

# ***Advances in Research on the Relationship Between Social Media Use on Female's Body and Appearance Image Anxiety***

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**Abstract:** With the proliferation of social media platforms and new-generation aesthetics. There has been a shift in how people—especially female—view and engage with notions of the body and appearance. An increasing amount of research has examined the intricate connection between women's body and appearance issues and social media use over the last ten years. The relationship between young people's appearance anxiety issues and body image has been extensively studied in the literature. However, the influence of social media on the body image and influence of young women has received comparatively less theoretical investigation. It's also critical to comprehend how social media use influences women's body image barriers and perceptions, given the prominence of the internet in the lives of young people and their dependency on it. This essay aims to investigate the ways in which social media influences young women's body image issues and to provide a greater perspective on the research on this topic. It will do this by utilising the theories of social comparison and objectification to uncover and analyse the ways in which young women perceive their bodies and appearances on social media.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Body Image, Social Comparative, Self-objectification.

## **1. Introduction**

Social media's visual format and concentration on user-generated content could reinforce society's aesthetic norms, exacerbating issues with appearance and body image. The detrimental effects of social media on female's self-perceptions can be lessened by having an understanding of the reasons behind social media use and the connections between these reasons and problems with body image. Social media is full of visual information, especially when it comes to appearance [1]. Users can comment on and like other users' photos as well as be judged and commented on by other users, giving them instantaneous and quantifiable feedback. According to Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., there is a prevalent trend among women to express dissatisfaction with their body shape and appearance, with up to 80% of them expressing this sentiment on social media [2]. Based on data from the 2020 Tiktok survey [3], among other things, "one in six women feel anxious when looking in a mirror or taking a photo, and about half of women consider themselves unattractive." Additionally, Cohen et al. discovered that young women's negative body image increased when they were exposed to celebrity photographs on Instagram more frequently [4]. This may result in heightened worry related to one's body image or, more frequently, low self-esteem and discontent among women. The difference

between one's intended and actual look is the root cause of negative body image, which can negatively affect a person's conduct and mental health.

The actual association between social media use and body image is still unclear based on the literature that is currently available. It's critical to comprehend the precise elements that could impact a person's degree of body dissatisfaction because there is a correlation between body image dissatisfaction and several detrimental outcomes, like seem anxiety. Next, using the theories of social comparison and objectification, this essay will investigate and evaluate how young women view their body and appearance anxieties on social media.

## 2. Social media

With users generally spending hours a day on social media reading and publishing information on their accounts, social media is quickly becoming an indispensable part of many people's everyday life. According to surveys, 3.5 billion people were using social media as of January 2019 globally [5]. According to Lenhart et al., 72% of 18 to 29 year olds in the US utilise social networking sites online and more than 80% of them use wireless Internet [6]. Pew Research Centre conducted a nationwide survey that revealed that among all demographic groups in the United States, individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 who use the internet are most likely to use social networking sites. Interestingly, women are more likely than men to browse these sites [7].

Social media is a great tool for those who are especially worried about their bodies and want to create a "virtual self-image," according to Tras et al [8]. This is due to the fact that social media allows users to make their own profiles, submit edited pictures or brief films of themselves for others to see, and browse other users' photos or videos to get a glimpse into their friends' life. Facebook, for instance, enables users to make public or semi-public profiles, personalise their pages with images and other content, alter images before posting them, and keep a close eye on how they present themselves in order to present an idealised or "wished-for" version of themselves [9,10]. Facebook has emerged as the leading social networking site (SNS) on the Internet since its debut in 2004 [11]. Facebook is the most popular social networking site in the country, used by 67% of American adults [12]. This is especially true for young people, as 90% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 use the site [13]. Facebook use among young women is estimated to be two hours a day [14,15].

Numerous research have looked into the connection between body image and social media use in recent years. Saiphoo and Vahedi argue that body image refers to how individuals feel, act, see, and assess their impressions of their bodies [16]. These perceptions might be good or negative. Marengo et al made the case that those who regularly use social media are more aware of or prone to concern about their looks and body image than those who do not [17]. Does social media make people feel more self-conscious about their appearance and body image, especially women? According to Bell, the crucial factor is whether or not information and images are given undue attention [18]. The longer women use social media, the more probable it is that the aesthetic standards it promotes will have an impact on them. As a result, they may unintentionally examine themselves to meet these standards, which can result in negative emotions like appearance anxiety [19].

## 3. Social Comparative Theory

Manago et al claim that idealised content is frequently given in the media [10]. On social media, people frequently select the most idealised aspects of their self-disclosure process to somewhat elevate their persona. According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, people evaluate their opinions and skills through social comparison, particularly when there are no objective criteria in place [20]. Women on social media frequently make upward comparisons between their appearance and body size and those of those who are seen as more superior, which can worsen anxiety and body

dissatisfaction. The majority of experimental studies in the previous social comparison research on issues related to appearance and body image have looked into how exposure to idealized bodies in traditional media (such as music videos, television, and magazines) affects young women's body dissatisfaction [21]. The main conclusion of these research is that women's body dissatisfaction is a result of the slim ideal body image that the media promotes; in other words, exposure to the media's portrayal of a thin body is linked to negative body image in women [22,23]. Conversely, the majority of experimental studies conducted recently have switched from traditional media to social media that is more engaging [24]. Eveland contends that interaction is a fundamental distinction between modern social media technologies and conventional mass media [25]. When utilising social media, users are both information providers and recipients [26]. People may become more conscious of the disparities between their ideal body and their real body through social comparisons in the virtual environment [2]. For example, a study conducted in 2015 by Fardouly et al. revealed that women who use Facebook experience greater negative body image and body image perception. And the degree of body dissatisfaction increases with the strength of the tendency to compare appearances [21,27,28]. Haferkamp et al. discovered that women expressed that their primary reason for reading other people's Facebook pages was to make comparisons with their bodies or self-images [29]. Women use social media as a platform for frequent appearance-related social comparisons. They may use it as a way to validate their self-concept by obsessively checking their profile pictures and comparing them to those of their friends who are less attractive. This process satisfies a psychological need for appearance gratification and helps them convince themselves that they look like their ideal others [30]. Consequently, examining and contrasting idealised image accounts of oneself or others on social media may worsen body image anxiety problems in women and have a detrimental effect on general wellbeing.

Furthermore, a number of research have demonstrated that the most impactful social comparisons are those made between peers [31,32]. This is founded on the original Social Comparison Theory, which contends that individuals get more reliable evaluation data when they compare themselves to friends or people who are similar to them—for example, those from similar families, social classes, or educational backgrounds [20]. In one example, it was found in a qualitative study by Kenny et al. on the impact of peers on teenagers' body image that girls are more likely to imitate their attractive peers in order to fit in [33]. The study's participants disclosed that they used social media to compare their look to that of their peers and that they mimicked the appearance of their peers in an effort to comply with certain appearance standards and guidelines unique to the peer environment. Peer pressure to maintain a close appearance may make women feel even more stressed about their bodies and expectations about how they seem. Women may internalise the attitudes and behaviours of their peers because peers tend to focus mostly on a person's unfavourable exterior qualities. This can cause emotions of confusion and worry over one's own body views and behaviours.

Because the lines between ideal and real appearances on the internet are blurring and because women in the media are portrayed as more flawless than they are in reality, ideal images in the media are frequently compared to women in real life [34]. These parallels heighten worries about how one looks on the body. Women who don't meet the unrealistic beauty standards on social media become even more unhappy and self-conscious about their bodies and appearance when they are continuously compared to other people's flawless photos.

#### 4. Self-objectification Theory

The objectification of women is largely facilitated by the mass media [35,36]. According to the objectification theory, women are frequently socialised to accept the observer's point of view as the main one regarding their physical self. This self-perception may cause women to habitually monitor their bodies, which can put them at risk for a number of detrimental outcomes as well as raise feelings

of guilt and anxiety about their appearance. Regular exposure to idealised photos on social media might increase the perception that a woman's value is dependent on her looks and contribute to the objectification of women's bodies [15]. For instance, social media posts that present women's bodies as objects to be glanced at or uninvited remarks made by certain users that criticise the bodies or looks of others [37]. Women may be reminded by these remarks that they do not meet society's standards of attractiveness [38]. The objectification of women's body image can be amplified by these remarks, which can lead to women unintentionally internalising these standards and accelerating the objectification process. The majority of earlier research on social media and body image has demonstrated a connection between self-objectification and the body image that is suggested. According to Moradi and Huang, self-objectification is believed to take the form of body surveillance activities, which entail contemplating one's physical appearance to an outside observer [39].

According to objectification theory, there is a moderating effect on the relationship between self-objectification and body image concerns from factors including appearance anxiety and body image surveillance. This is supported by Seekis et al.'s study, which examined the connection between young women's use of social networking sites and their body image issues using an integrated model of objectification and social comparison theory [37]. The results of the study found a positive correlation between social appearance anxiety and body image surveillance. This also was confirmed in a study by Fardouly et al., which examined the relationship between Instagram use and young women's body image concerns and self-objectification [40]. The study's findings indicated a positive correlation between the two, which is consistent with other research suggesting that frequent exposure to social media and idealized photos on SNSs raises the risk of body surveillance and self-objectification.

In addition, user reactions—which are strongly tied to the 'like' functions of certain platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram—may have an impact on how the self is presented objectifyingly on social media. Through the usage of these features, users can easily provide favourable feedback by clicking on other people's work [41]. People display themselves selectively on Facebook, for instance, sharing only the finest images of themselves. This can momentarily raise self-esteem, but it also causes a gap between a person's online and offline identities, which makes users anxious and unhappy when they believe their online persona does not match their offline one [42]. Facebook users can also be identifiable via images or related hashtags of subjects shared by others, frequently without their permission, thanks to the tagging or labelling tool. According to Fardouly et al., this may result in unwelcome exposure, which causes anxiety in women over their body image [40]. And interactive elements on Facebook give consumers measurable social recognition. Women's self-esteem and body image can be strongly impacted by the quantity of encouraging comments they receive from their networks. Nonetheless, inadequate reinforcement or unfavourable remarks can intensify anxiety related to appearance and body dissatisfaction [43]. This was supported by a study by Bell et al. that looked at the connection between the frequency of uploading sexually objectified self-images (selfies) on social media and the feedback one receives when one objectsifies oneself [44]. According to the study's findings, sharing sexually objectified photos on social media is more common the more self-objectification there is. The aforementioned findings underscore the significant role that social media plays in perpetuating negative body image and approval-seeking behaviors on the internet. Positive feedback, such as likes and comments, exacerbates anxious behaviors and feeds a vicious cycle of self-objectification and approval-seeking. These findings have important ramifications for the study and analysis of the psychological and social effects of these online activities.

## **5. A broader perspective: men's perceptions of social media use and body image**

This essay focuses on the effects of social media on young women, however social media is a worldwide phenomenon, and its effects on body image affect many other demographics as well, including men. Males also report feeling unsatisfied with their bodies, and while there is little research

on how media affects male body satisfaction, some studies have found a positive correlation between using social media and both body dissatisfaction and the use of muscle-building supplements [45]. In a qualitative study conducted in 2005, Ridgeway and Tylka discovered that most of the male participants said they wanted to get more muscular in order to get the body they wanted [46]. The contemporary media standard for male attractiveness is tall, muscular, and slender. Social media has shaped these ideal bodies, making this ideal standard more and more alluring [19]. Similarly, studies have shown that men's exposure to media portrayals of muscularity may cause them to feel unsatisfied with the way their bodies look [47].

The following hypotheses can be derived from Social Comparison Theory [20]: people are more likely to compare themselves with people who are less than themselves because this serves a self-protective function; upward comparisons with people who are better than oneself in a given situation may lower self-esteem; and downward comparisons with people who are worse than oneself raise self-esteem. Women compare their own body image and appearance on social media in an upward direction, while men compare their appearance in a downward direction, more often to those who have a lower body image than to professional models [48]. In a study by Arbour and Ginnis, for instance, male participants' unhappiness with their body image increased when they saw photographs that were revealed as being excessively or visibly muscular [49].

Additionally, internalising social media ideals has been linked to men experiencing higher levels of body image dissatisfaction [50,51]. Daniel and Bridges contend that internalising media ideals is one of the most reliable indicators of the desire for muscularity [52]. As a result, upward social comparisons with muscular models or famous athletes as well as the consumption of excessively muscular images on social media can lead to a negative contrast effect and discontent, with men who are attracted to muscle being especially vulnerable [30].

## 6. Conclusions

It is evident that it is challenging to demonstrate a causal association between these variables in the literature review for this thesis on social media use and women's anxiety about appearance and body image. Though each of the previously stated theoretical models offers a distinct viewpoint on the reasons behind women's social media use and the effects it has on their appearance and body image, these models are not exclusive of one another. Put another way, women's perceptions of their bodies and appearance are significantly influenced by the reasons for their use of social media.

The field of study on the relationship between women's use of social media and appearance anxiety and body image is quickly developing, and it is crucial to comprehend how social media use affects body image and create practical methods for addressing associated fears. Furthermore, studies grounded in social comparison and objectification theories can shed light on the subtle ways that new media affects young women. These studies can also offer solutions for improving social media environments that support positive body image and lessen anxiety related to appearance, which can help both men and women develop healthier attitudes towards their bodies. Finally, in order to create healthier digital environments where women may connect with social media in ways that enhance rather than hinder their well-being, it is imperative that ethical standards, media literacy, and user-centered design concepts be integrated.

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