The Relationship Between Social Media and Women's Well-being: The Role of Self-objectification

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Abstract: Social media has become a fundamental part of everyday life, frequently showcasing objectifying information and images that impact users' perceptions and behaviors. This review explores the relationship between social media use and women's well-being, focusing on how self-objectification mediates this relationship. The study delves into the role of internalization of ideal beauty standards and social comparisons as mediators between media use and self-objectification. The review categorizes specific social media selfie behaviors, including selfie-viewing, selfie-posting, selfie-editing, and selfie-investment, and analyzes their differential impacts on self-objectification and health. Using a comprehensive literature review method, the results indicate that media use, particularly frequent involvement in selfie-related activities is strongly linked to increased self-objectification and subsequent negative health outcomes. For specific activities, contradictory findings are identified regarding the impact of selfie-posting, and possible explanations are provided, including motivations, scale usage, and cultural differences.

Keywords: social media, self-objectification, selfies, well-being, beauty ideal.

1.   Introduction

Sexual objectification, according to objectification theory, happens when a woman's body is disassociated from her identity or is seen as a symbol representing her as a whole [1]. This theory suggests that when women internalize sexual objectification, they begin to consistently scrutinize their bodies, engaging in self-objectification by viewing themselves from the perspective of an external observer and treating their bodies as objects. Research on objectification primarily concentrated on women, studies have shown that women are more likely to objectify themselves. [2]. A significant source of sociocultural pressure contributing to this phenomenon is the social media. People spend considerable time browsing and posting information and pictures, where they encounter carefully edited self-representations from various individuals[3]. Among these, selfie activities are particularly important. These representations collectively construct societal standards of ideal beauty. Particularly, women tend to compare themselves to others and constantly monitor their bodies and appearances against the standard of ideal beauty, which leads to self-objectification. Recent studies indicate that social media significantly influences women's self-objectification, which can adversely affect their health and result in eating disorders, appearance-related anxiety, and body shame [4][5][6][7]. Consequently, it is vital to examine self-objectification, social media usage, and mental health outcomes.

This review examines the association between women's social media use and their physical and mental health. It analyzes the mechanisms by which self-objectification affects women and further distinguishes the influence of different selfie activities on their self-objectification and well-being. By summarizing recent relevant studies, this review aims to show how specific social media behaviors amplify self-objectification and impact women's well-being. This understanding is crucial for creating targeted interventions and preventions to mitigate psychological difficulties tied to social media and fostering positive and healthy mental well-being in women.

2. Social media, Self-objectification, Well-being

2.1. Social media

Research has demonstrated that objectifying imagery in conventional media outlets, such as newspapers and magazines, has been linked to increased levels of self-objectification [4][5]. However, with the growing popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook and Instagram, there is a need to shift focus from conventional media to SNSs. Emerging studies suggest that social media plays a major role in shaping women's self-objectification [8][9][10]. These platforms often emphasize appearance. One common form of self-representation on social media is through selfies. Activities centered around selfies have a more pronounced impact on women's self-objectification than general social media use[6]. Women with higher self-objectification tend to be less genuine and have more strategic self-representation on social media, which implies that these women spend more time on photo manipulation [3].

2.2. Self-objectification and well-being

Objectification theory posits that self-objectification manifests as persistent self-surveillance of the body, leading to four negative subjective experiences, which are increased body shame, heightened anxiety, reduced flow experiences, and decreased internal bodily awareness. These encounters raise the possibility of developing depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction [1][2]. Greater body shame and anxiety appear to be more closely related to appearance-focused phenomena on social media. Feelings of shame or anxiety due to perceived discrepancies may lead to issues like eating disorders, low self-esteem, and social anxiety [11][12]. Increased self-objectification not only directly connected to negative health outcomes [7][13][14], but also serves as a key mediator in the relationship between social media usage and both physical and mental health issues [15][16]. Additionally, consistent with the original theoretical model, research has demonstrated that body shame serves as a mediator in the relationship between self-objectification and eating disorders [17][18].

3. The Mechanism of Self-objectification

3.1. Social comparison

Since self-objectification is related to may adverse health problems, it is imperative to investigate the mechanism by which self-objectification is linked to social media. Socio-cultural theories of body image identify social comparison and the internalization of beauty standards as key mediators [19].

Social comparison theory suggests that people form clear self-evaluations by contrasting with others, using these comparisons as a reference point to assess their abilities and beliefs [20]. Overall, social comparison is associated with increased self-objectification in women, but the impact of these comparisons varies depending on the target groups and the specific platform being used [8][9][21]. These comparisons typically occur across several distinct target groups: comparison to peers,

comparison to family members, comparison to celebrities, and comparison to past self. The association between Facebook usage and self-objectification was mediated solely by peer comparison, even though participants more frequently compared their appearance to photos of peers and themselves [9]. Comparisons with family members were rarely made in this context. In contrast, Fardouly et al., on the other hand, discovered a different outcome for female Instagram users [8]. Although participants frequently compared themselves to both friends and celebrities, only comparisons with celebrities significantly mediated the connection between Instagram use and self-objectification. It should come as no surprise that celebrities are frequently compared on Instagram, a site where users follow celebrities, browse their images, and leave comments. Furthermore, Feltman and Szymanski made a further distinction that only upward, but not downward, appearance comparisons served as a mediator in the relationship [21]. Therefore, platform-specific features shape the prominence of different comparison types, with upward appearance comparisons playing a more significant mediating role.

3.2. Internalization of beauty ideals

The internalization of beauty standards serves as an additional mediator in the relationship between social media use and self-objectification. This process involves individuals adopting society's prevailing definitions of beauty as personally relevant and striving to attain them [19]. A majority of photos on social media are edited to align with cultural beauty ideals, such as being thin. People who are exposed to unreasonable standards over time may perceive them as the norm for socially acceptable beauty. Women who internalize these ideals tend to engage in more frequent appearance monitoring and place more emphasis on physical appearance, which in turn fosters self-objectification.

Numerous empirical investigations have demonstrated that the association between self-objectification and social media use is mediated by internalizing beauty standards. Viewing Instagram photos that conform to societal beauty leads individuals to internalize these ideals, which can contribute to self-objectification [8]. Similarly, Caso et al. discovered that, in comparison to family and peer influences, the media exerted the strongest social pressure to conform to beauty ideals, which contributed to self-objectification among female Italian SNS users [10]. Furthermore, there is a reciprocal relationship between self-objectification and the internalization of beauty ideals, showing that each predicts the other and both predict negative body image outcomes [22].

4. Specific Social Media Activities

4.1. Impacts of different activities

Some studies have indicated that the overall use of social networking sites does not correlate with body image concerns in young women [6]. SNS platforms offer users a variety of applications and features that may have different impacts on individuals. Hence, examining specific social media activities instead is meaningful. Selfie activities are the most closely related to body image compared to other social media uses, such as reading news or listening to music. These selfie activities can be further categorized into four types: selfie viewing, selfie editing, selfie investment, and selfie posting.

Selfie viewing involves individuals looking at selfies and comments posted by others on social media. Research has shown that the frequency of selfie viewing is positively associated with the level of facial dissatisfaction, mediated by the internalization of beauty ideals and appearance comparisons [23][24]. Selfie editing refers to the modifications and enhancements individuals make to their selfies, often using photo-editing applications. Selfie investment refers to the effort individuals put into selecting photos to share and their level of concern regarding these posts [25]. Selfie posting involves the actual act of posting selfies for others to see and comment on.

Studies have revealed that self-objectification is linked to selfie investment and editing, but not selfie posting. This self-objectification predicted negative appearance worries such as body shame, appearance anxiety, poor appearance evaluation and bulimia symptomatology [6][18]. This may be because girls share selfies for various reasons, some of which are more about showcasing friendships or experiences rather than reinforcing appearance. Cohen et al. also found a correlation between frequent selfie posting and increased body satisfaction in individuals [6]. This may be due to the tendency of those with higher body satisfaction to post more selfies, receiving positive reinforcement about their appearance such as likes and comments, leading to further enhanced body satisfaction. In contrast, the act of editing and investing in selfies reveals individuals' recognition that their images will be subject to scrutiny and judgment, reflecting their efforts to conform their appearance to sociocultural beauty standards. Increased investment in selfies is linked to a greater tendency to overestimate body size and weight, experiencing body dissatisfaction, and engaging in dieting behaviors [25].

However, some studies have reported contrary findings, suggesting that selfie posting is linked to self-objectification [10][26]. Notably, comments on selfies not only served as an independent mediator between selfie posting and restrained eating, but also formed a serial mediation effect involving selfie posting, comments, self-objectification, and restrained eating [17].

4.2. Reasons for contradictory findings

Previous research on whether selfie posting is related to self-objectification has yielded conflicting results. Several potential reasons for these discrepancies can be identified.

One reason is the diverse motivations behind posting photos. People post selfies for various reasons, such as sharing their lives or showcasing their appearance in line with societal beauty standards. These differing motivations can naturally lead to different impacts. Therefore, in clinical interventions, such as those for eating disorders, it is crucial to specifically focus on the motivations behind social media selfie behavior, as not all selfie behaviors will result in body dissatisfaction.

Another reason lies in the multidimensional nature of the concept of self-objectification. Various scales are used to measure self-objectification, including the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ), the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS), and the Self-Objectification Beliefs and Behaviors Scale (SOBBS). Although each of these scales has good reliability and validity, differences in their application can lead to varying results. For instance, some studies use translated and adapted versions of these scales, which may introduce further discrepancies [26]. Additionally, even within the same OBCS scale, some studies use the full 24 items, while others only use a specific dimension, such as the 8-item body surveillance subscale [17][18]. These variations can influence outcomes.

Cultural differences also play a significant role. In Western countries, individuals often underestimate their weight, whereas in Asian countries, women typically overestimate their weight [27]. Moreover, research has found that Asian media places stronger pressure on young Chinese women's body image compared to Western media, including influencing decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery [28]. This may be because Asian societies place greater emphasis on social norms and meeting societal beauty standards, leading to more upward comparisons. In contrast, Western societies may focus more on individual uniqueness. As a result, merely seeing beautiful selfies of others can influence self-objectification and body dissatisfaction among Asian women [17]. For women in Western countries, more engagement in activities like selfie editing and selfie investment may be required to affect the degree of self-objectification [18].

5.   Conclusion

This review discussed the impact of social media on women's well-being through the mediating role of self-objectification. It also delved into the different effects brought about by specific social media activities. The review concluded that self-objectification mediates the relationship between media use and women's well-being, such as body shame, appearance anxiety, and eating disorders. Additionally, social comparison and the internalization of beauty ideals mediate the relationship between media use and self-objectification. Regarding specific media activities, selfie editing and selfie investment are associated with self-objectification and consequently lead to negative impacts. The research on selfie posting is contentious, which may stem from different motivations for posting photos, the use of different scales, and cultural differences. While this review focused on self-objectification as a key mediator, other factors like personality traits and feminist beliefs also influence women's body image. The generalizability of existing studies is restricted by the focus on Western countries and platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Additionally, most research has focused on women, though objectifying content can also affect men and other groups. Future studies should include more diverse participants and explore additional mediators between media use and well-being for a comprehensive understanding.

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