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**The Relationship Between Social Media, Body Image and Gender Drawing on Interviews
with Teenagers
Barbara Mitra**

According to The Priory Group (2022), eating disorders are responsible for more loss of life than any other form of psychological illness. A UK based survey (March 2022, conducted jointly by Mental Health Foundation and YouGov) found that 31% of the 1,118 teenagers who responded felt ashamed in relation to their body image and 40% of teenagers noted that images on social media caused them to worry about their body image. Whilst numerous studies look at quantitative information (see Lawler and Nixon 2011; Fardouly and Holland 2018; Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016), qualitative research on social media and body image is still surprisingly scarce (Burnette Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017). This present research is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty young people aged between fourteen and twenty-one years. These young people have grown up alongside the development of social media (O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson 2011) and therefore discussions focused on social media, body image and gender.

Much research has also been conducted in relation to mass media and body image (Wykes and Gunter 2005) with traditional media seen as “powerful transmitters of society values and standards, especially regarding ideal beauty, weight, food, fashion and gender roles” (Burnette Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017, 114). In the past, the focus has been on women, particularly in relation to body image (Perloff 2014), appearance (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016) as well as physical attractiveness and sexual desirability (Knoblock-Westerwick et al. 2014). There has also been a range of research on the relationship between media messages, body images and eating disorders (Wykes and Gunter 2005; Lawler and Nixon 2011; Palmberg et al. 2014). Studies also suggest that body image dissatisfaction is exacerbated because of social media (Lawler and Nixon 2011; Meier and Gray 2014; Perloff 2014), particularly because images and posts are easily accessible and individuals themselves can produce, create and share such posts (Hye-Ryeon et al. 2014).

Social Media

Social media refers to a “group of internet-based applications...that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Hye-Ryeon et al. 2014, 1346). This is one of the key differences between the images that circulate on traditional media compared with social media – they can be user created and generated and the interaction can be instantaneous (Zappavigna 2016) as well as being “omnipresent and available anywhere and anytime” (Williams and Ricciardelli 2014, 389). Clearly for many young people having a presence and interacting on social media is important with high participation rates (Franchina et al. 2018; Kats 2018; House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2019; Statista 2020). According to Ofcom (2019) young people (aged 12–15 years) engage in a range of platforms including Instagram, SnapChat, WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube, whilst TikTok tended to be used more by those in a younger age group (Ofcom 2019). Social media is where many young people spend their time, and it has become part of their socialisation processes and identity formation (Plaza et al. 2017; Goodyear 2020). Expressions of self can inform, reinforce and even instigate ideas about the body, appearance and how one should look.

The photographs and images that tend to dominate are often those that conform to socially acceptable standards and norms (Golden and Jacoby 2018). For example, Instagram is dominated by “perfect bodies, perfect lives and perfect relationships” (Tiggemann and Anderberg 2019, 3). Similarly, images on Facebook have also been associated with “thin-idealization” and body dissatisfaction (Makwana et al. 2008).

Although such stereotypes are prominent, the rise of body positivity must also be acknowledged. There is a plethora of discourses that challenge the dominant idealised images, but rather than such messages and images having a positive effect, it is much more complex. For example, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) found that even messages which promoted healthy lifestyles, whose intention was to be empowering, could have negative consequences regarding body image comparisons. For example, blogs that focused on healthy lifestyles through food and exercise were dominated by stereotypical images which encouraged body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann and Anderberg 2019). Fardouly and Holland (2018, 4313) found that “disclaimer labels offer no improvements to women’s wellbeing and body image.” Even where images note that they have been edited and staged, the images feed internalisation comparisons regardless of such disclaimers. On the other hand, Tiggemann and Anderberg (2019, 4) found that “no makeup posts” did result in lower facial dissatisfaction. Supportive posts, support groups and messages of

encouragement can help to lessen and protect against body image concerns (Williams and Ricciardelli 2014) as can strategies which highlight the “artificiality of media images” (Burnette Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017, 122).

How young people responded – positively, negatively or, indeed, indifferently – to these discourses depend on a number of factors. These include whether individuals internalise the stereotypical body image ideals (and to what extent) as well as an individual’s tendency to compare their appearance to such images (Fardouly and Holland 2018). Indeed, whilst Porter, Morrow and Reel (2013) found that a “don’t care” attitude was good protection against body dissatisfaction, Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo (2017) found that comparisons happened at a subconscious level and are therefore much more difficult to control.

Body Image Concerns

Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) note that individuals, at some level, tended to compare themselves to others as a means of self-exploration. However, these comparisons were exacerbated on social media, because of the focus on physical appearances (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2014, 744) and due to social media being dominated by the taking, editing and posting of visual content (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2019). In addition, the structure and format of social media can lead to ranking oneself against idealised and often unattainable images. If one perceives the images to be better than oneself, it can lead to dissatisfaction with one’s appearance and body. This is upward social comparison (Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017) where the images and posts are deemed to be superior to oneself. Previous studies have noted that sharing idealised, filtered and edited images on social media have contributed to “feelings of inadequacy or upward social comparison” (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016, 6).

If, however, the images are perceived as being worse than oneself it can actually lead to a more positive internalisation of one’s own body image and appearance. This is called downward social comparison (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2014) where the individual considers themselves better than the images with which they compare themselves. Despite this, Fardouly and Holland (2017) suggest that upward comparisons (as opposed to downward comparisons) were the most common type of comparisons made. Such ranking is encouraged by social media, as it encourages individuals to see their bodies as objects to be gazed upon (Meier and Gray 2014) in

order to be judged. Ratings and feedback based on looks, selfies and even just posting pictures of oneself all encourage self-objectification and greater self-surveillance. Social media encourages young people (and others) to view themselves as objects or sights to be seen. According to Ghaznavi and Taylor (2015, 55), women and girls are particularly socialised to “internalise an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves.” Indeed, “body shame” tends to be stronger for young females, whereas for young males, it depends on how sensitive they are to social cues compared with those who ignore such cues (Salomon and Brown 2019).

Goodyear asserts “young people can become obsessed with the way they look on social media” (2020, 48) leading to addictive feedback, reinforced through likes and endorsements from others (Williams and Ricciardelli 2014). Thus, the peer group also plays an important role for individuals. When people follow specific celebrities or influencers online it encourages para-social relationships to form (Turner 1993; Fardouly and Holland 2018) which embeds celebrities and influencers as part of their peer group, counting them alongside friends and family (Hyojin, Eunju, and Juran (2015). The para-social relationships work to make the Vloggers, YouTubers and Instagrammers much more “personal, credible and easy to relate to” (Boerman and Van Reijmersdal 2002, 2). By including such celebrities as part of a peer group, greater pressure can be exerted on individuals who feel that they have to continually monitor and evaluate themselves. In the same way celebrities and influencers also have to continually monitor and evaluate their images themselves in a “constant reworking of the self” which impacts those who follow them (Turken et al. 2016, 34). Additionally, this may happen at a subconscious (rather than conscious) level (Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017). Chatard et al. (2017) suggest that such social comparisons are automatic and operate in an uncontrollable and unintentional manner, making it even more difficult to mitigate against. This leads to continuous “self-gender policing” (Coen, Newton-John, and Slater 2017, 32) where people may not even post images if they feel they do not adhere to body image and appearance norms.

The Idealised Bodies

The images for women that dominated on social media tended to be “sleek, slender images of female beauty” (Perloff 2014, 366) with “thin and largely unattainable beauty ideals” (Fardouly and Holland 2018, 4312). Women are inundated with these “powerful messages emphasising an ideal feminine body as physically lean and thin” (Porter, Morrow, and Reel 2013, 180; Perloff

2014, 366). Whilst there are changes over time, the thin waist seemed to remain constant (Wykes and Gunter 2005). Messages insist that the female body is in need of control in order to be “socially and aesthetically acceptable” (Andsager 2014, 410) and women have greater sociocultural pressures in relation to appearance and conforming to such norms.

There has been growing concern regarding body images disturbances for males, with young men also becoming “increasingly body conscious” (Wright, Halse, and Levy 2016, 8). Andsager (2014, 410) and others have written about increased body surveillance and a focus on muscularity for males. Whilst there have been more variations of body types for males, there has also been a focus particularly on wide shoulders, a well-developed chest and arm muscles and a “ripped muscularity” (Perloff 2014, 371). These can be seen in numerous fitpiration videos which then link fitness to body image and can encourage increasing body dissatisfaction. Indeed, some of the research in relation to males has focused on the muscle-enhancing supplements (Perloff 2014). However, as noted, there are more variations in relation to masculinities (Connell 2003), compared with the very narrow idealised female image (Perloff 2014). Thus, whilst there is increasing concern about body image focus for men, women are more used to engaging in “appearance comparison” (Davison and McCabe 2005 cited in Algars et al. 2003, 114) and “self-objectification” (Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015, 55) which is exacerbated through social media.

Neoliberalism

One of the underlying premises of neoliberalism is that people can be successful if they try hard enough, and the body can become the focus of such activities. According to Beattie, Bettache, and Chong (2019, 19) the body is a site of “self-representation and surveillance” which, in the neoliberal context, places an emphasis on individual responsibility to monitor, evaluate and maintain oneself. There is continuous self-cultivation (Turken et al. 2016) which is encouraged through self-representation (real or idealised and edited) on social media. Shame and comparison on social media reinforce this neoliberal logic of competition and individualism. Therefore, the concept of individual responsibility has seeped into maintaining one’s body and encourages “impression management” (Mehdizadeh 2010, 357) which conforms to the “accredited values of society” (Goffman 1990, 45). Neoliberalism “recasts the body as a key site of identity, empowerment and control” (Beattie, Bettache, and Chong 2019, 18). Influencers and celebrities

also have pressure to self-monitor their images (Archer 2019) and their posts can encourage audiences to do the same.

Methods

This research is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty young people (ten identified as male and ten identified as female) who were previously interviewed ten years earlier. In the original study, I interviewed thirty one children aged between 4–11 years using toy advertisements with parental permission (see Mitra and Lewin-Jones 2012). Twenty of those children agreed to take part in the current interviews aged between 14–21 years. The semi-structured interviews began with a number of predetermined questions to find out their media usage. A flexible approach was then adopted in order to stimulate discussion (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). This enabled more interaction and for the conversation to be “natural” whilst still focusing on the topic (Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury 2012). Questions were asked that related to the media, for example, “what kind of things do you watch?”, “Do you watch YouTube videos?”; “Do you put photos on Instagram?”, “Are there similar pressures on males and females in terms of looks?” The interviews took place during 2016–2018, ten years after the original interviews (2006–2008). Names and dates have all been changed to preserve anonymity in accordance with ethical approval and informed consent. These interviews took place in their homes in order to explore “their experiences ideas, perspectives” and their viewpoints in more detail (Van Esch and Van Esch 2013, 224). Typically, the interviews lasted anything from thirty minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes and were recorded on an MP3 player and transcribed later as part of the data analysis (Cridland et al. 2015, 81).

In order to make sense of the interview material, thematic analysis was employed to “uncover, define and analyse the major themes and subthemes of participants’ perspectives” (Palmberg et al. 2014, 1405). As Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) suggest “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Themes are patterns that “at minimum describe and organise” and at the maximum interpret the data (Hartman and Conklin 2012, 828). Each transcript was analysed separately and coded deductively at a semantic level. Transcripts were read and re-read and line by line coding was completed. NVivo data management software was used to manage and organise the data. The coding process enabled comparisons between codes and phrases. Thus, thematic analysis enabled

rich description to explore “underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies” (Maguire and Delahunt 2017, 3352; Ross and Green 2011, 113).

General Findings

Nine (out of the ten) females were concerned with looks compared with four (out of the ten) males. As Perloff (2014) suggests, women are more likely to compare themselves to others because they are more used to self-objectifying. Lisa (sixteen years) suggested that there was more pressure for females: “I think there is more [pressure] for girls because like you have to have the perfect body and like have a pretty face and everything.” Similarly, Kath (seventeen years) noted that “girls have to look pretty and stuff...you can definitely tell on social media, there’s like girls covered in makeup and then the guys are just hanging out with their mates, like covered in mud playing football.” Goodyear (2020) notes that self-presentation, or selfies, on social media were particularly important for young people and could lead to increasing social comparisons (Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017). This was reinforced by Amber (fifteen years) who noted: “I think especially with some of the stuff I watch, I think it’s like “Oh you need to use makeup to make you look this way” and have your clothes look this way and do your hair like this.” These images then circulate and recirculate through these individuals posting on social media. The images also tend to conform as a result of wanting to “fit in” and impression management (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, 110) encouraging upward social comparisons. As Dawn (fourteen years) mentioned, “you hear about people photoshopping their photos to look better on Facebook and stuff... So, I think people want to look better than other people.” As highlighted by these young people, those identifying as female were more likely to be concerned about body image. Abigail (fourteen years) noted that “A boy can get like, he can get away with anything pretty much, whereas a girl, you kind of, you’ve either got to follow the trend or you’ll get laughed at.”

Social Media and Appearance

Social media often has stereotypical and idealised images, particularly in relation to women focusing on thin waists, the face (looks) and appearance. This manifests in women being particularly anxious about posting images of themselves on social media. For example, Kath (seventeen years) suggested: “I always get worried if I want to post a picture of myself on social

media, because that has to be like a really good picture, or I won't post it." This response from Kath showed that impression management was particularly important and that she wanted to present the best version of herself as Fardouly and Holland (2018) suggest. Similarly, Zara (fifteen years) noted: "I'll take lots of pictures and then decide which one is like the best and then go through the filters depending on which one I like...I would like to get a lot of likes." The number of likes that Zara received reinforced an internalisation of idealised body norms. By choosing images that conformed to these ideals, Kath, Zara and others who also noted they chose particular photographs, were contributing to the circulation and re-circulation of idealised images through their own creations and posts. For women, this self-presentation tended to be on the face, thin bodies and appearance generally. It also related to self-esteem, where the perception of oneself is based on the response of others and feedback through social media. For those who did not conform or had very low self-esteem, they may avoid posting altogether.

This seemed to be a strategy for the males in the study. Jarred (fifteen years) commented: "I used to [post] but I haven't posted [on Instagram] for three years. I used to be self-conscious." Similarly, Trevor (fourteen years) commented that he also "used to [post on Instagram] but I haven't posted for about a year or so. I still use it but I just don't post." For males, whilst there was some pressure in terms of appearance, the pressure to conform was not as great as it was for females. Warren (seventeen years) noted that there is a "sort of like expectation to be masculine, but I mean I don't really notice it to be honest." However, he did post up active images that tended to conform to masculinity such as posts from his rugby dinner.

Influencers

When celebrities and influencers are perceived as part of peer groups and counted alongside friends, it deepens the para-social relationships with these microcelebrities and leads to greater social comparisons. The emotional connection may lead to imitating celebrity styles, tastes and purchasing products they advertise in order to associate with them. At the same time, it can also foster internalisation of the idealised body and appearance ideals. For example, Abigail (fourteen years) commented: "There's like celebrities on there and you see them and think – Oh I want to look like them." Similarly, Kath (seventeen years) noted: "If you like celebrities and stuff...the girls are normally wearing loads of makeup and always looking really nice and like just the sort of people you want to be." Upward social comparison is being encouraged, partly as a result of

the para-social relationship. The constant monitoring and evaluation that of celebrities includes focusing on appearance (Turken et al. 2016) which then also encourages individuals to constantly monitor and evaluate themselves in relation to appearance. Even though there was awareness of how edited these images were, it may not necessarily stop the upward social comparison. Amanda (fifteen years) highlighted this with her comment: “I think it’s quite bad how they photoshop people like celebrities and make unrealistic appearances of what people look like. You see a picture and you immediately think I should look like that, even though it doesn’t look like a person.” Despite Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo (2017) suggesting that the awareness of the artificiality of media images may protect against body image comparisons, such perception does not necessarily provide protection against appearance dissatisfaction as a result of comparisons.

Weight

For females the thin waist still resonated with these young people. Kath (seventeen years) noted: “everyone wants to be skinny and there’s lots of ‘Oh I’ve lost so much weight’ and all of that on social media.” Whilst size zero has become unfashionable, there is still pressure to be thin. Abigail (fourteen years) remarked that “If you’re larger you won’t fit in as much. I wouldn’t say there’s pressure to be like mega thin but like slim or not overweight.” Another young person, Loise (fifteen years) also noted the advertising for waist trainers “which are basically just corsets, it’s like a corset which is like bright pink and it’s got like five rows of hooks, and each week you can go on to a new hook and just lose weight.” She also mentioned influencers such as Khloe Kardashian who advertise various tea brands to aid weight loss. These kinds of advertisements could be a trigger for those suffering with eating disorders. It also feeds into the neoliberal context of working on one’s body in a competitive manner and to maintain oneself as a continual self-project that is in constant need of being improved Whilst some people might be aware that they engage in social comparisons, it can also happen at a subconscious level (Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo 2017). For example, Loise (fifteen years) commented:

So, if I put on a skirt and I’m like I don’t feel comfortable in that I won’t wear it.

That’s one of the reasons I don’t wear trousers all that much because I don’t like how they make me feel...I just went to town and I tried on some trousers and they were

nice trousers and I think they'd look good on other people but I put them on and I didn't like how my legs looked, or my hips, so I decided against them.

This suggests some upward social comparison and body dissatisfaction in relation to how she perceived herself looking in trousers. Other people were more vociferous about the comparisons, but awareness did not necessarily stop people from engaging with these comparisons. For example, Amanda (fifteen years) commented that “you compare yourself to other people which isn't so good” but she still made comparisons, and these were more often in the upward direction. One criterion that influenced the direction of comparison was whether they perceived themselves (or specific body parts) more negatively. Where this was the case, these individuals were more likely to engage in upward social comparisons.

Challenges to the Images

As well as disengaging from social media platforms, depending on the extent and intensity of internalisation, protective measures varied between the self-identified males and females in this research group. The males in this group tended to either stop posting, taking time away from posting or to post other things rather than selfies. For example, Christian noted that “if there's an event, maybe I'll put up a photo of that” rather than selfies. For females there seemed to be more pressure in relation to posting up selfies and gaining likes and nine out of ten young women people mentioned advertisements targeting make-up and beauty. However, there was some protection against this which included following more positive accounts such as the body positivity accounts. This was an active choice by individuals such as Loise (fifteen years) who tended to look at these if she “felt bad” about herself. In these instances, she tended to “follow body positive accounts on Instagram. Pictures saying love your body, you're great the way you are.” These were micro-rebellions where people negotiated and challenged the stereotypical images on social media platforms, although one had to actively seek out such posts. This highlights the double function of digital platforms as “sites of empowerment and identity formation on the one hand, and of surveillance and self-monitoring on the other, particularly for women” (Beattie, Bettache, and Chong 2019, 24). Much of the eating disorder research highlights how the eating disorder voice, or the inner voice, was often in battle with a more positive voice. This is perhaps played out in relation to social media with the images and posts presenting these two different voices battling each other – the one side encouraging upward

social comparisons and the other encouraging downward social comparisons. Noordenbos (2013) describes the inner criticism or inner negativism as dominant, especially if they are reinforced externally by social media, where for females, appearance has been important for self-worth and self-esteem. Consequently, more males in this study found it easier to reject the self-monitoring and self-evaluation or at least control it, compared with the young women. Despite males having more strategies to protect themselves from social comparisons, as media itself has expanded to focus on fitness and muscularity (Williams and Ricciardelli 2014), muscle dysmorphia (and resulting fitness and gym culture) has correspondingly become of increasing concern for males (Heath et al. 2016).

Males

For males, the focus tended to be on the body rather than face, particularly centring on muscles, chest, abs and shoulders as highlighted by Perloff (2014). Harriet (seventeen years) also pointed out that for “guys it’s mainly bodies, pressure to have abs and perfect trim [shape] and deep voices and stuff like that.” According to Williams and Ricciardielli (2014, 390), boys wanted to be like the sportsmen they saw on television, and there is a link to sport-shaped body ideals focusing on fitness and muscularity. Similarly, Loise (fifteen years) suggested that “for men, I feel like there’s a lot more pictures of like boys with shirts off...it would be more about the body for men.” Fitness also seems to be associated with these images as Christian (seventeen years) noted: “You see guys who are in insane shape...you see adverts and like, see bodybuilding things online.” Similarly, Johnnie (twenty years) commented: “I think stereotypically, the man is to be muscly, is to work out and play sport and do all these things, and women [are] meant to be pretty and doll herself up and all this sort of stuff.” Whilst these highlight a stereotype of passive female/active male (White 2015), physical activity has also become associated with slimness for both males and females. Young people who look at fitness accounts or sites often encounter the same idealised body images. Indeed, Instagram and fitspiration posts have particularly become associated with body dissatisfaction and body surveillance. These might encourage upward social comparison in relation to bodies, particularly in relation to muscles and abs for males. It is however more complex, and for males there are more versions of masculinities (Connell 2003) such as techno-masculinity or the geek (Hines 2018) that do not focus so much on appearance.

The males in this study seemed to employ more individual mitigating techniques compared with the females, but clearly were still being influenced by the images and posts in social media.

Conclusions

Although it is difficult to assert any direct causal link, body ideals can influence perceptions about one's self (Andsager 2014) and the effects can be indirect and subtle. Social media encourages individuals to "turn themselves into objects or sights to be seen" (Ritland 2018, 1283) and in the context of neoliberalism this needs to be constantly worked upon and developed in order to meet impossibly idealised images. Whilst such self-objectification has been ever-present for women, social media also encourages self-objectification for men. Whether men or women could disrupt this gaze depended on a number of different factors, including self-esteem, internalisation of body ideals and how important appearance was to self-worth. For some individuals, the self-evaluation and constant monitoring was more dominant, encouraged by influencers and microcelebrities who constantly reworked their body as the site of identity and control. For others, social media enabled empowerment and identity formation in a way that challenged the dominant neoliberal discourses and challenged the focus on the body. However, it was hard to escape the encouragement of neoliberal discourse which focuses on the body and individual responsibility and particularly social media's encouragement of selfies and visual dominance.

Even body positive sites might not protect against upward social comparison. As Ghaznaiv and Taylor (2015) note women are socialised to self-objectify at an early age which may be why more males in this study were able to challenge idealised images and mitigate against body disturbances compared with females. Resistance can be found by those who tend not to internalise the images and postings, as well as for those who have other factors, rather than appearance or body image, as a basis of self-worth. The emotional connection that is developed via social media, with celebrities and influencers can also lead to more upward social comparison, as can the general dominance of idealised images, reinforced by likes and comments towards those that conform to stereotypes. As Loise (fifteen years) commented: "I think there's definitely pressure for both boys and girls, but I feel there is slightly more on girls...just because of the nature of media [where] this woman has put on weight since the last time we took a photo

of her. What do you think? But with a man it's like 'here's the great man and all his achievements...Online I've seen things glorify a skinny lady.'"

Bullet Point Summary

- Body image comparisons are exacerbated on social media, encouraging upward comparisons where others are deemed better than oneself.
- The images that dominate on social media differ for males and females. For females the focus is on the thin waists, face and appearance, whilst for males the focus is on muscularity, wide shoulders and abs.
- Different factors such as self-esteem, internalisation of body ideals and how important appearance is to an individual, impact on whether or not they internalise body images.
- Influencers and microcelebrities are used for comparisons due to parasocial relations which incorporate these as part of peer groups.
- Some protection might be offered by body positivity posts, but these may not entirely protect individuals against upward social comparisons.

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