

The Impact of Social Media on Body Image Anxiety Among Females

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ABSTRACT

Entering the digital era, social media has become the omnipresent way of transmitting distorted body standards especially targets on young females. The failure to meet these unrealistic standards leads to body image anxiety. Existing studies considered the erosion of self-esteem had led to weight stigmatization, social comparison, and body image concerns. This article concisely illuminates the mechanism of social media-related body image anxiety and explains how they are more closely intertwined than the general public is aware of. The main purpose of this article is to encourage young females to understand and reject unrealistic societal beauty ideals trending on social media platforms, and hopefully to raise awareness of mitigating body image anxiety for both genders.

Keywords: Social media, Body image anxiety, Thin ideal, Body dissatisfaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Body image anxiety, though can be spotted among women of all ages, is specifically prevalent among young females. During adolescence, for instance, body image is the most significant constituent of adolescent girls' self-esteem [1]. As social media exerts all its strength to promote the current lean and emaciated body standards and exceedingly accentuate thinness, the definition of beauty for women has been distorted into an unrealistic thin ideal. Therefore, social media's propelling force is arguably the most possible cause of body image anxiety, which results in a drastic erosion of self-esteem and multiple psychological problems. However, the public failed to recognize the severity of body image anxiety provoked by social media, with a glorification of the morbid fascination with thinness. Self-discipline, weight control, healthy lifestyle, and many other statements serve as justifications for social media and its twisted, clearly unhealthy trending ideas concerning body image.

This article firstly explains how young females are facing erosion of self-esteem because of social media, and lists some of the most notorious negative impacts on psychological health; then explores the role played by social media in the dissemination of body image anxiety and how media serves as a convenient propaganda tool of the beauty industry; finally emphasizes the severity of the current situation and the exigency of public awareness and joint effort.

To specify, this article aims at illustrating the detrimental effect of body image anxiety specifically associated with social media, many other factors, such as biological consequences (i.e., eating disorder), cultural background influences, sociological factors (i.e., family influences, and peer pressure), are not fully discussed.

2. EROSION OF SELF-ESTEEM/SELF-CONFIDENCE CAUSED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

To elucidate and apprehend the mechanism of body image anxiety, the loss of self-esteem in social media use has been a crucial phenomenon that requires further analysis. However, this topic does not receive appropriate attention and has adequate research in China. For instance, the current understanding concerning body image anxiety of Chinese female students is interrelated to social media is highly limited. According to Liao's research, 32.5 percent of participants expressed extreme concern about certain aspects of their physical appearance, while 1.3% of female participants showed signs of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) [2]. There were an increasing number of people with depression and social anxiety who had concerns about how they look like, even the ones who did not test positive for BDD [2]. Nevertheless, there was still a major limitation of this study that the cross-sectional research adopted a self-

report survey design, thus constraining experimental activities with several formulated questionnaires.

The relationships between social media and self-esteem have been examined by existing studies, many of which indicated a positive correlation showing that social media usage is linked with poor self-esteem. A broad range of studies has explored mobile social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, WeChat, Instagram, Snapchat, Weibo, Twitter). Social media, especially online photo-sharing-based ones (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat) and social network platforms exemplified by Facebook and WeChat have posed threats to self-esteem. Social media platforms, take Instagram as an example, typically features images of diverse body types, provide instant access to a variety of body types idealized by other users [3]. The likelihood of negative influence cast by these hyper-idealized content of body images is reasonably high. An experimental study was conducted on Catalan undergraduate students in three parts, concentrating on the consumption of Instagram and the level of body image dissatisfaction. It indicated the relationship between social media and lack of self-confidence [3]. However, the study cannot reveal the category of image and material which the participants chose to experience. Thus, it results in an obscure situation: the level of exposure to idealized body images is doubtful.

On top of that, the study also had several limitations. Up to three main drawbacks are worth mentioning in respect of research methods, which are subject activities, and financial support [3]. Firstly, the researchers acknowledged that participants might be prone to online social comparisons among peers, acquaintances, or friends, which was reckoned to aggravate the dissatisfaction with body image [3]. Given that this particular limitation was about what type of contents participants consume and respond to, further studies are expected to apply certain filters to media contents during experiments. Secondly, The authors also mentioned their suggestion for future research to explore different activities on social media [3]. Furthermore, it was noted by the author indicating possible financial assistance to be given to further research to bypass the boundaries of research tools. For instance, in this study specifically, the Body Image Disturbance Questionnaire is not a free research instrument, and it has a constraint of service duration of two years, hence constraining the experimental span by two years.

A recent study with Asian cultural background in 2021 rejected the idea mentioned above. An opposite result can be seen, demonstrating that the impact of photo-sharing apps on self-esteem was minimal. According to Ramadhany, who studied 37 female respondents from the State University of Jakarta, body shaming on Instagram had a negative impact on female students' self-esteem. [4]. Concerning categories of body shaming influence factors, the study connected

independent variables including social or external cognitive components, emotional components, and avoidance behavior components [4]. Its result indicated a positive association between Instagram usage and self-confidence but emphasized its insignificance [4]. As shown in this study, body shaming on Instagram had a 6.9% effect on self-confidence among female students in a very low category, and the rest was influenced by other factors that were not addressed by this study [4]. Psychological components were considered to account for the deficit of self-esteem as well.

3. MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE DISSEMINATION OF BODY IMAGE ANXIETY

After reviewing the erosion of self-esteem caused by social media, then it is essential to investigate the role that media played, especially in the dissemination of body image anxiety. A manifold of media types facilitates the bombardment of body ideals. For females, thin-ideal body image is a deep-trenched pattern in films, series, advertisements, and promotions. Based on the stage of self-esteem and social network, Aparicio-Martinez et al. studied the correlations implied by the results of a test about Social Network Sites (SNS) in 2019. Some factors can also show females' self-esteem erosion caused by social media, for example, strategies used to change their body image, a stronger desire for a slimmer body, a lower level of self-esteem, a bigger number of social media accounts, a longer duration of connections, and the priority given to social networks all showed positive relevance [5]. The overwhelming amount of expression and implication of hyper-idealized and superior body shapes attribute to the internalization of deals, thus provoking social comparison. Social media do not provide users with an authentic social norm but reinforce stereotypes and result in a distorted perception.

One of the primary mechanisms involved in one's body image perception is social comparison, which is combined with ideal internalization [6]. Fashion trends on social media contribute to promoting social comparison on a scale larger than ever. Across traditional media (films, radios, magazines, television programs) thinness is frequently underscored, rewarded, and overrepresented for females, while overweight figures are underrepresented [7]. One may speculate that it is most likely for the new social media to outdo the traditional media when it comes to information dissemination. SNSs provide a platform for a multitude of social comparisons, typically including idealized images to a certain degree, as only photos of these users looking good or doing something cool tend to be posted [7]. SNSs are successful to continue and strengthen the influences of traditional media. Jiotsa et al. argued that although historically, body norms were primarily communicated through traditional media (i.e., television,

radio, newspapers, and publications), the last several decades are seeing the rise as well as expansion of social media use [6]. Similarly, Grabe et al. pointed out that body image anxiety was intimately correlated to the media's progressively thin ideal [7]. However, the trend has also been aligned with the fashion industry to serve advertising and promoting purposes.

The fashion industry and celebrity worship are of considerable importance in addressing the indications of media on body shape standards. As Grabe et al. argued that images of women in the media are thinner and more unnatural than ever before [7]. Social stigma and the discrimination of medium and large body shapes were combined with defamation of character. People with non-ideal weight or body shape were portrayed as lack of discipline, self-control on social media, and on manifold other occasions [8]. The dominant message in the media is that obesity is a matter of personal responsibility, as Dr. Puhl and his colleagues described. Obesity-related personal causes and solutions receive far more attention in the media than other societal attributions of blame. The entertainment industry also sends anti-fat messages and reinforces the notion that one's weight is under one's control [9]. Consequently, the inability to measure up to harsh, often uncompromising body shape expectations from social media causes distorted self-assessment. Meanwhile, the failure of sticking to strict dieting methods (i.e., maintaining a good figure) results in both internal and external defamation of body shape.

However, it is possible that this impact is amplified by the prevalence of social media since the fashion industry purposefully cast influence on the public. It is a long-drawn scheme that implicates and manipulates women to adhere to the morbid body standards. For the fashion industry, chronically exposing fashion promotions and celebrity worship to social media users is what they yearn for. Taking all the factors above, social media turns out to be useful for the cause of the fashion industry. After repeated exposure to media content, viewers begin to accept media portrayals as accurate representations of reality [7]. For that reason, promotion via social media is prevalent and effective. As demonstrated in the work by Aziz, the pretense that equates significantly thin models with beauty is a long-held agenda, which has been promoted by the fashion industry and adopted by celebrities alike for many years [3]. Social media uplifted the ambition of the fashion industry, thereby disseminating the idea of lean, and emaciated body standards.

Mainstream media and social media trends publicize malformed body image and beauty standards. Grabe et al. pointed out that thinness is frequently rewarded and heavily represented in mainstream media, while normal and overweight people are vastly underrepresented [7]. However, not all actions that relate to social media are factors that contribute to body image issues. As reported

by Santarossa et al., certain SNS activities (e.g., checking their profile page, liking photos on strangers' profiles, and reading posts or comments on others' profiles) are less probable to provoke body image dissatisfaction [10]. The response and reaction of social media users to their posts should be further studied to gain more insights into the reasons for this phenomenon.

4. THE SEVERITY OF BODY IMAGE ANXIETY ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

After discussing how social media performs in exacerbating body image anxiety, the severity of the problem should be addressed. Compared to upward social comparisons of celebrities and models, upward social comparisons with peers on social media are more closely related to the desire for thinness and dissatisfaction with one's body, with even higher significant effects on body image concerns [11][12]. Indeed, social media serves mainly as an instrument for social connections online, which is a necessity for younger generations. Also, it is more influential in comparisons with peers than with celebrities.

It has been an exigent circumstance that the prevalence of body image anxiety has caused females, especially young females, on the brink of psychological crisis. As social media depictions of the thin-ideal body of females and muscular-ideal body of males, young females, between 40% to 50% of preadolescent girls, are highly susceptible to thin-ideal internalization, body image anxiety, social appearance comparisons, and disordered eating [13][14]. The omnipresent phenomenon of body image anxiety on social media may cast a rather incremental influence on every media user, but young females are in exigent circumstances. Particularly peer pressures make female netizens need more caution and psychological care [15].

Amongst all negative consequences, anxiety, and concern for body image give rise to further detrimental effects. Body image is reported to be a top concern among youngsters in Australia [16]. Also, high levels of body image dissatisfaction are strongly connected to harmful weight control behavior and psychological distress [17]. Adolescents are subjected to more extensive research, with one study, in particular, demonstrating a positive relationship between body dissatisfaction and depression [18]. Many forms of social media activities can cause detrimental outcomes. One of them involves actively engaging with attractive peers' social media, namely Active Social Media Engagement (ASME), and stands as a representative. Compared to passive social media consumption, ASME features content engagement on social media and may have a stronger psychological effect [19]. Active social media engagement with fellows may pose a greater threat to psychology than common social media consumption,

which is typically passive and does not necessarily involve social comparison [19]. Hogue defines ASME behaviors as viewing and making comments on social media posts made by friends [19]. Active social media engagement can cause an increase in negative body image and worsen the psychological state of young adult women. Hogue's findings are consistent with the proposal that media education projects concerning body image should emphasize social media use, particularly the pressures associated with viewing images of others, particularly peers [19][20]. Given the fact that social media creates an environment that normalizes the mental issues mentioned above to a certain level, it is still crucial to continue to carry out more delicate studies on the matter.

Although body image anxiety is a prevalent psychological problem regardless of cultural background and education, Asia has witnessed a specifically severe situation. According to a cross-cultural study conducted by Nayeong in 2010, which compared 266 female students for Germany and 324 female students from Korea, Korean females reported a particularly higher level of body shame and social appearance anxiety. Body image anxiety necessitates further exploration and public attention in Asian countries [21]. Existing studies on young females' body image anxiety related to social media are usually analyzed in Western cultural backgrounds or focus on cross-cultural comparison. Then, a considerable amount of studies were conducted in colleges and universities in North America. The homogeneity created by education and cultural background could lead to a less discernible effect, especially in real-world terms or in other cultural terms. Hence, many of the current results may not be precise from other cultural perspectives.

Furthermore, cultural background plays an unexpected role in treating body image anxiety on social media. With social stigma and hierarchical social norms, the mechanism of the reluctance of alleviating body image anxiety forms an intricate network of the Chinese psyche regarding psychological health. It causes Chinese young females rarely try to comprehend the issue, instead of mentioning reaching out for assistance. Due to the obstinate misleading effects of social media, many females currently still struggle with fitting in with distorted body standards and suffering from poor psychological health. It is essential for both educational and research institutions to raise public awareness and potentially allocate political support from the governments. Therefore, joint efforts are still needed to interrupt the process of body image anxiety during the era of social media in Asia and across the globe.

5. CONCLUSION

To demonstrate the severity and consequences of body image anxiety for young females and its connection

with social media platforms, this article elucidates three sections of content. Firstly, how young females suffer from low self-esteem propelled by thin-ideal trends on social media. Secondly, how social media is used as a successor of traditional media to further promote distorted body standards for the sake of commercial promotion and other purposes. Finally, the reasons to demand more comprehensive public understanding and awareness urgently towards body image anxiety to mitigate mental suffering of young females, and likely, for both genders.

The topic of body image anxiety awaits additional studies for its significance in psychological health for both genders. The majority of the research studied in this article noted that severe psychological consequences were detected. By stigmatizing certain body image, usually contrary to the prevalent thin ideal, social media platforms serves as a carrier of unrealistic, distorted, and sometimes morbid body standards. Apart from psychological consequences, sociological and biological contributors are also required further exploration.

However, the propelling force of social media can be taken to positive use. Social media platforms of different types can be utilized to understand the severity of weight stigma within social media contexts in order to generate effective prevention techniques in the future. With optimal social media governance and regulatory policies to control extreme content and provide health suggestions from authoritative resources, a future of a more wholesome social media environment on body image that protects young females from morbid thin ideal and informs them of necessary assistance is within reach.

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