

# Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Female Self Image

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## ABSTRACT

With the development of electronic devices, social media has become an indispensable part of our social life. With its help, the voice from the side of the female are more likely to spread. While it is believed that social media has been shaping a non-realistic beauty image for females mainly characterized by thinness and sexual attractions. In order to know the consequences for taking into such an unrealistic image, we analyze its influence from the perspectives of physical and psychological by looking into a total of 24 paper related to this theme. The current review provides a holistic view of the influence of social media on the female self image from the perspective of both biological and psychological. Understanding from such perspectives will not only help women to target the negative physical influences derived from intake of negative body image but also help them to move toward a more integrated psychological state. From both perspectives, it has been observed that although the rise of social media has brought females the chance to spread their ideas, society is still based on a male-dominant worldview. Objectification and social comparison over the body image are prevalent and positively associated with eating disorders and body anxiety among female teenagers and young adults. It is still common among young females to take the male-dominant view and have a lack of female consciousness.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Female Body Image, Feminism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rise and development of new media have brought new opportunities for women's voices to be heard through media, social media has become a necessary tool in people's daily entertainment and work which is closely related to every aspect of our lives. Being in the current modern society with the popularization of social media and the deepening of women's self-awareness, this article will explore how social media affects female self-image from the perspectives of psychological and physical. Meanwhile, this paper will also summarize and classify the previous research results, then study and analyze the current situation from a new perspective, explore the impact of social media on female self-image more deeply.

On the one hand, it has been witnessed that the public presentation of ideal female body and social image on social media serves as an important social model for the female. To achieve the so-called "beauty"

as judged by the world, women disregard their health and even blindly worship deformed physiological structures, like plastic surgery, eating disorders, and so on, which also cause a lot of harm to their bodies. In terms of psychology, women have a platform to express their opinions and wishes, and the right to speak is no longer concentrated in the hands of men, which has achieved gender equality to a certain extent [1]. However, due to the public orders and social aesthetics formed under the framework of the millennium patriarchal society, the conventional ideology is still deeply clamped in social media, resulting in the absence of "female consciousness" in the media.

In the past two decades of research, more and more scholars have become aware of the influence of social media on female image and have analyzed from various aspects like traditional culture, media, and literature. But the direction of the research has mainly focused on exploring the relationship between social media and a

specific aspect of mutual influence, and has not completely combined the two types of women's physical and psychological health to analyze the relationship comprehensively. In this study, the keywords "media", "female" and "self-image" were used to search for articles from 2000 to the present on Google Scholar, CNKI and Wiki, etc. Through screening, a total of 24 articles were included in the classification of this study.

## 2. INFLUENCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

This article will explore the impact of social media on female self-image from the perspectives of psychological and physical. The list of papers cited can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Analysis of 24 papers related to "the influence of social media on female's self image"

No. of papers	Context of "influence of social media on female's self image" usage	References
8	Influence of social media on female's consciousness lead to change in physical status	[2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
16	Influence of social media on female's consciousness lead to change in psychological status	[1][10][11][12][13][14][15][16][17][18][19][20][21][22][23][24]
24	Total of 24 paper related to "the influence of social media on female's awareness" available in electronic form	

### 2.1. Use of Social Media as A Leading Factor for Eating Disorders

Researchers have been arguing that the increased availability of social media outlets has shaped the self-perception of females in a negative way that females are more prone to experience body dissatisfaction and anxiety. Klein's review in 2013 showed that mass media has been shaping a more and more unrealistic thin-ideal image for women and the increase of social media users has the same onset with the increase of eating disorders [2]. Although this review had not provided specific evidence for the existence of a specific relationship between the two, many studies have been conducted to test the use of social media and eating disorders/disordered eating styles:

Two main theories used to explain this relation are sociocultural and objectification theories [3]. Bell's study in 2016 provided evidence for the social comparison theory by showing that females in colleges would feel pressured for not conforming to the ideal unrealistic beauty standards set by society. Such dissatisfaction is the major contributing factor for eating disorders [4][5]. Fredrickson and Roberts argue that body surveillance is positively correlated with body anxiety, which in turn contributes to eating disorders [6]. Specifically, Ellen provided a link between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction by showing body surveillance can serve as a specific mediator between the two, providing evidence for the objectification theory [7]. Other studies showed similar results by examining specific use of social media and eating disorders: in 2011, the University of Haifa has found that there is a connection between the high use of Facebook and eating disorders/disordered eating styles

like keep on the diet [8]. Likewise, Turner and Lefevre conducted a study in 2017 that showed a similar effect by providing a positive connection between the use of Instagram and symptoms of Orthorexia Nervosa [5]. Similarly, it has been found that female young adults who are active Internet users are more likely to suffer from disordered eating [9].

However, although there is evidence of the connection between social media use and disordered eating, whether such an effect is causal is still open to debate. And researchers have proposed that it happens because of thin-ideal internalization, but there is not one confirmed specific mediator. Moreover, recent studies heavily aimed at research of specific image-sharing social media platforms and specific age groups that are adolescent and college-aged women. Whether there is a generalization effect to another age group across platforms is still open to debate.

### 2.2. Psychological Impact

#### 2.2.1. Influence on Body Dissatisfaction

One negative psychological impact is that social media triggers female body image anxiety. Women in a mediated society are influenced by many external factors that can lead to doubts about their body image [10]. Social media provides people opportunities to expose their photos to the public. Seventy-one percent of Instagram users have edited their photos before posting them [11]. While self-portrait editing enables women to display a better self to others, it may also affect how women create their ideal self-image, contributing to incorrect aesthetics and developing unrealistic expectations [12]. In this case, women are more susceptible than males to be dissatisfied with their

bodies because of social comparison [13]. Moreover, women tend to compare their looks adversely to their peers and celebrities rather than family members while browsing Facebook [14]. Thus, an image of a woman presented in social media sometimes is harmful to a female self-image [15].

### *2.2.2. Influence on Female Self-esteem*

On the other hand, social media can improve female self-esteem. Social media bring attention to women's rights and challenge gender discrimination [16]. For example, Turkin women express their opposition to the policy of banning abortion through social media [17]. Furthermore, social media can be served as a platform to spread feminism and express women's feelings. The feminist bloggers on Facebook strengthen feminist networks and create online feminist communities [18]. African women's rights activists have used social media to organize people and resources to take action in their communities [19]. Moreover, the impact of body-positive social media on body satisfaction applies to all women, regardless of their prior perceptions of beauty [20]. Women who saw body-positive messages were happier with their bodies, more appreciative of their distinctive characteristics and health, and in a better mood. Those who saw idealized Instagram photos, on the other hand, had a negative body image and mood [21].

### *2.2.3. Influence on Traditional Culture*

The traditional culture advocates the idea that men are the head of the family, and the family is a small country, old sayings like you plow the fields and I weave the cloth, and the long-standing family-based smallholder economic structure, which has kept men in a dominant family and social position for a long time. The relationship between men and women advocated in traditional Chinese culture is mainly oriented towards the idea that men are the benefactors and women are the beneficiaries. During the subsequent millennia of social development, the rulers and mainstream culture have deepened and strengthened this root thinking, thus forming the standard of women's image under traditional Chinese culture.

Social media constructs the upper level of consciousness such as social culture. Feminism will influence young urban women's concept of marriage through negative marriage news reports, post-marriage anxiety media, media construction of independent women's image, female opinion leaders' demonstration, and open internet discussion. As a result, with the combination of feminism and mass media, the late marriage of young urban women has become a "stage achievement" of feminism's continuous revision of the traditional social gender system to resist the hegemony of patriarchy [22]. Although "we have been told what

the world is like before we look at it," as modern Chinese women gradually break away from the functions and restrictions imposed by millennia of traditional culture, the awakening of self-awareness encourages women to step out of their predicaments and keep exploring, we can discover for ourselves what the world is like, we can liberate ourselves from the cage of the male gaze and the shackles of patriarchy.

### *2.2.4. Influence on Gender Relation*

In the age of social media, social media has provided a new path for women to defend their rights and interests and express their views. With the development of social media technology, on the one hand, women have a platform to express their opinions and desires, and the right to speak is no longer concentrated in the hands of men [23]; on the other hand, the phenomenon of female discrimination can still be seen everywhere in media reports and social media. The traditional stereotypes of women have been overturned, and the status of women in family and society has been significantly improved, which has contributed to social harmony and stability, but the traditional concept of "male domination and female subordination" is still deeply anchored in social media, resulting in the absence of "female consciousness" in the media. At the same time, the media amplifies the negative image of women through agenda setting and deepens the public's prejudice against women, resulting in the problem of female discrimination is still serious [1].

The dramatic increase in female body narratives on visual social media platforms, where women are defined as fashionable, cute, generous, virtuous, and sexy... stereotypes from the male perspective have put women in a subordinate position of being gazed at and objectified [24]. There is also the much-debated selfie today, a new form of self-expression in the electronic age, seen as a cry for help, or narcissism. And men have a higher economic level and voice in social life and participate more frequently in discussions than women. Some media, especially advertisements, sometimes give the inequality a veneer of happiness, but what lies behind the torn veneer of a happy family is still the ugliness of a long-standing unequal relationship between men and women. Various social media and commercials stereotype, alienate and objectify women, trying to construct an image of women that meets the public's psychological expectations and uphold the gender domination order.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

From research, it is concluded that while women have a platform to express their views, and the right to speak is no longer solely reserved for men, there is still discrimination against women and the traditional concept of "male dominance and female subordination"

is still deeply embedded in social media, resulting in a lack of "female consciousness." The media's agenda framing promotes the negative image of women and amplifies public prejudice against them, resulting in a persistent problem of gender discrimination. Social media postings of a female's ideal body and appearance serve as a vital social model for females. The shift from traditional mass media to social media makes social modeling and comparison a common occurrence by removing the barrier of tight control and allowing anybody to share and view content. Thus, people need to spread positive content that can improve female self-esteem rather than cause anxiety. Future research should merge the two forms of women's physical and psychological well-being and methods that can help women deal with mental and physical problems caused by social media.

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