Social Media and Body Image: Recent Trends and Future Directions

Laura Vandenbosch[a], Jasmine Fardouly[b], Marika Tiggemann[c]

[a] Corresponding author; School for Mass Communication Research, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven, Belgium, laura.vandenbosch@kuleuven.be

[b] School of Psychology, UNSW Sydney, New South Wales, 2052, Australia, j.fardouly@unsw.edu.au

[c] College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia, Marika.Tiggemann@flinders.edu.au

Abstract

This review presents recent trends in social media and body image research, with a particular focus on different social media platforms, features unique to social media and potentially positive content for body image. First, it was found that visual platforms (e.g., Instagram) were more dysfunctional for body image than more textual platforms (e.g., Facebook). Second, taking and editing (but not posting) selfies resulted in negative effects on body image. Positive comments intensified the effects of exposure to idealized content. Third, of the forms of potentially positive content examined in recent research (i.e., fitspiration, disclaimer labels, and body positivity), only body positivity content had a positive effect on body image. Recommendations for future research are offered.

Keywords: Social media, body image, body positivity, objectification, social comparison

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The widespread and daily use of picture-based social media platforms by young people has many ramifications. Considerable research has now investigated the uses and effects of such social media in the realm of body image, where body image refers to a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about the way they look [1]. Reviews summarizing this research have uniformly concluded that social media use is related to negative body image [2–4]. While early work focused only on overall time spent on social media, a growing body of research shows that it is appearance-based activities on social media which are most important [2–4]. In particular, research has consistently found that viewing ideal and digitally edited social media images can negatively impact people's body image [2–5].

The greater complexities of the link between social media use and body image are just starting to be investigated. In the current review, we discuss three recent trends in research which move the field beyond a traditional media approach in which exposure to idealized images is the main focus. First, recent research has increasingly given attention to the differential social media platforms in which social media interactions take place. Second, studies have begun to address unique social media activities. Unlike traditional media where the content is fixed, social media is user-generated and contains diverse image, video, and text-based content from a variety of people. Third, we reflect on research documenting the recent attempts to provide a more positive environment for body image. Specifically, the research on fitspiration, disclaimer labels, and body positivity is reviewed.

1 Trend 1: Different Social Media Platforms

The social media landscape evolves at an unprecedented pace. Social media research has been attentive but delayed to these developments. While almost all studies before 2017 focused on Facebook [2, 6], studies examining Instagram and Snapchat have dominated

research in the past years (e.g., [4]). New popular platforms, such as Tinder and TikTok, are just beginning to be examined [7]. While there are similarities in the way that people use different platforms, there are also nuanced differences with implications for body image. For example, experimental and cross-sectional studies suggest that use of photo-based platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, relate more consistently than more text-based platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, to dysfunctional body image [8–12]. These relationships appear to be largely similar across genders [9, 11].

Photo-based platforms (in which users must post an image) are proposed to be worse for body image because they are more focused on physical appearance [9]. They present social media environments in which users are more likely to post appearance-focused content and thus subsequently are also likely to view appearance-focused content [9]. This content provides users with more opportunities to internalize appearance ideals, self-objectify (i.e., apply an observer's perspective to their own body, [14]) and make negative appearance comparisons. In support, women who spent time on Instagram in a lab setting were found to make more appearance comparisons than those who spent time on Facebook [8]. Further, Instagram use, but not Facebook use, has been positively correlated with self-objectification and appearance comparisons [9, 12]. Recent research testing how such mechanisms mediate the links between different platforms and body image is limited, yet consistent in its support (see [9, 12]).

2 Trend 2: Features Unique to Social Media

One of the important ways in which social media differ from traditional media is that content is user-generated. Not only can users view the content posted by others, but they can post their own material for others to view, and they can 'like' and make comments on others' posts.

2.1 Creating, Editing, and Posting Self-Images

Recent research has started to address the uses and effects of creating and posting self-images ("selfies') on social media. Women and girls report spending considerable time and effort on their selfies, in order to present the "best" version of themselves [13]. Following body image theories [14–17] and self-effects literature [18], creating, editing and posting selfies is suggested to invite users to self-objectify and to internalize unrealistic appearance standards [19–21]. Greater body image disturbance and appearance pressures are expected to then drive further selfie editing, taking and posting behaviors [13, 19, 22].

Cross-sectional studies have largely supported this reasoning and shown consistent correlations between selfie-behaviors and body image disturbance [13, 20, 22–24]. However, it is important to distinguish between the different selfie behaviors. For example, a longitudinal study among adolescents found that editing, but not posting, selfies predicted increases in self-objectification and body/facial dissatisfaction, which in turn predicted selfie-editing over time [25], and another study found no link between general self-posting behavior and appearance self-esteem across three waves of data [26]. Experimental studies have also found that selfie taking [21, 27] and editing [28] resulted in increased levels of self-objectification and facial dissatisfaction. Whether the selfies were posted online or not, had no effect [21, 27, 28]. Thus, current research suggests that taking and especially editing, but not posting, selfies may be harmful for body image. This conclusion seems to apply across genders (except [23]), even though boys/men spend considerably less time taking and editing selfies than girls/women [20, 24, 27].

2.2 Likes and Comments on Social Media

Although the posting of a selfie may not be harmful in itself, this may change as a result of comments posted by others. One experiment showed that women's levels of self-objectification increased when they received favorable appearance comments on their posted selfies [29]. Other research draws on the assumption that likes and comments function as

bandwagon cues, and thus reward or punish appearance practices on social media. These cues strengthen or weaken the effect of a posted image on the poster or observer [30, 31]. In this research, one experiment found that viewing a low vs. high number of likes attached to idealized social media images had no differential impact on women's body image [31]. Other experimental research among young women has found that viewing appearance-focused Instagram images with comments idealizing the portrayed appearance increased body dissatisfaction as compared to viewing the same images with comments that resist appearance ideals [30, 32]. However, such differences did not occur when comparing the idealized comment condition with a no comment condition [30, 32] or with positive comments focused on the person more generally [33].

3 Trend 3: Unpacking the Ambiguous Effects of "Positive" Social Media Content

In recognition of the potentially harmful effects of social media for body image, researchers have begun to examine ways in which to make the social media environment a more positive one. Content that has gained the most recent research attention includes fitspiration posts, the use of disclaimer labels and captions, and body positive posts.

3.1 Fitspiration content

Fitspiration refers to images and text that avowedly aim to promote a healthy lifestyle through exercise and healthy eating. While the focus on wellbeing appears positive, content analyses of fitspiration posts consistently find that they present mainly idealized and sexualized bodies and promote restrained eating and excessive exercise (e.g., [34, 35]). An abundance of recent cross-sectional [36], experimental [37–40], and experience sampling (ESM) [41] studies have accordingly found that exposure to fitspiration content can increase body dissatisfaction. The few studies that included men suggest similar effects across genders, despite men being less exposed to fitspiration content than women [39, 41].

3.2 Disclaimer labels

Government bodies in the UK, France, Israel and Norway have suggested or mandated the use of disclaimer labels or captions on idealized social media images that have been digitally altered. The rationale is that disclaimers will point out that the images are unrealistic and do not provide suitable appearance comparison targets, and so will protect body image [42]. However, recent experiments among predominantly female samples have shown that such disclaimers do not prevent idealized social media content from inducing negative body image in viewers [43–46]. Some studies even show that disclaimers may increase appearance comparisons [42]. Thus, disclaimers do not appear to be a useful approach for reducing the impact of idealized social media images.

A potentially more valuable approach is to encourage users to post a realistic unedited image of themselves alongside the ideal edited image, allowing viewers to see this discrepancy for themselves. Research among young women suggests that exposure to both ideal and real images together decreased negative body image compared to viewing ideal images alone [47]. However, this approach may be difficult to implement on a broad scale due to fear of negative feedback from others. Thus, more research is needed before it can be recommended in practice.

3.3 Body Positive Content

Researchers have also examined the potential benefit of viewing social media content that is deliberately designed to be body positive. Body Positive (BoPo) content refers to text or images that combat narrow unattainable appearance ideals, promote body acceptance, and encourage body diversity [48]. One line of research has examined the impact of attaching body positive captions (e.g., "You are real, and that is perfect") to ideal images. While one experiment suggested that the addition of body positive captions to idealized content had a positive effect on women's body esteem [49], other studies showed, just like the research on disclaimers, that body empowering captions had no effect [39, 50]. A second line of research

has focused on viewing BoPo images, such as natural unedited images, pictures of fuller

figures, and various memes (e.g., self-compassion quotes such as "It's ok to take a

break" [39, p.17]) and inspirational posts. These studies showed improved body image in

predominantly young female samples [33, 39, 50–52]. In addition, one ESM study found that

everyday exposure to BoPo content on social media was associated with increased body

satisfaction [53].

Although viewing BoPo content has been found to improve body image, one

experiment in young women showed that it also led to more self-objectification than viewing

appearance neutral content (pictures of nature) [54]. More generally, researchers have raised

concerns about BoPo content that it is self-promoting, contains commercial messages, uses

enhancing filters and is sometimes sexually objectifying (e.g., wearing minimal clothes). In

these cases the sincerity of the poster in promoting body positivity is questionable and not

only undermines the positive effects of BoPo, but could trigger negative effects [55, 56].

Thus, while BoPo content may be theoretically helpful, we need more research as to its

implementation and effect in practice. Taken together, the results indicate that, unlike

fitspiration content and disclaimer labels, visual BoPo content has the real potential to

improve body image.

4 Recommendations for Future Research

While recent research has advanced knowledge of positive and negative social media

use for body image, there is still much that remains to be addressed. First, recent research has

made significant progress in unraveling how the unique features of social media (e.g., posting

material, comments) help elucidate the link between social media use and *negative* body

image. These features also need more extensive examination in research studying positive

social media content. Moreover, there are many other features still to be explored, such as the

ephemeral nature of posts (e.g., viewing idealized content in a temporary Instagram story vs

permanent post), tie connection strength (e.g., comments from close peers vs. unknown individuals) and the effect of social media algorithms (targeting appearance-focused content at the individual on the basis of previous searches) (e.g., [57]).

Second, although self-objectification [e.g., 9, 20, 21, 22, 25, 27, 29, 36, 54, 56] and appearance comparisons [e.g., 8, 12, 13, 32, 33, 36, 37, 46, 47, 51, 52] have received considerable attention, other processes, such as internalization [e.g., 13, 20, 32, 55] and social reinforcement or pressure [11, 45] have been less examined in recent research. Further, research rarely examines the possibility that specific mechanisms may be differentially relevant to the different activities on social media (e.g., viewing vs. editing appearance-focused content). Such research on mechanisms might help to further contextualize the role of newly introduced social media features (e.g., Instagram's stories).

Third, social media clearly does not impact all people equally. Future research is needed to examine individual differences that may moderate the relationship between different aspects of social media use and body image, and the mechanisms that may be relevant to different people. Gender is the most common moderator examined in current research, and most studies find more similarities than differences across genders [2–4]. Other sociodemographic and personal characteristics have been identified in singular studies, but systematic evidence is lacking, for instance, regarding age [11], culture [9], ethnicity [37], and social media literacy [52]. More generally, most experimental research has focused on samples of young white women living in Western countries [2–4]. Given the pervasiveness of social media and body image concerns, further research should employ more heterogeneous samples.

Finally, from a methodological viewpoint, future survey research might move beyond the use of unvalidated self-report exposure and posting measures. In particular, data donations in which users upload the selfies that they have posted online or share the results of

social media tracking apps may help to reduce the biases inherent in self-report research [58]. In this way, the power of social media can be used to evaluate its effects. In addition, the field requires more longitudinal designs and experience sampling methods (ESM) to study time-sensitive dynamics over different time intervals and to distinguish between-person from within-person effects. This research may further disentangle how different social media interactions affect each other and, subsequently, relate to body image. Until now, behaviors such as selfie viewing, selfie posting, liking and commenting have primarily been examined separately, while in reality they will likely co-occur and affect each other (see the framework of [18]).

5 Conclusion

Although popular social media platforms and activities are continuously changing, the literature on social media use and body image is growing rapidly, as is our understanding of this complex relationship. As can be seen from the current review, recent research has adopted a more nuanced approach, and started the investigation of features and content unique to social media. Given the pervasive use of social media globally, it is vital that we understand the impact of social media on body image and find ways to create a more positive social media experience for users.

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Using a meta-analysis of 63 different studies, the authors summarize the cross-sectional research on social media use and body image. A significant link between social media use and body image was found and type of social media use, body image outcome variable, culture, and age were identified as moderators.

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This article provides a reflection on the early research on BoPo content on social media. The authors point at several complexities that are starting to be identified in the link between BoPo content and body image. Gaps in the current state of empirical research and suggestions for future research are described.

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This study is the first experimental study among young women to support the finding of cross-sectional research that the use of visual platforms (i.e., Instagram) is more dysfunctional for users' body image than non-visual platforms (i.e., Facebook). The authors found that Instagram users showed more appearance comparisons and body dissatisfaction than Facebook users.

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The current study is one of the first to offer a framework for how body image can function as a driver for various selfie behaviors (i.e., preoccupation with selfies, selection of selfies, editing of selfies, and deliberate posting of selfies). Their cross-sectional study among young

women suggested body appreciation was positively related to increased selfie selection and deliberate posting behaviors. Self-objectification was further a predictor for all examined selfie behaviors.

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The current two-wave panel study among Chinese adolescents is one of the rare studies who examined the reciprocal links between selfie behaviors (i.e., exposure to selfies, editing of selfies, and posting of selfies) and body image (i.e., self-objectification, and body/facial dissatisfaction). Editing of selfies and exposure to selfies predicted increased self-objectification and facial dissatisfaction. Editing of selfies also predicted body dissatisfaction. When looking at the reciprocity of the examined links, self-objectification predicted increases in all examined selfie-behaviors. Facial dissatisfaction predicted increased editing of selfies and exposure to selfies.

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The current experimental study among young women offers some first insights into the effects of no-makeup selfies on social media. Moreover, the idea that positive vs. neutral online appearance feedback may change the effects of idealized images or no-make up images was tested. The positive potential of no-makeup selfies was demonstrated on women's body image (e.g., less frequent appearance comparisons and higher perceived attainability than when women were exposed to idealized images). No effects were found depending on whether positive vs. neutral online appearance comments were included.

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The current study combines persuasion literature on prosocial movements with social media research on body image to understand why BoPo content on social media does not always result in the anticipated positive effects. An experiment among women demonstrates that BoPo content on social media showing average size models and containing self-promotion or promoted products cause users to perceive the content as less morally appropriate and were unsuccesful to promote body appreciation and inclusivity. Interestingly, the same BoPo content promoted by plus-size models did not trigger these adverse effects.

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