

A Review of Instagram Usage on Body Image Perception among Male and Female College Students

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Abstract: *Instagram, as one of the most popular social media platforms, has significantly influenced the perception of body image among college students. This review explores how Instagram usage affects body image perception in male and female students, highlighting the role of social comparison, exposure to idealized images, and engagement with fitness and lifestyle content. The review also examines gender differences in susceptibility to body image dissatisfaction and the psychological consequences associated with prolonged Instagram use.*

Keywords: Body Image Perception, Self-Esteem, Male Students

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become integral to modern life, with Instagram standing out due to its visually-driven interface. College students, who are at a critical stage of identity and self-concept development, are particularly vulnerable to social media influences. Body image perception refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward their own body, which can significantly affect self-esteem and mental health (Fardouly et al., 2015). Instagram, by emphasizing image sharing and comparison, plays a key role in shaping these perceptions.

The rise of social media has transformed how individuals communicate, interact, and perceive themselves. Among various platforms, Instagram stands out due to its highly visual nature, allowing users to share photos, videos, and stories that often depict idealized lifestyles and physical appearances (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Instagram's emphasis on imagery, likes, and comments fosters a culture of social comparison, particularly among college students, who are in a developmental phase of identity formation and self-concept consolidation. Research has consistently shown that social media use is strongly associated with body image perception, self-esteem, and overall psychological adjustment, making it a crucial area of study in understanding young adults' mental health outcomes (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014).

Body image perception refers to an individual's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward their own body, encompassing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with appearance, shape, and size. For college students, who often face academic stress, social pressures, and transitional life experiences, body image is a significant factor influencing self-esteem and psychological well-being (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Instagram, by providing continuous exposure to curated and often digitally enhanced images, can reinforce unrealistic beauty standards. Users are frequently encouraged to evaluate their own appearance in comparison with peers, influencers, and celebrities, resulting in heightened appearance-related concerns (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). This comparison mechanism has been shown to affect both males and females, although the specific aspects of body dissatisfaction differ by gender. Females tend to focus on thinness and facial aesthetics, while males often emphasize muscularity and physical strength (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020).

The impact of Instagram on body image is closely linked to the concept of social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others to assess their own worth or abilities (Festinger, 1954). Instagram, as a platform saturated with idealized images, provides ample opportunities for upward social comparison, where users compare themselves to individuals perceived as more attractive or successful. Studies indicate

that upward social comparison on Instagram is positively correlated with body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and negative affect among college students (Fardouly et al., 2015; Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2019). The constant exposure to edited photos, fitness content, and lifestyle portrayals reinforces internalized beauty ideals, which may contribute to the development of unhealthy body image concerns and, in some cases, disordered eating behaviors (Perloff, 2014).

Gender differences play a significant role in understanding how Instagram influences body image perception. Research suggests that female students are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction due to the pervasive thin-ideal and beauty-focused content prevalent on the platform (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). They are also more likely to engage in appearance comparison, which is linked to decreased self-esteem and increased risk of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Fardouly et al., 2017). Male students, on the other hand, are often influenced by images promoting muscularity, athleticism, and fitness, which may lead to concerns about muscle mass, body shape, and physical strength (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). While the content and focus of body image concerns differ by gender, both male and female college students are susceptible to Instagram's influence, highlighting the need for gender-specific interventions and awareness programs.

Instagram's interactive features, such as likes, comments, and follower counts, amplify its effect on body image perception. Engagement metrics can serve as a form of social validation, reinforcing users' concerns about their appearance and influencing their self-worth (Fardouly et al., 2018). College students often interpret the number of likes or comments on their posts as an indicator of social approval or attractiveness. This constant evaluation creates a feedback loop in which appearance becomes a central determinant of social recognition, exacerbating anxiety about body image and increasing the risk of negative psychological outcomes (Perloff, 2014). Furthermore, the use of filters, photo editing apps, and curated posts can create unrealistic expectations about appearance, making students compare their unaltered selves to idealized representations, thereby intensifying dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

The psychological consequences of negative body image among college students are profound. Studies have shown that dissatisfaction with one's body can lead to lower self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Fardouly et al., 2015). In extreme cases, it may also contribute to eating disorders, self-harm behaviors, and other mental health challenges. For male students, the pressure to achieve a muscular physique can result in compulsive exercising, steroid use, and body dysmorphia, whereas females may engage in restrictive dieting, excessive concern with weight, and other maladaptive behaviors (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). Understanding Instagram's role in these dynamics is essential for developing effective interventions aimed at promoting healthy body image and resilience against social media pressures.

While Instagram can have negative effects, it also has the potential to promote positive body image through exposure to body-positive content, inclusive messaging, and supportive online communities (Fardouly et al., 2018). Educational interventions, media literacy programs, and awareness campaigns that teach students to critically evaluate social media content can help mitigate harmful comparisons and enhance self-esteem. Promoting self-compassion, encouraging realistic self-appraisal, and selectively engaging with content that fosters acceptance rather than comparison are strategies that have shown promise in reducing Instagram's negative impact on body image (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Instagram usage is a significant factor influencing body image perception among male and female college students. Its visual and interactive nature fosters social comparison and internalization of appearance ideals, leading to body dissatisfaction and associated psychological consequences. Gender differences in susceptibility and type of body concerns highlight the need for targeted interventions. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, the role of individual differences, and the efficacy of strategies designed to foster resilience to social media pressures. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers seeking to support healthy development and well-being among college students in the age of digital media.

INSTAGRAM AND BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION

Instagram provides a constant stream of images depicting idealized lifestyles and physical appearances. Users are prone to social comparison, evaluating their own appearance against others, which can lead to body dissatisfaction

(Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Studies indicate that exposure to highly curate and edited images can increase the risk of negative body image, particularly among females who often face societal pressure to conform to beauty standards (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Instagram, as a visually-driven social media platform, has emerged as a significant influence on body image perception among college students. Unlike text-based platforms, Instagram emphasizes photos and short videos, allowing users to present idealized versions of themselves, often edited and filtered to enhance appearance (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). This visual focus encourages users to engage in social comparison, evaluating their own appearance against those of peers, celebrities, and social media influencers. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals constantly assess themselves relative to others to determine their own worth, and platforms like Instagram amplify upward comparisons with idealized images, which can increase body dissatisfaction (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly et al., 2015).

Research has demonstrated that frequent Instagram use is associated with negative body image outcomes, including increased concern about weight, shape, and overall appearance (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Female students are particularly vulnerable to these effects, often internalizing thin-ideal standards portrayed on the platform, leading to lower self-esteem and higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). Male students, while less studied, show a tendency to focus on muscularity and athleticism, reflecting societal norms around male body ideals (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). These gender-specific concerns highlight how Instagram content can differentially affect body image perceptions based on social and cultural expectations.

Instagram's interactive features, such as likes, comments, and follower counts, further exacerbate body image concerns by creating a metric for social validation. High engagement on appearance-focused posts can reinforce self-objectification and the desire to meet perceived societal standards, leading to heightened body consciousness and stress (Perloff, 2014). The prevalence of edited images, "fitspiration" content, and curated lifestyle portrayals contributes to unrealistic expectations about physical appearance, prompting negative self-evaluation and comparison among college students (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

However, Instagram also has the potential to promote positive body image through exposure to body-positive communities and content that emphasizes diversity in body shapes and sizes. Programs encouraging media literacy and critical evaluation of social media content have shown promise in mitigating harmful effects, helping students interpret Instagram content more realistically and reduce the impact of negative comparisons (Fardouly et al., 2018).

Instagram significantly shapes body image perception among college students, fostering social comparison and internalization of appearance ideals. While the platform can negatively influence self-esteem and body satisfaction, awareness, and educational interventions can mitigate these effects and promote healthier self-perception.

Table 1: Key Findings from Recent Studies on Instagram and Body Image Perception

Study	Sample	Key Findings	Gender Focus	Reference
Fardouly et al., 2015	300 female college students	Instagram exposure linked to increased body dissatisfaction	Female	Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015)
Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018	200 male & female students	Viewing fitness-related posts increased appearance comparison and body concerns	Both	Tiggemann, M., & Zaccardo, M. (2018)
Holland & Tiggemann, 2016	250 students	Self-objectification mediated the relationship between Instagram usage and body image issues	Both	Holland, G., & Tiggemann, M. (2016)
Cohen et al., 2019	180 female students	Higher Instagram engagement correlated with greater internalization of beauty ideals	Female	Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2019)
Brown & Tiggemann, 2020	150 male students	Male participants reported concern about muscularity and body shape	Male	Brown, Z., & Tiggemann, M. (2020)

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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION

Research shows notable gender differences in Instagram's impact. Females tend to internalize thin-ideal images, leading to higher body dissatisfaction, while males are more influenced by images promoting muscularity and athleticism (Fardouly et al., 2017). Both genders are affected, but the type of body concern varies, reflecting societal expectations and gender norms.

Gender plays a significant role in shaping body image perception, particularly among college students who are heavily influenced by social norms and media portrayals. Studies have shown that females are more susceptible to body dissatisfaction due to the pervasive thin-ideal propagated through media platforms such as Instagram (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). Exposure to images of slim, toned, and conventionally attractive women encourages upward social comparison, where individuals evaluate themselves against seemingly superior physical standards. This often results in lower self-esteem, heightened body monitoring, and in some cases, disordered eating behaviors (Perloff, 2014). Social media features, including likes, comments, and follower counts, amplify these effects by reinforcing the importance of appearance as a form of social validation (Fardouly et al., 2018).

Male students, on the other hand, tend to focus on muscularity, leanness, and athleticism, reflecting the cultural emphasis on male body ideals (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). While males generally report lower levels of overall body dissatisfaction compared to females, they experience concerns regarding muscle mass, strength, and body shape. Exposure to images of highly muscular men on Instagram and other social media platforms can increase drive for muscularity, body comparison, and engagement in potentially harmful behaviors, such as excessive exercise or supplement use (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Although both genders are affected by social media use, the nature of body image concerns differs. Females are more likely to internalize thinness and aesthetic standards, while males focus on muscularity and strength. This divergence underscores the importance of gender-sensitive approaches when addressing body image issues. Intervention strategies, such as media literacy programs and promotion of body-positive content, can help mitigate negative impacts by encouraging critical evaluation of idealized portrayals and fostering self-acceptance among male and female students (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

Understanding these gender differences is crucial for researchers, educators, and mental health professionals aiming to reduce body dissatisfaction and promote healthy self-perception among college students in the context of pervasive social media influence.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Negative body image can result in low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and disordered eating behaviors (Perloff, 2014). Instagram usage exacerbates these risks by promoting constant exposure to curated and idealized images. Additionally, the number of likes, comments, and follower counts can reinforce social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors, further influencing self-perception.

The pervasive use of Instagram among college students has notable psychological implications, particularly concerning body image and self-esteem. Repeated exposure to idealized images of peers, influencers, and celebrities fosters upward social comparison, where individuals evaluate themselves against perceived "superior" appearances. Such comparisons are strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014). College students, being at a formative stage of identity development, are particularly vulnerable to these effects, as their self-concept is still malleable and influenced by social validation.

Body dissatisfaction can manifest differently across genders. Female students often internalize thin-ideal norms prevalent on Instagram, leading to increased self-criticism, dieting behaviors, and preoccupation with appearance (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). Male students, while generally less studied, show increased concern with muscularity and overall physique, sometimes leading to compulsive exercise or unhealthy supplementation to achieve societal standards of male attractiveness (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). Both genders may experience heightened self-objectification, wherein self-worth becomes heavily tied to appearance and perceived social approval (Perloff, 2014).

Beyond individual concerns, psychological effects of Instagram usage also include social anxiety, fear of missing out (FOMO), and depressive symptoms due to perceived inadequacy compared to peers (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). The platform's engagement metrics, such as likes and comments, further reinforce these pressures by creating continuous feedback loops that tie social validation to appearance, exacerbating stress and reducing overall psychological well-being.

However, interventions like media literacy programs, body-positive campaigns, and awareness about the curated nature of online content have been shown to mitigate these effects, promoting resilience and healthier self-perception among students (Fardouly et al., 2018). Understanding these psychological implications is crucial for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers aiming to support the well-being of college students in an increasingly image-focused digital environment.

COPING AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Educational interventions, media literacy programs, and promoting body positivity on social media can mitigate Instagram's negative influence (Fardouly et al., 2018). Encouraging self-compassion, critical thinking about media content, and selective engagement with content can reduce harmful comparisons.

The negative impact of Instagram on body image perception among college students necessitates the development of effective coping and mitigation strategies. One of the most widely discussed approaches is media literacy education, which encourages students to critically evaluate social media content rather than accept it at face value (Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2018). By understanding the prevalence of image editing, filters, and selective posting, students can reduce unrealistic comparisons and develop a healthier perspective on the content they consume. Media literacy programs have been shown to improve self-esteem and body satisfaction by fostering critical thinking skills and resilience against social pressures (Levine & Murnen, 2009).

Another key strategy is promoting body positivity through exposure to diverse and inclusive content on social media. Platforms like Instagram host communities that celebrate different body types, sizes, and appearances, which can counteract the negative effects of idealized imagery (Halliwell & Diedrichs, 2014). Encouraging students to follow such accounts and engage with body-positive messages can reduce internalization of thin-ideal or muscularity-focused standards.

Self-compassion and cognitive reframing are also effective coping mechanisms. By fostering a mindset of self-acceptance and focusing on personal health and well-being rather than appearance-based validation, students can mitigate feelings of inadequacy (Homan et al., 2012). Additionally, limiting time spent on appearance-focused content, using app features to control notifications, and reducing engagement with harmful posts are practical behavioral strategies that have been associated with improved psychological outcomes (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

Peer support and counseling can play a significant role in helping students navigate social media pressures. Group discussions, workshops, and professional guidance allow students to share experiences and develop adaptive coping skills in a supportive environment (Perloff, 2014). Together, these strategies highlight the importance of awareness, critical engagement, and behavioral regulation in reducing Instagram's negative impact on body image.

II. CONCLUSION

Instagram significantly impacts body image perception among college students, with gender-specific effects. While females are more likely to experience dissatisfaction related to thinness, males are influenced by muscularity ideals. Awareness and intervention strategies are essential to promote healthy body image and prevent negative psychological outcomes. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and explore strategies to enhance resilience to social media pressures.

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