (following the routines that their influencers promote, buying the products that they recommend, etc.), they are never quite enough.

Friends

On social media, it seems almost second nature to connect with one's friends and keep up with their lives through their posts. Out of celebrities, influencers, and friends, friends' content has the highest level of relatability to users. This level of relatability makes users extremely susceptible to self comparison, which means that someone's friend's post can be significant in the development of their body image. Seeing friends post online is unlike celebrities and influencers because in most cases, friends have seen each other in real life before and have already developed a mental image of what they look like in their head. Thus, seeing the pictures of what a friend posts online is a different experience from only ever seeing someone online. There are so many different directions that this experience can go. Because social media is a place where people like to post the best pictures of themselves, that environment can easily slip into a very supportive or a toxic space. On one hand, posting a good picture of oneself and receiving supportive comments can be very uplifting. On the other hand, seeing friends post pictures of themselves could make others feel insecure or that they are missing out on something. But these are only simplified possibilities of a vast amount of feelings, complicated or not, that can underlie the reactions from when they or their friends post. To put it in simpler terms, friends can significantly shape people's body images and set beauty standards because of how similar, relatable, and close friends can be to each other.

What Sets the Beauty Standard

There are many different ways in which physical culture is represented throughout social media. There are ways that passively set norms and beauty standards, and there are ways that

actively do so. Different sides of social media highlight the different ways that beauty standards come about, and they all cohesively work together to create society's idea of attractiveness.

Gym and Fitness

A particular side of social media that can set these standards is the fitness and gym side of social media. A big part of gym and fitness social media are progress pictures, workout routine videos, diets, and setting and reaching goals. This side of social media is also extremely extensive in its showcase of fit people's bodies, and people often show their gym progress through numbers. The influencers and celebrities on this side of social media often have very high muscle mass and very low body fat, and through numbers, many will share their body weight, body measurements (waist, chest, hips, and shoulders), how much weight they can lift in different positions, and more. Numbers make it extremely easy for online consumers to compare themselves to those influencers and celebrities because it then sets objective goals that individuals can reach in order to feel like they can also be like the people they see online. Because of this type of culture, people will believe that if someone follows the fitness routines that those influential individuals share, then they will start seeing progress in their bodies towards the direction of looking more like those influential figures. Why even strive to look like those fitness influencers and celebrities in the first place? Because the general public seems to react positively towards the way that these famous people's bodies look, then consumers of gym and fitness content will start forming the connection that looking this certain way will allow them to be more accepted in society.

Critiques and Comment Sections

A huge part of how societal beauty standards are set comes from the general audience's critique of other people's bodies. When body-critiquing articles are published on social news

outlets or the comment section of someone's post is filled with critiques about the way an individual looks, there is no other clearer indication of what is considered physically desirable and what is not. There have been so many different viral moments for celebrities throughout the years where celebrities, particularly female ones, have been praised or criticized for how they look while wearing swimsuits or other revealing pieces of clothing. In 2015, pictures of celebrity Selena Gomez on the beach in a bikini surfaced, showing that she had put on some weight since the last time that fans had noticed. All over social media, people were commenting on the way that she looked, and many of those critiques were negative, with the indication that she looked "better" when she was skinnier. Or whenever models, like Emily Rajitowski, are spotted at the beach, they will be photographed, and the tabloids that post them on social media will have many comments praising how they look in their bikini. The praise is often given to those who have slender bodies, toned stomachs, and an overall "fit-looking" physique. These tabloids also do not shy away from providing multiple pictures of the celebrity that they are referring to, and those visual aids are what drives the mental image of celebrities' bodies into its readers' minds, and it provides visual context for what is considered beautiful.

In addition to celebrities, critique for bodies also comes through for influencers and regular people who go viral online. Virality occurs because of something that catches the viewers' attention, especially something that is at an extreme. Therefore, in short form content, when videos of people go viral on social media, it can be because of how extremely conventionally attractive or unattractive someone is or if there is a body part on them that stands out in some way. What makes these forms of content, especially on TikTok, interesting is to read the comment sections of these videos. When people go viral for looking a certain way, the comment section is extremely indicative of what the general audience thinks of the way that the

content creator looks. Sometimes it could be because everyone is in awe of how small someone's waist is or how pretty their eyes are. Other times, it could be accusing someone of being overweight or having extremely large arms. Whatever the case is, the comment section will be able to tell someone if that feature is considered attractive or not, and similarly to the celebrities' tabloids, viewers who read these comment sections can then better understand the societal expectations for beauty.

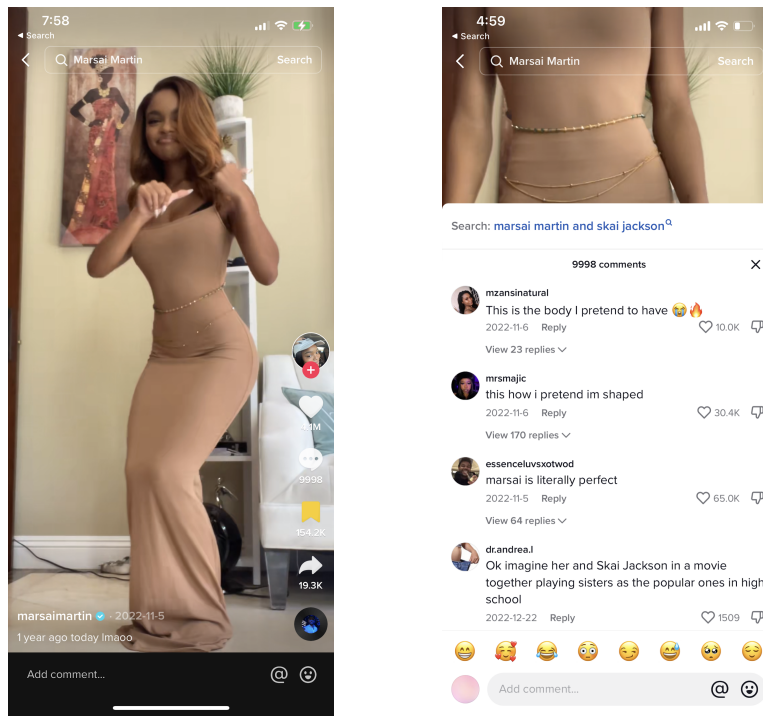


Figure 1. This TikTok video went viral, with over four million likes and 25.9 million views, and we can see in the comment section that many people are praising her hourglass figure.

“Thinspo” and “Fatspo”

A harmful way that content creators set beauty standards is through posting “thinspo” and “fatspo” pictures. The term “thinspiration” originated from a pro-anorexia movement in the 1990s, otherwise known as “pro-ana.” As the 90s’ beauty standard revolved around emaciated looking bodies, pro-anorexia websites began emerging that normalized anorexic behavior, particularly for women (Burke 2012). Over time, the pro-ana movement began to die down as it

became clear how toxic that movement was, but it never truly went away. That community is now emerging into social media as “thinspiration,” which can encourage similar habits as the pro-ana websites did. The thinspiration side of social media is where people will post a series of pictures, especially focusing on particular celebrities or body parts, that serve as their motivation to become thin. People will use pictures of thin people as inspiration to lose weight, and these pictures are known as “thinspiration” or “thinspo” (Boepple and Thompson 2016). Similarly, “fatspo” pictures are pictures of people who are larger, and the motivation behind looking at “fatspo” pictures is to remind oneself to keep losing weight so that they do not become the people in those pictures. Like the pro-ana websites, this space can be very harmful, as this example of social contagion shows the toxic sides of social media. Most of the larger social media platforms have attempted to ban thinspiration content, so typing in the words “thinspo” or “thinspiration” will not lead an individual to any search results. However, people will always find a way around these bans, as they can spell those words differently or still post the pictures that they would have wanted to anyways. While the thinspiration side of social media is much smaller compared to the gym side or the viral side, the mere existence of that community means that there is still space for it to grow, and the pattern of fat shaming and idolizing thinness will continue over time.

On this particular side of social media, K-pop idols are commonly idolized for how thin they are. And this goes further than just appreciating the way that an idol looks; the particular signs that show how thin an idol is are what gets glamorized. For example, extremely sharp shoulders, prominent collar bones, thigh gaps, and thin arms are all features indicative of thinness. And while these features are not usually valued in Western society and can also point to potentially unhealthy amounts of thinness, they are often now used as thinspiration for people.

The Asian ideal of thinness has been popularizing in the United States as thin bodies are becoming trendy again, and because K-pop idols are often held to the standard that they need to be very thin or else they will be heavily criticized in Korea, these idols are often the epitome of thinness. Even with potential health issues aside, this glamorization of thinness can be so harmful for the mental development of young adults because it paints the picture that they must look that thin in order to be considered attractive in society.

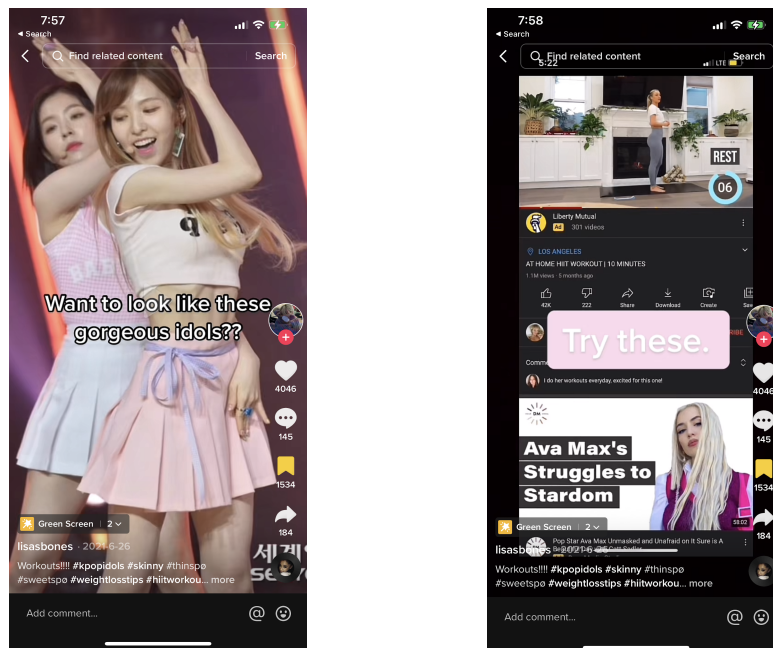


Figure 2. This is a TikTok video that showed multiple pictures of thin K-pop idols with the caption “Want to look like these gorgeous idols?” Following the pictures are screenshots of YouTube workouts that are supposed to help people look like the pictured K-pop idols.

The Algorithm

When looking at the already mentioned sides of social media and people on social media that can shape beauty standards and an individual’s body image, it is important to observe the way that social media as a whole pushes more conventionally attractive people to the top of the algorithm. The social media algorithm is how social media platforms recommend content to users based on the predicted amount of relevancy to the user and the likelihood that the user will

engage with that content. Recommender systems, in particular, are algorithms often used by social media platforms because they are able to present users with content liked by other similar users, so that content will be continuously pushed to users' feeds (Anandhan et al. 2018). The algorithm's use of recommender systems means that because users more likely engage in content with attractive people, then other users are more often presented with the same content, meaning that it is easier for individuals to come across content that presents or sets the beauty standard. As previously mentioned, influencers or people who go viral on social media usually are good at what they do *and* they are conventionally attractive. Thus, when people receive more attention on their posts on social media, it can be attributed not only to the quality of the content that they post, but also to how attractive the content creator is. When the person in the content is more attractive, consumers are more likely to engage with the content, and the more they engage in the content, the more the algorithm will believe that that content will be appreciated by additional people. And therefore, the algorithm will more likely push up content made by or featuring conventionally attractive people, allowing consumers only to see a plethora of one type of beauty represented.

The Facade (Transparency and the Lack Of)

Because social media can be such a curated space of content, people will try to look their best in the pictures or videos that they post of themselves. Since celebrities and influencers can hide behind their phone screens, it can be difficult to tell if they have edited their bodies or face a certain way, if they have had cosmetic surgery done, or if they are just posing in a particular way. And while there may seem to be nothing inherently harmful about doing things that boost one's self-confidence, editing, cosmetic surgeries, and skillful posing can all build a certain facade to take away from what an individual really looks like, which can be misleading for fans who are

trying to mimic their favorite celebrities' appearance. If they follow a famous individual's routine in hopes of looking more like them, but that person really achieved how they looked through an external factor, then the consumer would have been following this routine for no reason. This is where the issue of transparency becomes an interesting moral dilemma.

There are not many non-invasive, definitive ways to prove whether a celebrity or influencer has gotten procedures done or has refined their photo to make themselves look different unless they admit it themselves. Therefore, celebrities and influencers being transparent about these things can be so important in the context of how consumers will shape their mental image of what a natural body looks like and thus their perception of their own bodies. There are so many celebrities and influencers that people have speculated have gotten procedures done or have been exposed for editing their photos to make themselves look better, and by continuing to not be open with what they have done, it can be difficult for young people to understand what is natural and normal.

In the past few years, a more body positive movement has been rising, where people have become increasingly open and honest about what their bodies really look like and their personal struggles with body image. The body positive began popularizing on social media in the early 2010s as a way for women to challenge the beauty standards, and over time, it has evolved into a movement that promotes "all bodies are beautiful." Thus, the body positive movement creates a space where anybody can post their body insecurities online, and their cathartic sharing can then reshape the way that others view themselves (Sastre 2014). Individuals may post pictures of themselves where their cellulite and rolls may be more noticeable, and in doing so, they are trying to normalize having features that are usually shamed by society. Or they will be very open to the type of procedures that they have gotten done or what they edit in their pictures. This

movement of open and honest conversations about body image is still relatively new on social media, but as more people post more honestly about what they look like or what they do to enhance their appearance, the more that social media consumers will be steered away from the mindset of traditional beauty standards. However, the body positivity movement has its own downsides as well, as businesses will use body positivity as a marketing tactic to the point where it seems ingenuine or how body positivity may still marginalize overweight or obese individuals due to the ongoing association between body positivity and overweight individuals. While the body positive movement is still evolving to overcome such issues, the sorts of changes that the original intention of the movement can bring about for social media consumers can certainly be monumental in breaking down societal norms and reshaping people's perceptions of their body.

Conclusion

Social media provides such a wide range of people, content, and communities that shape individuals' body images. It has allowed how people view themselves to grow in various directions because of the way it can constantly expose users to content that shapes beauty standards. The different types of people who create content - celebrities, influencers, and peers - all vary in how they can affect an individual because of their differing levels of relatability to the user. Because people online are now virtually within an individual's social network, based on the social comparison theory, users will analyze the similarities and differences between themselves and those figures, which will then affect the way that they view themselves. Additionally, the types of communities, content, and discourse that occur online also affect the attitudes and behaviors that consumers develop as they are exposed to those sides of social media. Thus, based on social contagion theory, users are more likely to develop similar habits or attitudes based on

what they see is promoted online, which can either harm or help the way they view their own bodies.

This chapter primarily focused on social media's representation of beauty standards and how those representations can shape a user's idea of personal body image. However, users are often not on all the sides of social media; they are more likely to be consuming social media in a way that caters to their interests, as seen by how the algorithm presents them content. Therefore, to continue this discussion, it can be important to investigate social media from the point of view of users and the various ways that they consume, react, and reflect from the things they see online. There are three aspects to the social comparison theory: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Kramer, Tiedens, and Ophofen 2008). Self-evaluation is more about objective comparisons whereas self-improvement focuses on how an individual can learn from others on how to better themselves, and self-enhancement focuses on how an individual may protect their own self-worth through comparison (Kramer, Tiedens, and Ophofen 2008). While this chapter highlighted more of ways in which an individual may self-evaluate, the following chapter will highlight whether social media can also have self-improving or self-enhancing effects, which can point more towards the positionality that users themselves actually develop towards how social media affects their body images.

Chapter 2: How Users Consume and React to Online Content

Introduction

This chapter focuses on how users react to the content they consume online as well as how users themselves create content, and this analysis of users is derived from extensive interviews with young adults and their experiences with their body image and social media. Because the regular social media user can come from a diverse array of backgrounds, it is important to understand how their backgrounds relate and contribute to the way that they process the content they see on social media. Additionally, it is important to understand what audiences they may be trying to impress, whether that is themselves or others. From these interviews, there was a noticeable gender divide in the ways that men and women process social media content in relation to their body images, which can also be attributed to broader societal gender norms and inequalities. And finally, this chapter discusses the ways that regular social media users themselves post online and how what they post may play a role in affecting others' senses of body image. When the term "regular user" is used throughout this chapter, it is referring to the regular or common social media user who does not have a public or significant platform. These are people who spend most of their time on the consumption end of social media.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, my conclusions are made on the basis of the social contagion and social comparison theory. The social contagion theory emphasizes that behaviors and ideas are spread throughout social interactions even without the intent of spreading (Scherer and Cho 2003). The social comparison theory states that individuals naturally will compare themselves to those around them in order to self reflect (Festinger 1954). The social comparison theory has three appraisals: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Kramer, Ingledew, and Iphofen 2008). This chapter will focus more on the self-improvement and

self-enhancement appraisals, which are, respectively: how people evaluate themselves in comparison to others to improve upon themselves and how people avoid comparison to protect their self-worth.

Reactions to Online Consumption

When discussing how online consumption can affect users' body images, it is important to take into account the various backgrounds that users come from. There are many different factors external to social media that have shaped the way that users already view themselves, as highlighted in the last chapter, and the presence of social media can then either enhance or take away from what the user already assumes about themselves. For young adults who are constantly socializing within a culture that emphasizes the significance of the internet, exposure to any content on social media that may affect body image can thus potentially play an important role in the way that consumers digest and apply that content to their own lives.

Body Image Shaping

Each user who consumes social media comes from their own history of what has shaped their body image, and therefore, the reactions that each user has to their consumption of online content varies. In general, those who are predisposed to more body image issues and insecurities will find that social media can amplify, validate, and exacerbate these thoughts. And on the opposite end, those who do not already have these seeds of body image issues and insecurities planted in their minds will often find that social media does not necessarily make these issues enhanced. However, the extent to which people are predisposed to body image issues and how much they are affected by online content falls on a wide spectrum. In addition, it is important to emphasize that the previous generalizations are just as they are named: generalizations. Therefore, individuals who are not previously aware of body image issues do have the potential

to develop them due to social media. And individuals who have insecurities can also be unaffected by social media or even find a certain relief from their body dissatisfaction on social media. The variations in the relationship between predisposed sense of body image and social media are endless, but this section will attempt to categorize the overarching trends in this relationship.

High Predisposition, Worsening of Body Image

“You're 11 years old and you pigeonhole yourself into a YouTube video and read all the comments about everyone's progress. For example, like on a workout video, you're trying to do this workout video at 11 and not trying not to have your parents know. You read the comments and you're looking at everyone's progress and then everyone puts their measurements in the comments. So then you're out here measuring your legs, which you shouldn't be doing, and then are trying to make them skinnier.” -Abby

Abby, a 21 year-old Asian American student, started dancing when she was three, and a large part of her body image was shaped by her experiences through dance. This means that from a young age, she was aware of the physical qualities that she wanted her body to have, and because of the rigorous training and strict appearance expectations at her dance studio, she developed body dissatisfaction very early on. As seen by her experience with wanting her legs to make her legs skinnier, social media can often fuel a greater amount of body dissatisfaction and exacerbate existing insecurities.

This is a commonly-seen relationship between social media and body image: high predisposition to body image issues and thus a strong susceptibility to have these insecurities validated and worsened by online content. As discussed in the previous chapter, social media nowadays runs on an algorithm to give consumers content that they believe will keep consumers

interactive with the platform. In other words, “what will keep them coming back?” For users who already have a particular bias to the types of bodies they think are attractive and are to be strived for, the algorithm will likely present them with content that shows this type of beauty and body expectation, and therefore, they will find themselves in a kind of positive feedback loop where their ideas of beauty and their own insecurities are amplified as they see more content that validates their thoughts on their body image.

In many of these cases, users are exposed to toned, fit bodies, and for women, the hourglass, slim figure is particularly emphasized. Therefore, if a user thinks that they are not slim enough, like Abby, or that their waist is not small enough, and then they see people online who receive praise for their slimness and hourglass figure, then it becomes easy to build strong associations between those physical qualities and being perceived as attractive in society. And these predisposed ideas of beauty do not necessarily have to be thin or hourglass; it can be whatever the consumers already perceive as attractive.

High Predisposition, Improvement of Body Image

“Luna Montana, she used to be a dancer as well. She's a YouTuber or she was a YouTuber. Now she does like all forms of social media. And I would watch her for dance content when I was younger. And then around the time of high school, she would also start talking about body image stuff. And then that was like a safe space for me. Like I used to watch her videos and cry in my room and be like, wow, like dance is a bitch. But like, also it was good to know that like other people were having similar experiences and like, we were all like, healing together, if that makes sense.” -Abby

Abby was able to find a certain type of comfort through watching someone else online share their similar experiences in a way that helped Abby unpack her own traumas. Like Abby,

users who have a high predisposition to body image issues can also find a space on the internet where they feel like the way that they look is accepted as beautiful and thus their idea of their body image improves. This often means that they have come across a side of social media where their body type is represented in a positive way, and/or others are receiving this body type positively. In some spaces, users find a community of people who relate to each other in similar ways regarding their body insecurities, and those communities often have individuals who have experienced growth from their body image issues, which then helps the people who are trying to improve their personal sense of body image. In these spaces, the social comparison theory encapsulates how users are able to unpack some of their insecurities, as the connection between the user and the community is vital in helping that user work through their struggles.

Note: It is important to emphasize that neither of these categorizations are mutually exclusive (as seen from Abby's experiences). The internet is not a vacuum, so it is very likely that users can and will be exposed to both beneficial and harmful sides of the internet that will affect their body image. Therefore, the push-and-pull of each side and the sorts of content that really affect users are ultimately what determines how social media affects their body image as a whole.

Low Predisposition, Worsening of Body Image

Those who have a low predisposition to body insecurities often approach social media without a strong expectation for what they think that they will find in terms of body image. However, in certain cases, if an individual is bombarded with a lot of content that praises or puts down certain body shapes, that individual can be swayed in a certain direction for body image, and that can be in the negative direction. In these situations, it is possible that the individual has just not been predisposed to much discourse related to body image before but is still very impressionable in that context rather than an individual who has been exposed to this type of

discourse before but is just rather unaffected by it. This individual may have been predisposed to certain ideas of body image before but did not read much into it until they were more consistently presented with related content on social media. In that case, their sense of body image was not bad to begin with up until prolonged social media usage, which is unlike the previous two categorizations.

Low Predisposition, Improvement of Body Image

Those with low predisposition and experience an improvement in body image are likely people who are naturally secure in the way they look, or they see people online who they relate to and are able to build their confidence in that direction. People who experience this combination are often either some variation of the societal beauty standard, or the content they are presented with on social media is supportive and positive in terms of body image. This combination seems to be more rare because if an individual is already secure in the way they look, it is likely that they are not easily swayed by various factors that could affect their confidence. People who are already in this secure mindset do not necessarily pay attention to as much content related to body image, so the algorithm may not recommend as much content to them in that area.

Low Predisposition, Body Image Unaffected

People who have a low predisposition to body image issues are most often relatively unaffected by the content they see online pertaining to body image. As mentioned before, those who are already secure in themselves are likely less exposed to content pertaining to body image. What is interesting about these people is that when they are exposed to such content, like workout routines or content related to someone who is conventionally attractive, they may even have passing thoughts about themselves and may experience comparison to some extent, but they

are able to separate their view of themselves from the content they see online. We can see this phenomenon through talking to John:

“I think there was a while ago where I might have felt a little bit more insecure about that kind of stuff. And I think that might have pushed me to say how I'm gonna start going to the gym more or whatever. But now it's like I've gone over those kinds of insecurities and it's just like, mainly just focusing on myself rather than caring about what other people look like.”

John is a 21 year-old Asian American man who has had a relatively mild history with body image issues. John's ability to separate what he sees online from himself and being able to focus on himself instead of others is interesting because it means that he may take the things he sees online as not an accurate representation of what people are like and thus not a realistic source of comparison. In context with the social comparison theory, those who are able to protect themselves from these comparisons are experiencing the self-enhancement appraisal (Kramer, Ingledew, and Iphofen 2008). In other words, they are able to categorize certain comparisons as irrelevant in order to protect their own self worth, and in doing so, their body satisfaction levels can remain as it was.

Who to Impress?

What are people searching for when they want to make changes to the way that they look? Many times, people are looking for some sort of validation or approval from others or themselves so they can feel more satisfied and content. Intrinsically, internal validation (approval from oneself) and external validation (approval from others) are hard to separate when it comes to how it affects someone's body image because it becomes difficult to discern at what point one's thoughts about oneself and others' thoughts about oneself are distinct. However, the way

that they manifest in users' mindsets are different, and it is important to understand those manifestations and thus what drives people to want to make changes to their bodies.

External Validation

When people want to change certain features of the way they look, it is often tied to more than just their view of themselves. The way that they view themselves is also tied to how they think others view them. *Am I skinny enough? Is my nose the perfect shape? Are my hips not wide enough?* These types of thoughts often circulate among young adults who are trying to reach a certain goal, that goal oftentimes being external validation. Because society praises certain body types or features over others, users may think that if they fit within that standard of beauty, others around them will accept them more, find them more desirable, and thereby be a better fit member of society. Especially with the way that social media can push the beauty standard upon users, it can be difficult to not want to conform to that expectation. However, those who try to change themselves for the approval of others are often the ones who undergo the greatest amount of unrest and insecurities because they critique themselves with comments that they believe others would make about them.

Some of these people experience the desire for external validation because of words that have actually been said about them while others experience the desire for external validation without those words. The search for this validation can be tied to so many different roots: family, romantic interests, friends, public figures, and more. However, the way that social media can play a role in the search for external validation is through the internet's obsession with physical appearance. Because social media is all about sharing media (pictures, videos, and other visual forms of content), it is natural that a lot of the content and comments on social media revolve around how people look. And while this discourse can go both ways, positive and negative, just

the presence of this discourse can make users develop an idea of what they would want to look like to be perceived as more “attractive,” as described by the social contagion theory. In other words, if the tangible world was not providing any commentary on one’s idea of beauty, social media most definitely will. And because people can hide behind a screen when making these types of assertions and commentary online, there is often much less of a filter to what they are willing to say (Barlett, Gentile, and Chew 2014). The lack of a filter can then make it really difficult for users who are trying to obtain social approval through physical appearance because then there are only increasing amounts of potential “flaws” to fix about oneself.

For those who are not fueled by external validation, it may be difficult to understand why people need validation from others to feel good about themselves. This is especially the case when users are not experiencing direct commentary on the way that they look, but they are still critiquing themselves with the words that they see online. In those cases, it can be important to remember that many of the comments made online are made by other people in the world, and if someone is making those comments on the internet, there seems to be nothing stopping others from having similar thoughts about people they see in real life. Therefore, because people generally have a greater filter when interacting with others in person, those who search for external validation can often only imagine what others are thinking of them. And without the actual knowledge of what people think of them, their idea of how they are perceived is thus greatly fueled by what they see online, regardless if that is representative of the type of thoughts people actually think of them.

Internal Validation

People who search for internal validation place emphasis on the way they view themselves more than how others view them. While this is not always the case, those who value

their own opinion of themselves over others' opinions tend to have an easier time accepting their bodies and building confidence in the way that they look. When an individual is looking to find that type of satisfaction with themselves, they are aware of what they want to improve on, and they know their bodies better than any other person would. That makes reaching goals and having a general sense of health for them a lot easier than those who are in search of external validation and have to constantly wonder if they are reaching the satisfaction of others.

Generally, those who value self validation do so because they put their health and how they feel above the way that they physically look. The mindset seems to be, "if I feel healthy and strong, then I am happy with how I am" rather than relying on external ideas of what they should look like. The sides of social media who push this type of mindset often foster a positive community and try to encourage reaching one's personal goals. Influencers on the health and fitness side of social media, especially, have a great amount of agency in facilitating this mindset amongst followers. These influencers play on the self-improvement aspect of the social comparison theory, as individuals who are looking for self validation are likely to use those types of influencers as a source of inspiration to improve upon oneself.

However, it is important to emphasize that just because someone is looking to find satisfaction with themselves does not mean that they necessarily undergo less stress than others. How one finds satisfaction in oneself is unique to each individual, and people can be equally or even more intensely hard on themselves compared to those in search of external validation. The important difference is primarily in the fact that when an individual places value in their own opinion over others' opinions, they are more aware of what they want to look and feel like, and that allows for them to have a more concrete idea of what they may want to implement in their lives to build upon their opinion of themselves.

The Gender Divide

The way that men and women experience body satisfaction and dissatisfaction due to societal standards are undoubtedly different, as society places emphasis on different parts of each genders' bodies. Muscularity is often emphasized more for men than women, and hourglass body shapes and slimness are emphasized more for women than men. Strength training and lifting weights is more associated with men, whereas cardio exercises are more associated with women. The intensity that men and women's appearances are valued in society also varies, generally towards the trend that women's appearances are more judged, commented on, and valued than men's appearances.⁴

How Women Are Affected by Social Media

From a young age, girls are exposed to the importance of their physical appearance, as seen by how much beauty is valued in Disney princesses or how the appearances of well-known women are always commented on. According to sociocultural theory, this means that women develop very early on a habit of internalizing and comparing themselves to others (Tiggeman 2011). On social media, there is a disproportionate amount of female influencers compared to male, and many of those influencers are considered very physically attractive, as their appearance impacts their role as an influencer. As mentioned in the last chapter, many of these influencers build their platform based on the inherent desire that users have to be similar to them in some way. For women, this desire is commonly at least in some part tied to how they want to look. And women users are so easily bombarded with so many different beautiful women on social media, which can make it difficult for them to feel body satisfaction towards themselves.

⁴ Because this study was not designed to specifically examine the relation of body image and social media in the context of gender fluidity, the conclusions made related to gender will be primarily focused on the binary idea of gender, as most of the people interviewed for this study identified as either a cis-gender man or woman. In future studies, it would be interesting to investigate a wider-ranged study of the gender spectrum.

Additionally, as women influencers and celebrities come from places of privilege, many of them make their physical appearance part of their brand, so they are more likely to invest in various methods that keep their physical appearance “desirable” to their audience. This could mean fillers, cosmetic surgery, photo editing, and more. For the everyday woman who consumes social media and builds up this idea of what they want to look like based on their social media consumption, it can be difficult to keep up with the changes that these influential women are making to their appearances, as most women do not have the resources to do so. These types of pressures are only amplified as body types go in and out of trend, which can be seen in women celebrities and influencers. It is extremely unrealistic for women to shift their entire body type based on passing trends, as everyone has their own natural shape and build already. In conjunction with social media praising women for conforming to the way that society deems attractive, it can be difficult for regular users of social media to ever feel like their physical appearance will be fully accepted and appreciated.

Another way that physical appearance seems to be valued more for women than men is seen through the way that both men *and* women consistently consume content created by women on social media. For women influencers who encapsulate the beauty standard, the comment section itself makes it apparent that both genders are commenting on the way that that influencer looks. Especially in terms of tearing down women’s appearances, men are often the ones to do so. According to the objectification theory, women are likely to internalize an outsider’s opinion of physical appearance as the way that they view themselves (Fredrickson and Roberts 2016). Therefore, when women users, straight women in particular, see that men will make these comments on women’s bodies, women users will develop an idea in their mind of what must be the “desirable” physical features that men look for in women. Even if this idea is paired with a

certain indignation, that still does not necessarily stop body dissatisfaction among women. This is rather different from men influencers, as there are fewer men in the influencing world in general, but even those who are are likely valued for the content they put out rather than just their physical appearance. And many influential men on the internet are actually praised by women, whether for their content or their appearances, as opposed to men tearing down how women look. While these may be broad generalizations, many users navigate social media with this type of impression, and that in itself can have its own effects on users.

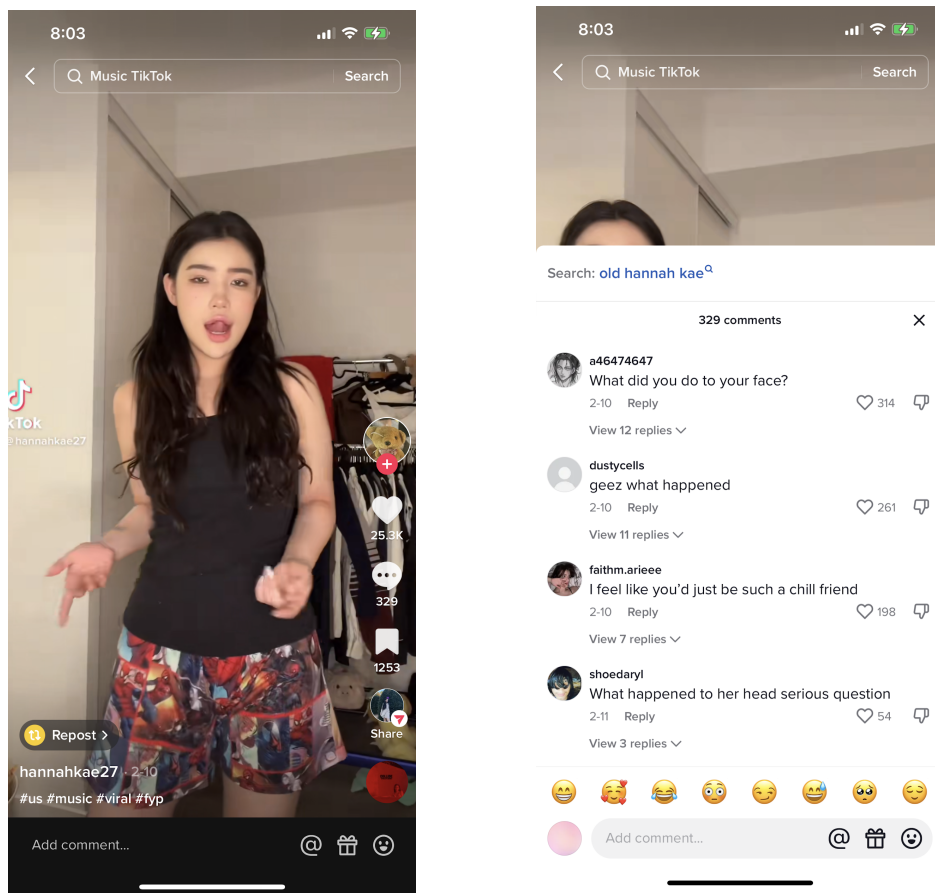


Figure 3. TikToker Hannah Kae, who is well-known for how attractive she is, faced a lot of criticism on a recent TikTok video where people were critiquing her appearance, although there were not noticeable differences in her appearance compared to what she normally looks like in her videos, other than her outfit covering more of her body and her wearing less makeup.

There are also beneficial ways in which women can be affected by social media in terms of body image. There are communities and influencers online that speak on their own journeys to find self confidence and body satisfaction, and that is extremely helpful for the regular user. Because women are the ones who are more valued for their appearance in society, women are the ones who often face more pressures to look a certain way, and therefore, they have more advice to share and stories to tell in regards to their experiences. For the regular user who may be struggling with similar pressures, these communities can relieve the pressures and help them approach their obstacles differently. These communities and influencers can play a monumental role in helping regular users find comfort in their own bodies, as it may be hard to find this type of space in real life, and social media can more easily connect like-minded individuals together virtually. However, these communities point to broader issues, like how there are bigger societal forces at play to create these pressures in the first place, and the need for communities like this originates from those forces, which are out of most people's control.

How Men Are Affected by Social Media

In general, it seems that the relationship between men's body images and social media may be less intense than women's. The body expectation for men is more focused on muscle mass and how strong they are rather than slimness and body shape. Thus, men whose body images are affected by social media are usually more focused on physical activity and fitness whereas women whose body images are affected by social media tend to focus more on diet. The male standard of beauty is seen through lifestyle and fitness influencers whose bodies are oftentimes very muscular and have low body fat. They will recommend certain workout routines, diet advice, and certain supplements or sources of protein to achieve the look that they have. The six pack and strong arms are very signature to that look. From the users' end of consumption for

this type of content, the general trend seems to be not to necessarily look like those influencers or celebrities but to learn from their routines to reach their own goals of what they want to look like.

However, there are most definitely men who struggle with body dissatisfaction, and social media may play a role in worsening this dissatisfaction. It seems that for the most part, men who were already predisposed to body image struggles from external factors are the ones who may have their body image affected through social media usage. While there seems to be a less toxic virtual environment for men in terms of how much the internet emphasizes the male appearance, there is also less space for men to share their personal struggles with body image. The former and the latter are likely correlated, as society values the man more than the woman, and therefore men can be valued for skills outside of just their physical appearance. However, the latter is likely also a result of the stigmatization of men being vulnerable and sharing these types of emotions, which thus makes it difficult to investigate if men are less willing to share their thoughts or be vulnerable in that type of way. The lack of a greater community for men to share their struggles may make it more difficult for those who are already predisposed to body image issues to overcome these obstacles, as they will feel more alone in the ways that they struggle.

Enabling Communities

Ben: *This guy [online] was like, hey you should try eating cotton balls right? To, like, lose weight.*

Me: *Cotton.*

Ben: *Yeah, cotton balls. You would try to eat that cuz it would stifle your appetite and obviously of course you don't acknowledge, like, the health consequences of that, but you listen and you're*

like, oh, this is an easy way to lose weight. So I did it and I didn't question like, oh, it's not bad because I'm losing weight and that's like the one thing, did.

Me: *So you actually lost weight?*

Ben: *Yeah. So that's the issue. That's the issue. It worked right. But then you don't acknowledge when you're doing that, you're depriving your body of food and other stuff that needs to function. So my hair started falling out and like my hair started graying. This was like senior year of high school or freshman year of college.*

Ben is a 21-year old Asian American man who has struggled with body insecurities throughout a large part of his life, especially throughout high school. Through talking to Ben about his experiences, it became too apparent that just as there are supportive communities online to help individuals through any body dissatisfaction, there are also influencers and communities online that fuel unhealthy or harmful behaviors that may worsen body insecurities. If an individual sees that others online are doing such behaviors and that they seem to be getting the results that they desire, then that individual is more likely to implement similar behaviors into their own lives. Seeing others online doing certain types of fad diets or excessive bingeing or restrictive eating makes it seem more normal and okay for the regular user to do it as well. This type of normalization can be extremely dangerous, as some of the recommended behaviors can be really harmful to one's body. We can see that Ben's experience with cotton balls was a result of such normalization. The person online who was recommending that type of diet seemed to be well enough to post about it, so it became easier for others, like Ben, to also try to eat cotton. However, upon further investigation, we now know that cotton is not edible to humans, and it can be dangerous to use as full meal replacements. The ultimate goal of diets like these is often

to lose weight or to look a certain way, and when users find people who also share that goal and implement these strategies to reach that goal, it can be a spiral of enabling harmful behaviors.

When Regular Users Post

Most of this chapter has focused on how individuals react to how other users or influencers post. However, it is also interesting to see the ways that regular users post on their personal accounts and how they may also play into the ways that social media can be harmful or beneficial to individuals' body images.

What Users Post

Most people do not post nearly as much as influencers or celebrities do. And rather than posting more content centered on the individual themselves, many individuals also share pictures from their life events, such as vacations, family gatherings, or friend hangouts. There seems to be a more relatable and realistic space when people post on their accounts to share with their friends compared to the type of content that people with a larger platform post. The posts are usually more personal and allow for followers to get a closer look into that individual's life. And yet, this does not take away from people posting what they think are the best pictures of themselves. The process of "self-presentation" is that people will try to control the way they are presented to an audience, and more often than not, they want to be perceived in a socially desirable way (Schlenker 1980). Therefore, a general assumption that we can make about social media is that most people, with a large platform or not, will be posting pictures that they curate and wish for others to see as a representation of what they look like. It is only natural for individuals to want their followers to see them in a positive way, and because social media is so visual, the pictures that people post are usually at least somewhat revolved around physical appearance.

Behind Users' Posts

So what runs through people's minds when making the decision to post, what pictures to post, and for what purposes? The answer to these questions for each individual can vary greatly. Many people post just so that they can share their life with their friends and family. Others may post because they took some good pictures that day. In the context of body image, people may be wary of posting because of personal insecurities and not wanting others to perceive them as unattractive, or they may be very willing to post because they took a picture that they think really highlights their appearance in a desirable way. Posting may seem intimidating to some because those who are consuming that content would be people who may actually know that individual. In other words, having that social connection outside of just the internet (which is unlike the connection between regular users and influencers or celebrities) can make the dynamic of posting daunting, as there is a chance to be judged by someone who knows oneself in real life. For others who are very comfortable with themselves and their followers, posting can also be very simple and easy, without much concern for judgment.

As mentioned in the last chapter, the level of relatability when posting for friends and family is extremely high, which can have its own sorts of implications. For example, if an individual posts an extremely good picture of oneself, then consumers of that post may become more self-conscious of themselves and wonder if they can also look that good on camera. In addition, it can be important to take into account that regular users can also edit their pictures, photoshop the way that they look, or be very strategic in the angles and lighting that they take their pictures in. When the regular user does these things to enhance the way that they look in pictures, they can cause their followers to internalize a certain image of what a regular person should look like, even if that image is not a realistic representation. This internalization of a certain image and comparison between regular user and follower is likely to run deeper than

comparisons to influencers or celebrities because of the personal connection one may have to the people they follow. This means that when regular users post, their posts could have even greater effects on others' body images than influencers or celebrities.

Positive Community

One aspect of regular users posting is the relatively positive feedback they receive. While there are definitely exceptions to this generalization, most people post online for people within their social circle to see, and people within their social circles are likely to give positive reactions to their friends posting. While this may also be coupled with the fact that comments are visible to other users as well and therefore people would not want others to perceive them as mean, true friends are usually caring and supportive of each other when they post, as they already have a close bond. This type of support can be significant in helping individuals develop a more positive sense of body image, as friends are not only supportive of them online but likely in real life as well, which can make their role monumental in a young adult's everyday life.

Conclusion

This chapter investigated the various ways that users were affected by social media in terms of body image. By taking into account whether users were already predisposed to body image issues and combining that with social media usage, there were many different possibilities that could come about in how users' sense of body image was affected. Additionally, it was important to investigate what some of the reasons were that users struggled with body image, and in particular, where they sought validation for their bodies. In most cases, it was a combination of trying to love oneself while also wanting others to appreciate one's physical appearance. Because of this male-dominated society, the way that women and men often struggle from body dissatisfaction differ as well, and these differences are very much reflected and also amplified on

social media, as the media focuses much more on the way that women look over men. And on the deeper end of social media, there are often dangerous communities that can enable regular users to perform harmful behaviors in order to look a certain way. However, there can also be positive communities, one being found within an individual's social circle online. When regular users post, they can also play a potentially significant role in shaping their followers' sense of body image due to the level of relatability they have with their followers.

Like Chapter 1, this chapter was also built on the basis of social contagion theory and social comparison theory, as people are always, consciously or subconsciously, being shaped by the people they are surrounded by and that they naturally evaluate themselves in comparison to those around them. This is seen in the ways that people's sense of body images are shaped by what they see online and even in the ways that they are unaffected for protection of their own self-worth. To conclude this study, the last chapter will investigate what sorts of implications social media can have on body image when thinking long term and how users carry what they see online into the tangible world.

Chapter 3: Implications of Social Media Usage

Introduction

Since social media can play a role in user's formation of body image, the content that users consume online can be carried into real-life applications and have various sorts of mental health implications. Because of body dissatisfaction and/or a desire for self-improvement, users may purchase particular products or make changes to their daily lifestyle habits from content they see online that is recommended to achieve the sorts of changes they want to see to their appearances. This purchasing cycle exhibits the uses and gratification theory, which describes how media should be most effective in satisfying the needs and motivations of users (Mehrad and Tajer 2016). Young adult users are also likely to have in-person conversations with their peers about what they see online. And in terms of body image, these conversations can play a significant role in putting certain unrealistic ideas or notions that circulate online into perspective in real life, as social media can easily become an echo-chamber of similar opinions that is hard to escape from. According to Cinelli, the echo chamber effect is how opinions within an online group or community can be continually reinforced and thus builds and strengthens individuals' opinions on the topic of interest (2021). We can see the negative implications that social media can have on individuals from the ways that their mental health can be affected. Those with a history of mental health issues in combination with feelings of body dissatisfaction especially may feel a worsening of their mental health through social media consumption. And even those who do not have a history of mental health challenges are likely to feel emotionally drained from consuming too much social media, as the overload of information that users experience from content consumption can be overwhelming and thus play a harmful role in their states of mental health.

Unlike Chapters 1 and 2, this chapter focuses more on the tangible implications that social media can have on individuals and how what users consume online can be carried into their everyday lives. Because social media is still growing and is becoming so prevalent to the younger generation, understanding how users are tangibly impacted is important in recognizing what sorts of precautions may be necessary when browsing online and how to most beneficially navigate social media. Most of the analyses drawn in this chapter are derived from participant interview responses.

Real-Life Applications

A large part of the effect that social media can have on an individual is psychological, rooted in comparison with the bodies of others online or lack of comparison. However, another part of the effect can be tangible actions that people perform in their life due to what they have seen online. Just like how individuals are all affected in different ways by social media, the extent that individuals apply their online consumption into the tangible world also varies. Some individuals heavily rely on what they see online for many parts of their lives, like skincare, fitness, and health, whereas others are not as eager to follow the advice or suggestions that are recommended to them.

Capitalistic Consumption

Much of this online-to-real-life application traces back to capitalistic consumption, as individuals online will promote certain products that they claim will give them the desired effects that users are looking for, and users will then follow those recommendations in hopes of also experiencing those effects. This type of consumption falls in line with the uses and gratification theory, which states that “media’s most important role is to fulfill the needs and motivations of the audience” (Mehrad and Jafar 2016). When putting this theory in context with capitalistic

consumption, media users are audience members to the online content that they consume, and when users are introduced to a product that seems like it could fulfill some sort of need that they would like, then they are motivated to buy that product. And if that product successfully meets the needs of the user who purchases it, then they will experience the gratification as a result of that content they consumed. Thus, the media will have satisfied the needs of the audience through its promotion of said product.

In recent years, TikTok has paved the way for originating and promoting viral products that are then sold out very quickly. This virality is somewhat cyclic, as it starts with an individual showing this product in some sort of way, and as more and more people purchase this product, some of those people will also create TikTok videos or other types of social media content to further promote this product. When content creators are showing this product, they are not necessarily doing so because of a brand deal or as an advertisement; some of them are genuinely just showing a product that works for them, and that authenticity⁵ can play a role in that product becoming viral. This cycle is interesting because the increase in TikTok videos being made about a product is a literal, visual representation of users applying what they see online into their lives. Abby, a 21-year old Asian American student who regularly consumes TikTok content, is someone who has been a part of this cycle:

“I bought the Aerie crossover leggings after I saw Hannah Schlenker's TikTok of her wearing them and dancing. She and her body genuinely just looked amazing, and I immediately was in the comments trying to figure out where the leggings were from. It was really casual content that I could tell wasn't a brand deal or sponsored content because it was just a natural dancing TikTok

⁵ Authenticity here refers to the lack of some sort of business or financial incentivization to be showing a product to viewers. When a content creator is promoting a product as part of an advertisement instead of their own genuine interests, they have to specify they are doing so to remain transparent to their viewers. Therefore, users are aware of which forms of content are ads and which ones are authentic. When a content creator is showing a product authentically, users are more likely to believe that product works how the creator claims it works because the creator is not being financially incentivized to talk about that product.

and because there were no hashtags or brands tagged. They were going crazy on tiktok, and I remember them selling out so fast. I was so excited when I got them in the mail that I duetted her tiktok while opening my package! A lot of my friends also bought those leggings.”

To give context of Abby’s experience, in November 2020, TikToker Hannah Schlenker posted a video of her dancing in these crossover leggings that were very flattering on her figure, so many users like Abby were extremely interested in where to buy those leggings. Just as the uses and gratifications theory describes, Hannah Schlenker’s sought-after body shape in that TikTok was useful in that it gave users motivation to purchase the same leggings. After she posted that TikTok, not only were the leggings very quickly sold out on the Aerie website, but TikTok users left and right were posting videos in those leggings, which, like a positive feedback loop, exposed additional users to these leggings, intensifying its virality. When people see many others purchasing a product, the credibility of that product goes up, and they are more likely to want to purchase it as well (Darmatana and Erdiansyah 2021). We can take away from Abby’s experience that people can be very easily influenced to purchase certain pieces of clothing that are flattering on another person’s body, especially when the content is authentic. However, a problem with viral products like this is that many people will expect to look like the person that they saw online with this product, and when they do not, it can be disappointing and lead to increases in body dissatisfaction. Because there are so many different body types and sizes, it can be difficult for everyone to look like the select individuals that go viral on social media, and so in cases like these, application of social media content can play a harmful role to individuals’ body images.



Figure 4. Hannah Schlenker’s Tiktok video of her dancing and wearing the aerie leggings that went viral.

Those with higher rates of social media usage are generally exposed to a greater amount of products that they can purchase to serve some sort of beneficial role in a user’s life. In conjunction with body image, it seems that generally, people who already have high predispositions for body image issues and are easily influenced are more likely to purchase products that could seemingly play a role in making their bodies more “attractive” in society. For the most part, social media does not seem to decrease levels of consumption, as people are very regularly being bombarded with ads to buy products, so if not consciously, then subconsciously, many people are being swayed to purchase more. Therefore, it is not very likely for someone’s

baseline rate of capitalistic consumption to be decreased when incorporating social media as a contributing factor in their purchasing habits.

Applied Actions

Aside from buying products, individuals also can apply actions, habits, or routines that are recommended online to their everyday lives. On social media, especially the health and fitness side of the internet, many creators will recommend workout routines, dietary recommendations, or lifestyle changes that they say can improve their lives in certain ways. A large part of users will consume these types of content and absorb the information, but they will not actually apply the recommendations. In fact, many may even use the “save” feature on these types of content with the intention of going back to them and applying them later on, but most will not remember or dismiss going back to them. We can see this in our discussion with Truman, a 20 year-old man who has a relatively positive relationship with his sense of body image, as he says says:

“I guess if I see a workout that I like, I'll save it, but very rarely do I go back and look for that video and actually do the workout. Same thing for like, if I see a meal plan that I think is cool, I'll save it. But like I don't ever go back and look at my save videos.”

Based on Truman's habits, we can see that most times, these more action-based suggestions that are on social media are not actually applied; most users live in the mindset that they will apply this content *eventually*. This mindset of “eventually” keeps users continuously consuming these types of content because they think that if they will one day apply the content, then they will continue to “save” these recommendations in hopes that in time they will reach the appropriate motivation to make such changes to their lifestyles. Both users who experience body satisfaction and dissatisfaction can “save” these types of content, as wanting to apply these types

of content can originate from wanting to increase feelings of body satisfaction and/or the hope for self-improvement, physically, mentally or both.

There are also a portion of users who will not only “save” but also *apply* this type of content into their day-to-day lives, although this happens much less often. These people are either more motivated or disciplined at least in the health or physical appearance-related aspect of their lives, and it can be interesting to see what sorts of results these people will experience from applying the recommendations that they see online. In many cases, if the individual stays consistent in their application, they will receive positive results, as consistency is oftentimes the key to a successful fitness regiment. This success is assuming that the habits that they are adopting from online are safe, beneficial, and not misinformed, which is unlike the enabling communities that we discussed last chapter. As a refresher, these enabling communities are spaces online that affirm and encourage extreme, and oftentimes harmful, thoughts and behaviors, making users more susceptible to partake in these behaviors as well. However, for the individuals who apply safe and informed behaviors to their lives, there will often be an increase in body satisfaction, or a more positive sense of body image from applying these health regiments, as their bodies will likely become more fit.

On the other hand, there are also individuals who apply these habits and do not see results fast enough or do not see results to the extent that they would like, and those people may develop greater amounts of body dissatisfaction. These people may hold a certain expectation for what they think that they will look like from adopting additional fitness and health habits, and that can negatively impact the ways that they view themselves. They may have adopted certain online suggestions because they wanted to look like the person promoting these lifestyle changes, and that can be harmful in the same way that buying clothing pieces due to wanting to look like

another person wearing that clothing piece can be harmful. Everyone's body is naturally shaped and built a certain way, so no matter how much someone may work towards their body looking like someone else's, there is always a chance that they will never be able to attain their "goal body." And that can be extremely discouraging to someone who has put in the effort to work towards that goal, thereby harming that individual's sense of body image.

Conversations

One of the most important parts of processing, interpreting, and internalizing online content is through the ways that individuals converse about it with those around them. When an individual browses through the internet or social media, it can be easy to become so immersed with the information that they are consuming that one can lose touch with reality. As mentioned before, social media can easily form enabling communities or spaces that can foster very opinionated, and even dangerous, beliefs and thoughts, and that is what makes real life conversations so crucial in either opposing or validating those thoughts. Even in less extreme cases, it can be helpful for individuals to talk with others about what they see online and how they feel from viewing that content because it can put those feelings and thoughts in a different perspective.

Acknowledging the Echo Chamber

When discussing online content with others, a certain phenomenon can occur, where not only the content is discussed, but the ways that the internet can become an echochamber of repetitive thoughts is acknowledged. The echo chamber effect refers to the way that the social media algorithm feeds content created by like-minded people to users, which can then influence users' perceptions and attitudes, to the point of misleading them or even spreading misinformation (Cinelli et al. 2021). Acknowledging the echochamber means that those

conversing about social media understand and recognize that social media can have these biasing effects. Even if it can be difficult for individuals to actually separate what they think from the content they see online, just acknowledging that social media can be misleading in these types of ways can help form some level of separation between the virtual and tangible worlds.

Building a Sense of Body Image “Reality”

When thinking about acknowledging the echo chamber effect in terms of content related to body image, we have discussed how the algorithm often pushes the most conventionally attractive people to the top of people’s social media feed pages, which can bias users’ perceptions of what a “normal” person looks like. In reality, there is not necessarily such a thing as what a “normal” person should look like, but when an individual is constantly presented with the idea that most people look a certain way, they begin thinking that that is the norm. Therefore, when users discuss the reality of what people look like versus online, it can then be extremely helpful to reshape an individual’s perception of what is “normal” and realistic.

Online, individuals are generally surrounded by content that affirm their beliefs, but in real life, individuals are more likely to interact with people who may think somewhat differently from them. Hearing different perspectives from these people and thereby recognizing the echo chamber that social media can be is what can keep people at least somewhat in check with the tangible reality that they live in. That being said, just because something is online does not necessarily make it any less of “reality” as something that is in person. However, the perception that one gains only from browsing online can make them out of touch with reality, as there are more perspectives than just the echo chamber ones found online. Just like how individuals can find communities online that can foster healthy discussions, individuals can also find healthy discourse in real life, which at times can play an even greater role than these online communities

can, especially if the discourse is with friends and loved ones. When someone's friends and loved ones affirm to them that their body is normal and healthy, then even if they think that they are not due to predisposed body image issues or social media, they are more likely to develop greater body satisfaction (Ata, Ludden, and Lally 2006). And hearing from other people that the content they see online is not representative of what most of the population looks like, even if that may seem obvious, can have the potential to shift an individual's mindset and perspective if they think differently.

However, not all real life conversations are always healthy and supportive. There are definitely cases in which an individual enjoys surrounding themselves with a certain type of community online that makes them feel seen to escape from potentially negative environments that they live in. That is where supportive, online communities can play an important role in that individual's life, which has been discussed in the previous chapters.

Mental Health

In addition to the kinds of actions and conversations that can take place, there are also mental health implications to increased usage of social media, especially in the context of body image. We know that the overarching trend for the effects of social media is that social media can intensify or pacify pre-existing notions of body image issues, but how does mental health play a role in all this? With mental health issues on the rise, especially with the rise of COVID-19 these last few years, it is extremely understandable that mental health issues are likely worsened by social media (Haddad et al. 2021).⁶ However, social media can also help individuals with mental health illnesses, as the anonymity of social media and the readily available forms of mental health resources and communication with others makes social media a more digestible and less

⁶ In this literature review of social media usage and mental health amongst college students throughout COVID-19, it was found that high and problematic social media usage was associated with decreased or worsened mental health states.

intimidating form of social interaction (Birnbaum et al. 2017; Naslund et al. 2020).⁷ Thus, social media can either potentially play both a helpful and a harmful role for those with mental health illnesses, depending on what those individuals are using social media for.

Pre-Existing Forms of Mental Health

When talking to Elena, a 21-year-old Asian American woman who battles anxiety, ADHD, and occasional depressive episodes, about her social media consumption and her relationship with her body, she opened up about how her mental health played a role in the ways that she experienced and processed social media content:

“I, um, already have some mental health things that I need to take medications for or talk to people about that I've just had, since I was a very young kid. But I think once those get integrated with body issues it just elevates it. Like as a kid, none of [my mental health issues] stemmed from the way I looked or like the way my hair was at all. But when [these insecurities] are already pre-existing and then it starts combining with the things everyone can post, being self-conscious or insecure, it definitely makes it a lot worse.”

We can see that in Elena's situation, combining the pressures of social media with pre-existing mental health issues and body image insecurities, she seems to have an even more negative experience with the posts that she sees online. She further elaborated on the ways that social media can affect her day-to-day life on days that her insecurities and mental health challenges are both heightened:

“Like for example, I'm a very anxious person so I feel it a lot with just a small thing that might set [my anxiety] off, like one pimple, or something like that that becomes a whole thing where

⁷ Both Birnbaum and Naslund's papers highlight the beneficial roles that social media can play for individuals with mental health illnesses. Birnbaum's research focused on social media use and pathways to care resources for individuals with psychotic and non-psychotic mood disorders, and they found that acceptance of mental health information through social media among the youth studied in these experiments was high. Naslund's paper discusses the potential benefits that social media may bring for those with mental illnesses - these benefits being facilitation of social interactions and access to a peer support network.

I'm like, I don't wanna go outside. I don't wanna see anyone, like, it's so embarrassing even though I would never notice that on someone else. So I definitely think, um, [social media] prevents me from doing as many social things as I wish I did.”

From talking to Elena, we can see that her experiences highlight how social media can play a large role in increasing her anxiety, her sense of body dysmorphia, and her feelings of seclusion and depression. With people like Elena, Festinger's social comparison theory can play a large role in how they process social media because the comparison of one's appearance to people online who post optimal pictures of themselves can play a role in triggering a worsening of mental health issues. Elena's mental health experience is one of many, but it is eye-opening in many ways, especially in the context of how social media can affect, and in this case dampen, her day-to-day life.

Mental Health Exacerbated by Social Media

Even when discussing mental health with those without specific mental health issues, the general trend was that higher rates of social media usage does seem to overall worsen people's mental health and overall state of mind. Especially when consuming short-form content, like TikTok videos or Instagram reels, the cycle of not being able to stop scrolling and then an hour or two flying by can cause the user to feel drained and unmotivated. Even when consuming social media content that is enjoyable and does not necessarily trigger body comparisons or negative feelings can lead to these feelings of exhaustion, which is interesting considering that most of the content people are scrolling through are not necessarily directly harmful to their mental health; it is the social media usage and the resulting information overload itself that can lead to these feelings. In fact, there is a positive correlation between information overload and social media exhaustion, which leads to decreased productivity in everyday life (Eliyana et al.

2020). This exhaustion and decreased productivity are indicators of a decreased state of mental health.

Coping With Social Media

We know that it can be difficult to separate what we see online with what we think about and process in our minds, and with social media playing a role in exacerbating mental health, it is important to also see how users both with and without a history of mental health issues have found ways to improve their overall mental health and state of mind. Not everyone has found successful coping mechanisms, and everyone's mental health states are unique, but seeing how select individuals have dealt with these obstacles can shed light on what can be done to potentially help others as they navigate the world of social media. When talking to Ben, a 21 year-old Asian American man who has previously struggled with body image issues, about his experiences, he described how he used to struggle with his mental health due to feelings of body dissatisfaction, and eventually what he changed to try to ameliorate these challenges:

Ben: I struggled a lot with mental health in high school due to body image, but that's all good now. Like in high school I remember like, I guess like people were more vocal, not more vocal, but like people posted more in your friend group versus like in college you don't really know a lot of people compared to high school, you know, almost everybody in school. So I guess it's like I felt bad about myself but now I really don't care enough.

Me: Yeah. So over time, what helped you move past that mindset?

Ben: That? I guess just like the whole idea that the world, like comparatively, you're a small dot in the whole world. So there's probably so many people out there that they don't care about you versus in high school you feel like you're the center of the world and like everybody has their eyes on you all the time.

What Ben was explaining here was that he gradually developed the mindset that no one really pays attention to the things you do and what you look like, and internalizing that concept allowed him to overcome some of his mental health and body image issues. Ben pointed out how in high school, the closer, tight-knit community actually played a large role in the ways that he was insecure with the way that he looked, which relates back to Chapters 1 and 2's discussions on how proximity, or relatability, to individuals can elicit greater amounts of comparison and how posting on social media to peers can become more daunting.

Limiting Social Media Usage

While Ben's experience was that he changed his mindset to improve his sense of body image and mental health, others discussed how limiting their social media usage played a large role in the way that they protect their mental health and avoid comparison. Limiting social media usage has been linked with decreased levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Hunt et al. 2018). So it should come as no surprise that individuals who actively inhibit their use of social media seem more content with themselves and their bodies. For example, when talking to Sarah, a 20 year-old white woman who has a strong and healthy sense of body image, about her social media usage habits, she was very direct in discussing how she avoids certain social media platforms to protect her mental health:

“I think on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, you can get more of that toxic environment. Yeah, um, there's a lot of diet culture and misinformation about nutrition and health and those sorts of things. So I try to avoid that because I think that avoiding that altogether is best for my mental health just because even though it doesn't affect me currently, if my mental state were to worsen, you never know what you're exposed to on a daily basis could cause.”

And with Sarah, we see that she actively chooses to use Pinterest as her social media platform of choice due to its more detached nature from other individuals. Pinterest is more of a platform catered towards one's interests and less so about other people's lives and appearances. Because Sarah intentionally chooses to use Pinterest and she knows that Pinterest does not fuel particularly negative body image effects for her, unlike the potential risk of such when using Instagram or other platforms, she currently seems to be in a very healthy mindset about her body: "I have a pretty strong, positive relationship with my body and my body image at this point. Like, I'm happy with the way I look, which is good, but it's definitely not always been that way."

Conclusion

The possibilities of how social media users can take their social media usage into their everyday, tangible lives are endless. We can see that beyond how the consumption and processing of social media content can affect body image, social media can also affect people's purchase choices and lifestyle habits to improve their body satisfaction. In application with the users and gratification theory, people are motivated to purchase products from the content they see online in hopes that it will change the way their body looks to what they think would be considered more "attractive," and it can be either encouraging when that product does create the desired effect or discouraging when that product does not play its desired effect. Similar to products, people may adopt certain lifestyle habits or suggestions, like drinking more water, specific workout regiments, or dietary changes, to change the way that they look or feel. And because there can be so much misinformation on the internet, when applying these changes in real life, the desired results do not always occur, and that can be discouraging for those individuals.

In addition to these changes, engaging in face-to-face, real-life conversations about social media consumption and body image can potentially play a beneficial role in helping individuals who struggle with body image to experience improvements in the ways that they view themselves. For individuals who experience body dissatisfaction, it is important for them to recognize how much of an echo chamber social media can be, and this recognition is more likely to develop through these types of conversations. These conversations can bring about different perspectives for those individuals on how to approach and overcome body insecurities and shed light on how those who struggle less with these insecurities view the perception of body image on social media.

Social media can also play a role in affecting an individual's mental health. Because social media is a place of endless information and content, users may feel drained after spending too much time online. Not only can social media usage be mentally exhausting for the regular user, but this can be extra tough for users who come from a background of mental health issues. We can see through conversations with Elena and Ben how social media has elicited certain negative reactions from them, such as seclusion and anxiety. To combat these negative effects, people like Ben and Sarah have found success through shifting their mindsets and limiting social media usage.

Overall, investigating the real-life applications and implications that social media can have on individuals' body images is important for broadening our understanding of what ways social media can be helpful and harmful. As social media is still relatively new, there are still many effects and implications that need to be studied to improve users' social media experiences and body images. Factors like lifestyle habits, mental health, and conversations can all be affected due to social media usage, and we can apply what we now know about those factors to

preserve or improve our own senses of body image and how to approach social media consumption in a more beneficial manner.

Conclusion

Discussion

Overall, social media provides a vast amount of content that can either beneficially or harmfully affect a user's body image, and the extent that this can affect individuals is dependent on their own background with their development of body image. Many of the factors external to social media that can play a role in affecting a user's body image (i.e. family, friends, and traditional Hollywood) are intensified by social media, as social media acts as a sort of glue and amplifier of existing domains of body image development. When an individual's body image is affected and when their ideas of health and bodies are developed through social media, we can apply the social contagion theory, which implies that that similar behaviors and attitudes are spread throughout social networks without necessarily needing the intent for the spread, and Festinger's social comparison theory, which states that individuals will inherently compare themselves to others as a way to reflect on themselves (Scherer and Cho 2003; Festinger 1954). Individuals who are already predisposed to body image issues are more likely to have their sense of body image influenced one way or another by the content they see online. If body image issues are a relevant part of their lives, they are more likely to be presented with online content that can affect their sense of body satisfaction. This content can be beneficial, such as online communities that are supportive and allow users to relate to others' experiences with their own journeys in developing a healthier sense of body image. Or this content can be harmful, which we can see through content that may endorse unrealistic body types as the beauty standard. For those who are relatively not predisposed to body image issues, social media usage can either be ineffective towards changing that notion, or social media can cause a stronger or weaker sense of

body satisfaction. Users whose body images are relatively unaffected are likely able to separate what they see online and in others from comparison to themselves.

Online content that can affect users' sense of body images are often carried into their real life, as we can see in certain purchase decisions, changes in lifestyle habits, vocal conversations, and mental health. A significant part of social media application is purchasing products as seen online in hopes that it will produce the desired effect on an individual's physical appearance, and that is shaped by the uses and gratification theory. Additionally, while changes in lifestyle habits can either improve or harm body image, conversations with peers are generally beneficial for the user if they have a supportive social circle. Vocal conversations play an important role because they give the chance for individuals to escape the echo chamber that users can often get sucked into online. Because of social media usage, mental health is generally worsened, whether the user has or does not have a history of mental health issues. Because of negative effects social media can have on body image, users will take certain precautionary measures that help them process what they see online in a less harmful manner. Some will work on changing their mindset, like recognizing that what they see online is not necessarily realistic and diminishing the urge to compare oneself with others. Another precautionary measure that users take to protect their mental health and body image is being selective in the online content they consume and minimizing their social media consumption overall.

From these conclusions, it becomes apparent that while social media can be an overwhelming source of information and can worsen mental health, being aware of the harmful effects of social media on body image can actually make browsing online an advantageous resource. Those who are selective in making sure they only consume content that they think will be useful for improving their mental health and sense of body image can actually use social

media as an aid. They can find supportive communities online, or they may choose to not engage in any content that shapes their sense of body image. However, being selective about social media engagement means the user has to be intentional in what they seek out on social media. Therefore, if an individual is already in an unhealthy mental state about their body, social media can easily become a tool that can promote further unhealthy behaviors and inhibit improvements in body image.

Differences in the Platforms

When performing this research, it was important to take observations from a few different types of social media platforms, as different platforms have somewhat distinct types of content and have various communication networks. The platforms that were primarily studied for this study were TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. TikTok is a platform that has continuous short-form content; in other words, it is a platform where users can watch and create their own short videos. TikTok's content is mainly centered on the "for you page," which is the feed page where the algorithm recommends users videos that the algorithm believes will be of interest to users. The "for you page" primarily consists of content from users' favorite creators and videos on topics that may be entertaining for users and less of content directly from friends, although videos from friends will occasionally show up on the "for you page" as well. On TikTok, users can never really reach the end of their feed; TikTok will provide more videos to watch as long as the user continues to swipe through the app, making it somewhat addicting.

On Instagram, there is a mixture of both pictures and short-form video content, and users interact with their peers, friends, and followers more than they do on TikTok, which allows Instagram to be a better platform for communication with and keeping up with people users know in real life. There is also an "explore page" on Instagram, where the content is all based on

what the algorithm thinks is the users' interests, so if users choose to scroll on the "explore page," they will find a good amount of content catered to their interests. The explore page is not the default page that Instagram places users in, however. Users are directed to their following's feed page by default, which makes Instagram a more personal, social network space for users. On YouTube, unless a user is taking on the commitment to post long-form videos, this platform is generally made more for consuming content than creating. Here, many creators will show more of their lives and can express themselves more through longer videos, so users who watch YouTube videos can feel closer to the creator.

It is important to note that despite the differences between these platforms, similar content can be found across all these sites, as the internet is all connected in one way or another. So if there is a certain content on one platform, it is very likely found on all the other ones too, meaning that none of these platforms are their own, separate entities. This interconnectedness is a reflection of how the internet is a public, shared space, so taking observations from these three platforms and taking into account how they relate to each other as well enabled this research to be more holistic in its understanding of how various forms of social media can play a role in body image.

Limitations

There were certain limitations to this study that should be acknowledged in order to improve on for future studies. Because the research participants were all undergraduate students from Emory University, this population's responses cannot be representative of all young adults in the United States. The conclusions drawn from this study are thus limited to a relatively liberal and privileged population of young adults who attend a private university. The race demographic of the participants was also primarily Asian, which could potentially bias the overarching

conclusions drawn to be more applicable for Asian undergraduate students. However, even though many of the participants were Asian, their responses still ranged across a wide spectrum of how much their body images are affected by social media, which shows that there was still a great variety in the participants who were studied. Additionally, because this study covered a relatively broad subject, it was difficult to be more thoroughly inclusive of the gender spectrum and people of various sexualities. Furthermore, as an Asian American, my interpretation of online content and the types of content I came across could be biased due to the ways my identity has shaped me. As an Asian American, I am constantly balancing East Asian versus Eurocentric ideals of beauty, and I am more likely to consume Asian forms of popular culture, like K-pop. Therefore, how I process certain content may be less representative of individuals of other races, ethnicities, and backgrounds.

Future Studies

To build off of this study, future studies can focus on how sex, gender, and sexuality play a role in how individuals' body images are affected by social media. Studying the dynamics between balancing the various aspects of one's identity with the heteronormative and Eurocentric ideal of beauty and body image that is often perpetuated on social media could help us understand what social media currently lacks that could increase inclusivity and a more body positive environment. Additional future studies could incorporate more experimental methods in order to gather more quantitative data to back up the qualitative data and conclusions drawn from this study. Studies that could cover a broader population of young adults in the United States, like interviewing participants from various geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, would allow conclusions to be drawn for a wider population of young adults, and these conclusions can

thus be used to improve upon future social media users' experiences online and with their sense of body satisfaction.

Broader Implications

Overall, social media is an online space that amplifies many existing forms of body image domains through expanding individuals' social networks and social interactions while also presenting them with an endless source of information. This expands on the anthropological concept of media, as social media is not only a newer form of media, but is now becoming ever more prevalent in the coming generations' upbringings and lives. So understanding the power and impact it can have can be crucial in recognizing how it can not only change, but shape young adults' perceptions, ideas, and values. The more time an individual spends using social media, the more they are likely to come across content or information that can affect their sense of body image. Especially when an individual already has pre-existing feelings of body dissatisfaction, they are likely to be more significantly affected by the bodies they see online due to self-comparison and the internalization of how others look than those who do not have significant prior feelings of body dissatisfaction.

The reason why individuals would want to look a certain way is tied back to the desire for validation from either oneself, others, or both. Increasing one's perceived attraction levels can likely increase feelings of body satisfaction, especially for women when their bodies are often torn down by others, particularly men, on the internet. Users themselves also feed how social media can shape others' body images because of how they post the best pictures of themselves online for others to see, and these pictures could also be a result of photo editing and selective camera angles. Through the types of content users see online, they are not only influenced in the ways they post but also real life applications that are done either in an attempt to make their body

appear more attractive or as a result of body image dissatisfaction. The latter can be exacerbated when in combination with pre-existing mental health issues, although even those without mental health issues often experience mental exhaustion from excessive social media usage. When thinking of these implications in the broader picture of sociocultural anthropology, this study contributes to a greater understanding of how online, social interactions shape the body perceptions of oneself and others as social media becomes ingrained into the social life and culture of the younger generations. Taking these findings into future studies, we can further examine the diverse ways that social media can affect the social life, cultural norms, and shared beliefs of humans.

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