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Social Media and Body Pressure:

by

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Keywords

Standards, Inclusions, Unworthy, Dissatisfied, Normalization, Promoted, Exposed

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the negative impact that social media's promotion of unrealistic body standards has on women and young girls. I give examples through peer-reviewed data on how social media's idealistic body promotion has a negative effect on young girls and women. These effects include eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. I first explain how body dissatisfaction is an impact of women seeing idealistic bodies on social media, that they cannot relate to. I go into detail as to how this leads to comparing themselves to the bodies they see on their social media feed, and being disappointed that they do not look the same. I then discuss the root of body dissatisfaction, which is low self-esteem. After this, I reveal that eating disorders are another negative impact from viewing idealized bodies on social media. I explain how women see "Fitspo social media pages" and follow the methods they promote in order to achieve a "perfect body". Many of these methods are unhealthy and restrictive which leads to these women to have an unhealthy relationship with food and exercise, spiraling into an eating disorder. I then give my own possible solutions to these issues, which includes having social media enforce better security on age limits required to access these apps so that young girls cannot be exposed to such toxicity at a young age where they are easily influenced. As well as,

having more body inclusive influencers on social media to promote body positivity towards young and adult women, and normalizing therapy for women.

Over the decades, and for as long as civilization has been around, women have always had a set a standard to live up to. These standards have changed over time, sometimes repeating, and other times switching completely. In the 50s the image of sexy in a woman was curvy, delicate, and voluptuous. Towards the 80s, 90s and even early 2000s being super skinny was the ideal body type. Fast forward to now, 2021, the body type in “style” is to look skinny in the waist, thick in the hips and butt, delicate arms, and big breasts. For the face, big lips, a sharp jawline, tiny nose, and high cheek bones is what is deemed as perfect. It seems as if the standards have gotten even more specific and harder to achieve, and these pressures have been heavily promoted through social media. Body standards being forced upon women in society have a negative impact on women’s mental health and behavior. Even though there are many different causes of this, the one we will be looking at closely will be social media. Social media can be an awesome place to seek entertainment, information, and connections, but it can also be a very dark place. It promotes unrealistic body expectations that are damaging and dangerous to young women. The few solutions to this issue includes heavier monitoring of the age restrictions on social media, and more realistic body inclusions.

Social media is an outlet for anyone of all ages to be exposed to a variety of different subjects, positive and negative. Even though there is an age limit on many apps, so many young kids lie about their age and are able to access it easily. An example of this is from my own personal experience when I was young. There would be social media apps that I wasn’t allowed to access because I was too young, so I simply lied about my birthday and *boom* I was in. With

young girls on social media apps like Instagram and Tik Tok, it is easy for them to get heavily influenced by what they see. A good amount of what they will be viewing on Instagram and Tik Tok will be other young girls, and some older ones as well. Women on these apps with “perfect bodies” are giving these young viewers the impression that that is the image of beauty, and that it is realistic. These “perfect bodies” are all what society deems as attractive, which includes thin waist, curvy hips, large breasts and butt, and thin thighs with a thigh gap. This image is glorified which is what makes it the standard. Therefore, if the young girls viewing these ideal body types do not look the same themselves, they feel unworthy and not as beautiful.

The first negative impact that social media’s idealistic body promotion has on young women is, body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction can come in many forms, and the first form we will be looking at is the increase in plastic surgery in women. Now, it is completely possible that there are women who decide to get plastic surgery without feeling pressured, but many do it because they do not like something about themselves and want to change it to fit the standards of beauty. In the article, “Attitudes toward Cosmetic Surgery in Middle-Aged Women: Body Image, Aging Anxiety, and the Media.”, they did a study on middle-aged women in order to see what their perspectives on cosmetic surgery were and why. The results showed that many of the women they interviewed had an interesting view on cosmetic surgery. According to the study, “Just over half the women (52%) reported that they would consider cosmetic surgery in the future, with this figure rising substantially (70%) when cost was hypothetically removed from the equation” (Slevec, Julie, and Marika Tiggemann, 2010). This reveals that a large amount of the women they had interviewed would be up to having cosmetic surgery if they had the money.

Therefore, these women have nothing against undergoing plastic surgery, and all have something they would like to change about their body. These are middle-aged women, meaning

these beauty standards that they wanted to achieve through cosmetic surgery were most likely taught to them as young women before social media. The article also claims, “A number of factors were identified. In particular, all of body dissatisfaction, appearance investment, aging anxiety, and media exposure (both television and magazine) predicted some facet of attitudes toward cosmetic surgery, which were delineated in terms of general attitudes, social motivations, and actual consideration” (Slevec, Julie, and Marika Tiggemann, 2010). In this quote, it is revealed that the media exposure that both young and older women face of the “image of beauty” causes them to have dissatisfaction in their own body. This dissatisfaction can lead to them getting cosmetic surgery, or at least wanting to. This article was released in 2010, where social media was not at its peak in society, like it is today. They included that magazines and television were the media outlets that promoted these beauty and body standards, but clearly since we are in a day and age in which social media has become the most prominent media outlet, it is easy to conclude that social media is having the same effect on women.

Another example of body dissatisfaction caused by social media takes form in young women comparing themselves to the pictures they see of “perfect bodies” on social media. In the article, “Social Media Is Not Real Life: The Effect of Attaching Disclaimer-Type Labels to Idealized Social Media Images on Women’s Body Image and Mood”, they did a study to see if disclaimers on social media posts that include idealized bodies have an effect on the women viewing them. That maybe these disclaimers would help the women and young women seeing these perfect bodies realize that they are not realistic and comparing themselves to them is a waste of time. Although, the study, described in the same article, reveals that even if there is a disclaimer on pictures that show these perfect bodies, women will still compare themselves and be dissatisfied in their own bodies because they still cannot achieve that image, whether it is

realistic or not. This comparison to “perfect bodies” on social media is extremely unhealthy for their mental health because they are constantly being exposed to a false and impossible image that they wish they could live up to.

What is important to observe within body dissatisfaction, is the roots of it. According to the article, Instagram Selfie-Posting and Young Women’s Body Dissatisfaction: Investigating the Role of Self-Esteem and Need for Popularity, it is revealed that low self-esteem is a key factor in a woman’s body dissatisfaction. This low self-esteem in oneself causes them to have negative body image, which leads them to comparing themselves to others. They claim that those who possess a high level of self-esteem, value and like themselves, therefore they are happy with their physical appearance. Unlike those with low self-esteem who are unhappy with their appearance and themselves overall. This shows that someone’s self-esteem reflects on how they feel about their body, and someone with a low one is more likely to have body dissatisfaction.

The next negative impact this toxic promotion of idealistic bodies on social media on young women is the development of eating disorders. According to the YouTube video, “The Link Between Social Media & Eating Disorders”, there is a direct link between the two. The speaker in this video describes the issue with the “Fitspo” accounts on social media because they seem to be promoting a healthy lifestyle. They describe how even though these accounts look helpful, they are instead encouraging dangerous behavior to their viewers. These accounts will usually be run by one person who is clearly in “shape”, nice abs, toned body and overall skinny. This influencer will post ways to stay skinny that are actually not healthy and include food restriction and over exercising. When young girls see this, they automatically assume that those methods are the answer to looking fit like the “Fitspo” influencer and begin to partake in the same things. This can lead to them spirally into an eating disorder and not even realizing it

because they are just following what they see on social media. Coming from my personal experience, when I was in high school, I developed an eating disorder, and it was heavily triggered by what I was viewing on social media. I would follow what these “Fitspo” accounts would tell me to do, which were actually really unhealthy and restrictive methods.

Another example of this promotion on social media causing eating disorders and disordered eating in young women is shown in the article written by, Iwanicka, Aleksandra, and Ewelina Soroka: “The Role of Social Media in the Process of Shaping the ‘Body Cult’ among Young Women.”, which states: “The goal of the above-mentioned activities is for young women to obtain a slim and attractive figure in line with the trends of female attractiveness proposed by the media” (Iwanicka, Aleksandra, and Ewelina Soroka, 2020). This shows that the media promotes a specific type of body type that is deemed as “attractive” to the public. This body type usually involves being thin, specifically in the waist region. When many young women see this, they are eager to be looked at as attractive as well, therefore they try to obtain this exact look. The article then goes on to claim, “It is worth paying attention to the functioning of this type of social networking site and considering what makes young girls more and more frequently engaged in activities that involve strong control of their body image through diet and sports” (Iwanicka, Aleksandra, and Ewelina Soroka, 2020). This reveals how social media is causing these girls to want to achieve “health” for the wrong reasons.

What this study really wanted to find out was if these behaviors young women participated in in order to be slim were healthy, or if they were restrictive and dangerous. They concluded, “The content presented on blogs and social networks exert pressure on young women to cultivate only the physical characteristics of a person... In this perspective, excessive focus on striving for the perfect figure can lead to the development of anti-health behavior” (Iwanicka,

Aleksandra, and Ewelina Soroka, 2020). This is a perfect example of how eating disorders and/or “anti-health behavior” can develop in young women due to the body pressures on social media.

There are a few solutions to the issues brought up in this writing, which include eating disorders, and body dissatisfaction in young women. The first solution is to have social media platforms enforce more security on the age limits required. On every social media platform there is an age requirement to meet in order to access the app and create an account. Although, many of the young users who do not meet these age requirements just simply lie when signing up and can easily make an account. This allows young girls to be viewing all these idealistic women bodies on their feed and begin to think it is normal. The normalization of these body types and standards cause these young girls to have the desire to look that way as well, and if they do not then they will go to certain extremes to achieve it. If there was stricter age security on these platforms, than young and developing girls who easily are influenced will not be exposed this on this high level. Even though this exposure to idealistic and unrealistic body types can negatively affect both young girls and adult women, it is even harder on such young kids where their sense of self hasn't even been developed. Adult women have gone through more experiences and have a better understanding of what is realistic and healthy versus what is not.

Another solution would be having more body inclusive influencers on these platforms. There is starting to be a great growth in body positive influencers on Instagram and Tik Tok, who promote loving oneself no matter how many rolls they have or cellulite on their stomach. A great example of an influencer who does this, is a young woman named Sienna Mae who is a Tik Toker with a total followers of 15 million. She is known for her transparency about flaws in her body, and promotion of body positivity. Sienna's Tik Tok handle is, [@siennamae](https://www.tiktok.com/@siennamae) and her videos consist of showing off her non-posed body and flaws and normalizing them to her young

audience. Sienna shows that it is okay and beautiful to not be a size 0, and that all body types should be accepted. As long as these influencers keep growing, I think it will have a greatly positive affect on the young women on social media.

Lastly, a solution that is targeted to help women's self-esteem levels in order to prevent them from being so dissatisfied in their bodies when they are on social media is to normalize and promote therapy. Therapy can help girls with their self-esteem levels which can make them less likely to compare themselves to other girls' bodies on social media. The pressures promoted through social media that women face can be dangerous and it is important to be aware of it and try to push for change. We as a society can push for change by posting more realistic and non-photoshopped versions of ourselves on social media and make petitions to get social media platforms to put heavier security on age restrictions.

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