

1. Executive summary

The Priory Group (2017) suggest that eating disorders are responsible for more loss of life than any other form of psychological illness. UK Sport note that parents of young children are concerned about children taking muscle-boosting products (including steroids) and being addicted to compulsive fitness. Social media has increased the idealised and unattainable body images which circulate on the internet, influencing both men and women. These images reinforce the internalisation of a 'perfect' body – thin for women and ripped muscular physique for men – and intensify self-comparison to these images. Consequences include increases in eating disorders (anorexia nervosa, bulimia, orthorexia nervosa), exaggerated focus on fitness training, cosmetic surgery, damaged bodies, low self-esteem and even death. Long term outcomes can include damaging effects particularly on growing bodies (Hill, 2003; Wells, 2015). Whilst there are numerous websites, Facebook groups, Vloggers, Bloggers, Instagrammers and other social media content that promotes unrealistic bodies, the internet can also be a place where these images are challenged. Support groups do exist to deepen self-esteem that is not associated with images. Similarly, there is also social media content that highlights just how constructed and unrealistic these images are. Media literacy – being able to critique and unravel constructed images and messages – is key for young people to develop self-esteem that does not depend on comparison to idealised body physiques.

2. Media and body image

The media acts as a strong influence on both men and women, young and old, particularly in relation to body dissatisfaction and body-shaping behaviours. The media provides messages about what is perceived as an ideal body size and shape, self-control, desires, food and weight management (Spitzer, Henderson and Zivian, 1999).

2.1. Body dissatisfaction

Although the ways that media and culture interact are complex, the images that pervade the media tend to promote an idealised body image for both males and females. These unattainable ideals may cause individuals to perceive themselves as less attractive in relation to their own body perception (Kazmierczk, Patryn and Niedzielski, 2013). For both males and females, media usage can lead to body dissatisfaction through the internalisation of body ideals and also through a tendency to compare oneself (in terms of appearance) to others. Those who internalise the ideals portrayed in the media, are at the greatest risk of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Stice, 2002).

3. Social media and body image

Social media often adopt images from mainstream media which are then disseminated via various social media platforms. These provide greater opportunities for social comparison which contributes to body image concerns (Levine and Harrison, 2009). Social media comparison suggests that people have an innate drive to compare and evaluate themselves to others (including physical attractiveness and body composition). Comparisons are made with others who are deemed to be better off (upward comparisons) and with others deemed to be worse off (downward comparisons) than oneself (Festinger, 1954). Upward comparisons tend to lead to higher body dissatisfaction and

have negative consequences, whereas downward comparisons have more positive consequences and lead to lower body dissatisfaction (Leahey and Crowther, 2008). A greater tendency to compare one's own appearance to others in general tends to be associated with negative body satisfaction (Halliwell and Harvey, 2006). Social media usage encourages greater social comparisons overall for both males and females in relation to body image (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). This is partly due to the increased visibility of body images on such media (Tiggemann and Ziccardo, 2015).

3.1. Self-objectification

Research has also found a link between use of social media platforms such as Facebook and self-objectification (viewing one's body as an object to be gazed upon) and body image concerns (Meier and Gray 2014). This notion of self-objectification may also lead to increased social comparison with images in various social media. Thus the virtual worlds play a significant role in shaping body image through social comparison and increased self-objectification (Perloff, 2014). These include images and videos on a number of different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, Snapchat and other social media, where videos and images circulate conspicuously around the internet.

3.2. Social media and comparison of body images

Holland and Tiggemann, (2017) suggest that social media usage raises concerns for body dissatisfaction and poor body image for both genders. How we present ourselves online reinforces notions of ourselves in relation to our own body. Some social media platforms enable users to edit and enhance their pictures through filters before they post them (such as on Instagram). For example, one female interviewee (aged 16) from my ongoing research commented: 'Well if I like the picture, I like the way I look... I put like a filter on it to make the colour look nicer.' Although they suggest they do not edit, they are still altering the image with which to compare themselves. This upward comparison to their own edited images could also contribute to greater body dissatisfaction. Another female interviewee (aged 15 years) noted: 'I think you compare yourself to people you know... you look at one person and you think! I like that part of them and then you're like I wish I had that part.' The amount of engagement with social media provides greater opportunities for such comparisons. Similarly, receiving positive comments and likes on such posts will also reinforce both the ideal body type and upward comparison to an unattainable image.

3.3. Idealised Body Physiques and social media

Social media are also dominated by discourses of self-care and health responsibility as belonging solely to the individual. The body image ideals link the aesthetic of the body with a moral obligation to maintain one's health (Haman, Barker-Ruchti, Patriksson and Lindgren, 2015). One outcome of social comparison alongside the discourse of a healthy lifestyle, means that bodies are viewed as objects to be worked upon and modified (Shillings, 2012). This combines health with an idealised body physique reinforcing body dissatisfaction. The numerous images and advice given in fitness Vlogs range from workout regimes to food and cosmetic surgery in order to attain the idealised (and unattainable) body physique. For example, one male on Instagram, alongside his muscular physique included the following comment about his body image 'I cheated. But from afar no one can tell. 6% bf actually... And dehydration isn't a joke...but dehydrated physique looks the best, after you get over the headaches' (Male fitspiration Instagrammer, 2017).

3.4. Idealised Body Images: Females

For women there are ideals of slenderness and leanness, an irrational fear of fat and the conviction that weight and shape are central to identity. These emotional responses, Levine and Murnen (2009)

argue, tend to emerge in childhood, and are influenced by media images which still highlight the thin body as the ideal for women (Grabe and Hyde 2006). On Pinterest, one woman who defines herself as 'health and fitness' commented: 'There is no shortcut. It takes time to build a better, stronger version of yourself' over her toned body revealing a bare flat stomach whilst sitting in a half lotus position (Pinterest, 2017). Likewise, the fear of fat is prevalent on social media: 'The pain of being overweight is far worse than the pain of working out' (Pinterest, 2017) which also reinforces social comparisons. Fitspiration images and videos which pervade social media, although promoting healthier lifestyles, are largely appearance focused which for women is having thin and toned bodies (Tiggemann and Ziccardo, 2015). Not only do these images promote and reinforce beauty ideals, but they often appear alongside stories of success, power and control which can also result in increased body dissatisfaction. Thus, negative effects are more likely to occur in women who have internalised this thin body ideal (termed thin-ideal internalisation). According to Dittmar, Halliwell and Stirling (2009:46) 'even women with an average, healthy weight or below can still feel fat' due to exposure of this thin ideal which worsens perceived body images.

3.5. Idealised Body Images: Males

The number of males with eating disorders are more common than previously thought (Treasure, Cluadino and Zucker, 2010). For men, the pursuit of a ripped muscular physique combined with leanness is the idealised norm (Perloff, 2014). This body image includes a well-developed chest and arm muscles with wide shoulders and a narrow waist as presented in numerous fitspiration videos and images. For example, one Pinterest Image termed Alpha Male notes: 'For a deep chest, wide shoulders and lats, this workout will give you the V-shape you're looking for' across his extremely muscular shaped arms and chest. Such images can result in muscle dysmorphia for males, contributing to a perception of lack of muscular build and resulting in continuous resistance exercises (such as weightlifting and bodybuilding), as well as disordered eating. Such videos and images result in internalisation of muscle dysmorphia for males in the same way that the thin body ideal encourages internalisation for women.

4. Outcomes

Thus, social media content and networks can provoke negative feelings of body related shame and poor perceptions of self, resulting in body image issues, eating disorders and compulsive exercise. Vloggers also highlight trends such as clean eating, raw eating, superfoods, juicing and similar lifestyles which appear to focus on achieving a healthy lifestyle and identity. In the process, though, they also increase the potential for poor self-body image perceptions whilst providing physical and verbal cues about consumption, behaviour and idealised bodies.

4.1. Disorders

There are different types of disorders that result from poor body image, depending on whether there is high social comparison or not. These are characterised by limiting food to minimum, binge eating, purging and intense workouts. In medical and psychological literature, anorexia is defined as a disorder with a psychological background characterised by drastic weight loss caused by limitation of food intake, intense physical workouts or administering purgation drugs (Kazmierczak, Patryn and Niedzielski, 2013). Orthoexia nervosa is about an exaggerated, obsessive, pathological fixation on healthy food and health-conscious eating behaviours only allowing themselves foods considered to be pure or wholesome (Bratman, 1997 cited in Bundros, Clifford, Silliman and Morris, 2016). This could include leaving out entire groups of food, encourage anxiety around food, feelings of guilt, shame and vomiting as a result of poor body perception. Not everyone will be influenced in the

same way, though, as it depends on social comparison and internalisation of idealised images, but the prevalence of these idealised bodies in social media (reinforced through traditional media as well as through individuals editing and filtering their own photos) heightens the likelihood of social comparison.

4.2. Websites that encourage idealised body images.

There are, on the internet, many 'pro-anorexia (proana), pro-bulimia (pro-mia), clean eating, dieting and fitspiration websites (Levine and Murnen 2009:23). Many of these have thinspirational images of emaciation or exaggerated muscular bodies, along with guidance for attaining such body physiques. These have a negative effect of reinforcing the idealised and unattainable body images, leading to increased dissatisfaction with one's self and strengthening the likelihood of social comparison and both thin-internalisation and muscle-internalisation.

4.3. Support groups

Alongside this, though, there are also support groups for growing self-esteem which is not based on appearance. For example, websites such as Eating Disorder Hope and the Dove Self Esteem project highlight more positive body image messages. Likewise, Jean Kilbourne's video *Slim Hopes* (and other similar content) highlights the construction and manipulation of images in advertising (https://youtu.be/C7143sc_HbU). Other examples include individuals such as the Instagrammer Essena O'Neill who also revealed on Instagram just how edited and photoshopped the images of herself were (see Hunt, 2015).

4.4. Media Literacy

Levine and Murnen (2009) argue that if the media, including social media, are influential in relation to body dissatisfaction, then reducing or eliminating this influence should help to reduce or eliminate negative body images and processes that result in eating disorders. One way of doing this is through media literacy, where people are taught to critically analyse the content of media as well as our relationship with it (Levine and Smolak, 2006). Education in the school curriculum in relation to media literacy where ideas such as identity, ideology, power, discourse and representation are used to evoke critical evaluation of media images are important. Elements of these ideas run through courses such as Communication and Culture, Media Studies, Sociology and could also include a new focus in relation to critical social media and culture. By engaging young people with such ideas, including evaluation of images on social media (as well as traditional media), it would go far to help students unravel media constructions of body physiques including the idealised images that prevail. An important part of this would be to challenge the social comparison and self-objectification that happens and to foster self-esteem based on things other than how one looks.

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5. References

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