



# Is What I See Me? The Influence of Instagram Use on Women's Body Image

Samii Kennedy Benson (PhD.)

Assistant Professor, Southern University and A&M College, United States

**Abstract**— Research concerning the media's effect on the body image of women and adolescent girls is abundant; however, a majority of the studies conducted relate to exposure to print media. Mass media outlets are no longer the main source of exposure to what are considered "ideal" body images for women. Social media disseminated through social networking sites (Myspace, Facebook), microblogs (Tumblr & X, formerly Twitter) and photo and video sharing applications (Snapchat, TikTok & Instagram) are quickly replacing conventional mass media usage among women. The purpose of this study was to gather baseline information on the effects of social media on women's body image to start to answer the larger question of: How do photos posted on Instagram, a mobile web-based photo and video sharing social networking service, influence women in terms of their body image, self-esteem and appearance?

**Keywords**— Body Image, Instagram, Self-Esteem, Social Media.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Print media, such as fashion magazines and advertisements and broadcast media such as film and television programs are no longer the main source of exposure to what is considered the ideal female body image. Social media disseminated through social networking sites (Myspace, Facebook), microblogs (Tumblr & X, formerly Twitter) and photo and video sharing applications (Snapchat, TikTok & Instagram) are quickly replacing conventional mass media usage among women. Social media use is defined as the consumption of digital media that provides an outlet for the audience to connect, communicate and interact with each other via social networking sites (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

About 70% of Americans say they use some form of social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Among adults between 18 to 29 years old, 84% say they use some form of social media which is similar to those ages 30 to 49 at 81% (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). A somewhat smaller percentage of adults ages 50 to 64 use social media, with 73% reporting use, while 45% of those 65 and older say they use social media in some capacity (Auxier & Anderson 2021). It is also found that a significantly higher percentage of women than men use social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

Previous research has demonstrated the negative effects that exposure to images portrayed through conventional mass media of the Westernized standard of beauty, which is based on an unrealistic and practically attainable thin ideal body type; have on women's body image and self-esteem. Currently however, there is a lack of research concerning the influences of social media on body image perceptions among women. The level of interactivity that users of social media are involved in is one of the key factors that differentiate this new media from the traditional sources that only allowed readers and viewers to act as passive receivers. Through social media, users are not only



the recipients but also become active producers of media content. Although, research concerning social media's effect on the body image of adolescent girls and college-age women are becoming more and more prevalent however, studies pertaining to the influence of social media on the body image of women age 30 and over are limited. With the older adult age group becoming one of the fastest growing groups of online users, it has become increasingly important to study the influence of Internet and social networking use on middle aged and older adults as well (Hogeboom et al., 2010).

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The terms social networking sites and social media are often used interchangeably, however; they actually have two distinct meanings. Social networking sites describe member based internet communities such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, that allow users to create a virtual profile that can include a unique username or "handle", a profile photo and other identifying personal information such as the users likes and their career status to give others a glimpse of their life and personality. Social media is considered to be the user-generated content (photos, videos, written posts, etc.) that is uploaded and distributed to people via social networking sites. Social networking sites also give users the ability to communicate with others in innovative ways such as sending public or private online messages or sharing photos online. Through social networking sites users become active producers of social media as well as the recipients of this web-based content. Since their introduction, social networking sites have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. These sites have become one of the primary venues in which people interact with one another, establish their identities and friendships, and influence peers.

The most commonly used social media platform among Americans is YouTube with 81% saying they use the site (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Facebook's growth has leveled off over the years however it is still one of the more popular social media sites among adults in the United States. Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok all have a strong following with young adults. A majority of 18 to 19 year olds say they use Instagram (71%) or Snapchat (65%), while roughly half say the same for TikTok (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Research shows that women construct appearance comparisons differently depending on the social media site used. On Facebook, women more often compare their appearance to images of their previous selves, friends and acquaintances rather than to celebrities (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Whereas on Instagram, appearance comparisons to images of celebrities and models are more prominent (Fardouly et al., 2018).

Studies involving body dissatisfaction among college-aged women are prevalent (White et al., 2023; Prochnaw et al., 2021). The relationship between frequent Facebook use and body image among young women has been explored to some extent as well (Eckler et al., 2017; Hanna et al., 2017). Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) found that there is a significant correlation between frequent Facebook usage and body dissatisfaction as well as between Facebook usage and the drive for thinness. The participants most often compared their appearance to their distant peers, close friends and celebrities but less frequently to their female family members. When the participants compared themselves to female celebrities they rated their bodies more negatively than when they compared themselves to close friends and distant peers. While some of the older women interviewed in the present study



did express body dissatisfaction in relation to Facebook usage it is difficult to compare the results due to the dissimilar samples of each study.

Previous research has linked Facebook usage among young women to self-objectification and body dissatisfaction however there is very little research concerning the use of other popular social media platforms (Meier & Gray, 2014). Instagram is one of the most popular social media sites that is particularly popular among women (Fardouly et al., 2018). Instagram provides users a way to update their followers by posting photos that can be tweaked or enhanced through the use of filters. Users can also share their Instagram photos on other social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter (Hu et al, 2014). Although there is a comments feature, there is little text involved with Instagram. Most Instagram users take advantage of the “like” feature, which allows them to rate the attractiveness, or popularity of others.

### **III. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of social media, specifically Instagram, on young, middle aged, and older women in regards to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their body image. Baseline information on the effects of social media on women’s body image was gathered to start to answer the larger question of: How do photos posted on Instagram, a mobile web-based photo and video sharing social networking service, influence women of all ages in terms of their body image, self-esteem and appearance? Through an online survey, the researchers asked women what they are viewing and “liking” on social networking sites, how this affects their self-esteem, body image and appearance and if this activity has as any influence on what they post. This research was approached by developing the following hypotheses:

H1: The use of the social networking site Instagram has a negative effect on women’s body image and self-esteem.

H2: Negative comments and a low amount of likes on a post has a negative effect on women’s body image and self-esteem.

### **IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

Three theoretical concepts, social comparison theory, self – objectification theory and theory of adult development, are used to frame this study.

#### ***Social Comparison Theory***

The theory of social comparison processes, first introduced in 1954 by psychologist Leon Festinger, involves people coming to know themselves by evaluating their own attitudes, abilities, and beliefs in comparison with others. In most cases, individuals compare themselves to those with whom they perceive are similar in terms of age, sex or achievements; or in the case of abilities, others who are slightly better (Kramer et al., 2008). Festinger contended that to compare oneself with people whose opinion or ability differ greatly from your own may be counterproductive as such a comparison seldom provides information helpful in assessing the accurate self-view (Corcoran et al., 2011).



### ***Self-objectification Theory***

Objectification theory, a theoretical framework proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), posits that women exist in a culture wherein their bodies are constantly subjected to sexualized gazing and sexual objectification from men. The goal of objectification theory is to illuminate the lived experiences and psychological consequences of girls and women who experience daily, often unavoidable, sexual objectification. "Sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175). Although women are most often objectified by others, namely men, for the sake of their own pleasure, women often times take part in their own objectification. The occurrence of self – objectification whereby women begin treating themselves as objects to be evaluated by the male gaze is a psychological consequence attributed to the pressures society places on women measure up to the feminine beauty ideal (Tiggeman & Lynch, 2001).

### ***Theory of Adult Development***

Levinson's theory of adult development includes the following elements: the life course, the life cycle, and the individual life structure. The life course refers to the evolution of a life from beginning to end taking into account times of "stability and change, continuity and discontinuity, orderly progression as well as stasis and chaotic fluctuation" (Levinson, 1986, p. 3). When studying the life course it is also important to consider all aspects of living including: "inner wishes and fantasies; love relationships; participation in family, work and other social systems; bodily changes; good times and bad – everything that significance in a life" (Levinson, 1986, p.4). The life cycle is an extension of the life course suggesting that life evolves through a sequence of various phases or seasons that are similar yet unique to each individual.

The life structure element, defined as the underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time, is the key concept of Levinson's theory of adult development. Life structure is primarily related to one's relationships with other's such as a person, a group, institution or culture, or a particular object or place. Relationships are of great importance when studying the life course as they shape how we participate in the world around us. Levinson found that throughout the adult years, the life structure develops in a relatively orderly sequence of age-linked periods. The sequence consists of an alternating series of structure-building and transitional periods.

During a structure-building period the goal is to create a new life structure and enhance our life within it; in doing so, one must make certain key choices, form a structure around them, and pursue our values and goals within this structure (Levinson, 1986). Transitional periods signify the termination of an existing life structure thus, creating the possibility for a new one.

During a transitional period, the goal is to reevaluate the existing life structure, explore possibilities for change, and proceed to commit to the necessary choices that will form the basis the forthcoming life structure (Levinson, 1986). This sequence of eras and periods help to frame a theory of adult development that supports the study of both men and women of different classes and cultural backgrounds.



## V. Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 435 women between the ages of 18 and 67. The sample was primarily Caucasian (65%). African Americans accounted for 22% of the sample. There were also smaller representations from other ethnic groups. Most of the women surveyed identified as single, never married (82%) while 14% were married or in a domestic partnership. A majority of the participants (70%) lived in the Midwest region of the United States. Forty-seven percent of the women described the area in which they lived as suburban, 28% level of education completed by the participants 51% of the women have completed some college. Of the respondents, 50% of them used Facebook most often, while 13% used Instagram, 11% used Twitter and Snapchat. Taking into account the broad demographics of the respondents, their responses to body image statements was a 3.0 on a Likert Scale of 1 to 5.

### *Procedure*

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Committee, a link to the online survey was made available on various social networking sites including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. A mass email with a link to the survey was also sent to students and faculty at large Midwestern university. The importance of participation and the purpose and significance of research were clearly explained. All participants provided electronic consent before proceeding with the survey.

### *Instrument*

An online survey was created using Qualtrics software. The survey consisted of demographic questions, Internet and social media usage questions, Instagram usage questions and questions pertaining to body image concerns. Standard measures used to collect demographic information such as, gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, geographic location, education level, employment status and annual income were included on the survey. The Internet and social media usage portion of the survey included questions such as "On average, how often do you access the internet?" and "Which social media sites do you use?"

Regarding their Instagram usage, respondents were asked questions about their followers and posts. For example, participants were asked to evaluate the following statement, "I care about the amount of followers I have on my Instagram account" using a 5 point Likert-scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Participants were also asked questions about the people they follow on Instagram. For example, respondents were asked to select the top five reasons they are motivated to follow someone on Instagram. Some of the choices were, "because I know them," "because they are famous," "their facial and/or physical beauty," and respondents had the option to add their own reason in the other category.

Questions concerning Instagram and body image were developed through the use of the Socio-cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-3 (SATAQ-3), which is a revision and extension of the Socio-cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-R) developed by Cusumano and Thompson (1997) and the original Socio-cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ) first presented by Heinberg et al. (1995), all of which have been widely used to measure societal influences on body image and eating disturbances. The SATAQ



scales have proven to be successful in measuring internalization of the thin ideal as well as assessing social cultural influences identified as risk factors for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

The revised and expanded (SATAQ-3) was developed to account for the then new and emerging influence for young women, athleticism and sports related media. Popularity of magazines such as Shape and Fitness have since helped to shift what may be considered the ideal body type and have not only influenced the dieting behavior of adolescent girls and young women but their exercise regimen as well. Since the development of the (SATAQ-3) however, another important media influence has emerged in the form of social media. For this present study, the (SATAQ-3) was adapted to account for social media's possible influence on body image and body dissatisfaction.

## VI. RESULTS

**Table 1: Scale and Item Analysis Impact of Instagram Use on Body Image**

Scale and Items	Mean	SD
I compare my body to the bodies of people I follow on Instagram.	3.01	1.357
I would like my body to look like people I follow on Instagram.	3.02	1.332
I've felt pressure from Instagram to have a perfect body.	3.54	1.296
I've felt pressure from Instagram to lose weight.	3.54	1.279
I've felt pressure from Instagram to diet.	3.57	1.351
I've felt pressure from Instagram to exercise	3.24	1.351
I've felt pressure from Instagram to be thinner.	3.56	1.315
I've felt pressure from Instagram to be curvier.	3.80	1.183
I've felt pressure from Instagram to use body enhancing undergarments (i.e., waist trainers, butt lifters, padded panties, shape wear, etc.)	3.98	1.250
I've felt pressure from Instagram to consider cosmetic surgery to change or enhance my body.	4.31	1.016
I've felt pressure from Instagram to undergo cosmetic surgery to change or enhance my body.	4.35	.982

## VII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This preliminary data confirms that body image of women is impacted by social media, especially Instagram. The existing data will be analyzed with independent-samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine if demographic attributes such as age, ethnicity, education, types of sites preferred and frequency of use have effects on women's perceptions of their own bodies.

Then additional research questions and hypotheses will be defined. Ultimately, we would like to determine the nature of the pictures women post, investigate the importance of likes, followers and comments to users and how these aspects relate to their self-esteem and body image, specifically Instagram.



## REFERENCES

- [1] Auxier, B., & Anderson, M. (2021). Social media use in 2021. Pew Research Center, 1, 1-4.
- [2] Corcoran, K., Crusius, J., & Mussweiler, T. (2011). Social comparison: Motives, standards, and mechanisms. *Theories in social psychology*, 119-139.
- [3] Cusumano, D. L., & Thompson, J. K. (1997). Body image and body shape ideals in magazines: Exposure, awareness, and internalization. *Sex roles*, 37, 701-721.
- [4] Eckler, P., Kalyango, Y., & Paasch, E. (2017). Facebook use and negative body image among US college women. *Women & health*, 57(2), 249-267.
- [5] Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2015). Negative comparisons about one's appearance mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns. *Body image*, 12, 82-88.
- [6] Fardouly, J., Willburger, B. K., & Vartanian, L. R. (2018). Instagram use and young women's body image concerns and self-objectification: Testing mediational pathways. *New media & society*, 20(4), 1380-1395.
- [7] Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human relations*, 7(2), 117-140.
- [8] Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of women quarterly*, 21(2), 173-206.
- [9] Hanna, E., Ward, L. M., Seabrook, R. C., Jerald, M., Reed, L., Giacardi, S., & Lippman, J. R. (2017). Contributions of social comparison and self-objectification in mediating associations between Facebook use and emergent adults' psychological well-being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20(3), 172-179.
- [10] Heinberg, L. J., Thompson, J. K., & Stormer, S. (1995). Development and validation of the sociocultural attitudes towards appearance questionnaire. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 17(1), 81-89.
- [11] Hogeboom, D. L., McDermott, R. J., Perrin, K. M., Osman, H., & Bell-Ellison, B. A. (2010). Internet use and social networking among middle aged and older adults. *Educational Gerontology*, 36(2), 93-111.
- [12] Hu, Y., Manikonda, L., & Kambhampati, S. (2014, June). What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types. In ICWSM.
- [13] Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- [14] Kraye, A., Ingledew, D. K., & Iphofen, R. (2008). Social comparison and body image in adolescence: a grounded theory approach. *Health Education Research*, 23(5), 892-903.
- [15] Levinson, D. J. (1986). A conception of adult development. *American Psychologist*, 41(1), 3.
- [16] Meier, E. P., & Gray, J. (2014). Facebook photo activity associated with body image disturbance in adolescent girls. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 17(4), 199-206.
- [17] Prochnow, T., Patterson, M. S., & Umstatter Meyer, M. R. (2021). A social network approach to analyzing body dissatisfaction among sorority members using two network generators. *Journal of American College Health*, 69(2), 159-167.
- [18] Tiggemann, M., & Lynch, J. E. (2001). Body image across the life span in adult women: the role of self-objectification. *Developmental Psychology*, 37(2), 243.
- [19] White, Grace, Cianna Piercey, and Alejandra Medina Fernandez. "Body Image, Self-Objectification, and Appearance Maintenance Among College-Aged Women: Direct Original Research." *Research Directs in Psychology and Behavior* 3.1 (2023).