

**A Feminist Perspective on Social Media's Impact on Body Image and Mental Health in
Young People**

Marykate Kiley

Sacred Heart University

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Dr. Suzanne Marmo-Roman & Dr. Mahfuja Malik

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The rise of social media platforms has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in body image issues and eating disorders in male and female young people (Rodgers et al., 2020). The World Health Organization defines “Young People” as any person between the ages of 10 and 24 years old, and therefore, the “Young People” age group includes the adolescent age group, containing people the ages of 10-19, as well as the emerging adult age group that is comprised of people from the ages of 18-25 (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021). Potential explanations for the increase in popularity of social media and the increase in the prevalence of negative body image have been suggested to be the high-risk nature of the adolescent age group, the normalization of oversexualized and unrealistic body types in social media, and the innate gendered etiology of body image (Borowsky et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020).

Research has shown that “35-57% of adolescent girls engage in crash dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting, diet pills, or laxatives” (Boutelle et al., 2002; ANAD, 2021). According to the National Organization for Women (NOW), by the time a college student enters their first year, it is estimated that 4.5 to 18% of females have a history of Bulimia and as many as 1 in 100 females have experienced anorexia. (National Organization for Women, 2021). For males, 0.4 have a history of anorexia (National Organization for Women, 2021). These statistics are frightening because the mortality rates for anorexia range from 1.36%- 20% for anorexia nervosa and from 1%-3% for bulimia nervosa (Jáuregui-Garrido & Jáuregui-Lobera, 2012). Those people who suffer from anorexia nervosa have a higher likelihood to attempt suicide and have an increased risk of death or severe consequences from their attempt (Jáuregui-Garrido & Jáuregui-

Lobera, 2012). These statistics emphasize the importance of continuing studies on eating disorders and determining social media's impact on body image and self-esteem in both male and female adolescents. Therefore, this paper aims to take a feminist perspective to analyze different studies on social media's impact on body image, mental health, and the development of eating disorders in young people.

Feminist Theories

As seen through many eating disorder studies, it seems that women are disproportionately affected by societal pressure to look a certain way and are more likely to experience an eating disorder or a warped view of their body (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2015). The definition of feminism is not universally accepted, and therefore there are many different and contrasting opinions on what feminism is. Although there are many different and varied definitions of feminism, the three consistent characteristics between all definitions are that feminism recognizes men are treated as superior to women in society, that gender and the traits and roles assigned to specific genders are constructed by society and have the capability to change and evolve and are valued differently by each member of society, and that women can be self-reliant (Casad & Kasabian, 2009). Many feminist theorists have attempted to understand why females are at a higher risk for having an eating disorder. One such idea is the theory of the "thin-ideal." The internalization of the thin-ideal "refers to the degree to which an individual subscribes to socially reinforced ideals of weight and shape" (Wilson et al., 2020), and its advertisement can be attributed to causing more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of women to suffer from a form of mental illness related to body image during their lifetime (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). The thin-ideal is widespread in social media and tends to promote unhealthy body ideals in all aspects, including the hashtags used such as "#thinspiration" and "#fitspiration" (Aparicio-

Martinez et al., 2019; Skowronski et al., 2021). The excessive promotion of the thin-ideal and the encouragement of young women to achieve unrealistic and unattainable body goals has been suggested to place someone at a higher risk for engaging in food restriction, as well as cause women to experience increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes, resulting in extreme methods of dieting (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019).

After seeing social media flooded with images of extremely edited women and men, young people are more likely to engage in constant body surveillance, change their self-perception, and view their own attractiveness on a modified scale. These changes in attitude as well as the “sexualization and self-objectification promoted via media” lead to more body dissatisfaction and the development of a disordered eating attitude (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). This finding is seen in another study as they concluded that after viewing images of extremely thin women, many women reported feeling dissatisfied with the size of their bodies and were seen with a negative affect. This finding was not seen when the same women were shown an image on an inanimate object, suggesting that seeing edited pictures influences their self-esteem (Mask & Blanchard, 2011).

Another theory that may explain why women are more susceptible to social media’s impact on body image is the objectification theory, created by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Anne Roberts. The objectification theory expands upon previous feminist theory and “moves beyond the internalization of the thin ideal to describe eating disorders as a response to women’s feelings of powerlessness to control the systematic objectification of their bodies” (Calogero, 2012). The objectification theory states that from a young age, girls are taught to see themselves as they perceive an outside observer would view them “leading to constant body monitoring, shame, anxiety, disordered eating, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Fredrickson & Roberts,

1997; Borowsky et al., 2016). Viewing themselves in a third-person perspective is the “first psychological consequence to emerge among girls and women as a result of living in a sexually objectifying cultural milieu” (Calogero, 2012). Once these girls learn to objectify themselves and to place a greater value on how they think they look to others rather than on their personal opinion on their looks or abilities, their body becomes a “malleable, measurable, and controllable body” (Calogero, 2012). They now become susceptible to outside sources, such as social media, and learn to care more about the view of others than their own personal view of themselves.

The perception of the importance of their own views has been shown to have drastic effects on their self-worth perspective and their future goals. In one study, social media's effect on women's self-esteem is specifically studied. This study was conducted by asking a group of 339 women a set of questions about social media and its effect on their body image and self-worth. After these questions were asked, it was discovered that most women experience high levels of self-objectification, depression symptoms, and body, eating, and exercise comparison due to the content they see on social media (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019). In fact, in this study, “99.7%” (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019) of young women stated they experience some form of appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC) and a decrease in their self-worth after using social media. This extremely high prevalence of ASMC among adolescent and college-aged women shows the importance of furthering studies of ASMC and social media's impact on young women's mental health and well-being. Furthermore, their lack of self-worth caused by social media has a drastic effect on their future, including stopping them from pursuing careers in STEM (Daniels & Robnett, 2021). As seen in a study conducted by Elizabeth A. Daniels and Rachael D. Robnett, if girls spend an excessive amount of time on appearance-focused social media, there is a greater likelihood they will experience body shame and lowered self-esteem”

(Daniels & Robnett, 2021). The low self-esteem they feel as a result of body shame will translate to them having low self-worth in terms of their academic ability, specifically in areas of math and science. (Daniels & Robnett, 2021). Therefore, social media lowering the self-esteem of women is affecting their abilities to go into STEM-related jobs in the workplace, as well as their personal belief they are able to hold a job that requires higher intelligence.

Another feminist theory that may explain why women are at an increased risk for developing body image issues and eating disorders as a result of the over-sexualization of women seen in the media is the three-step self-objectification process. Originally theorized by Laura Vandebosch and Steven Eggermont, the three-step self-objectification process states that through the combination of “the internalization of beauty ideals” (Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012), “valuing appearance over competence” (Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012), and “body surveillance” (Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012), a person will engage in self-objectification. The internalization of beauty ideals “refers to the extent to which an individual considers the societal norms of size and appearance to be appropriate standards for his or her own size and appearance” (Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012). This more commonly occurs when people are surrounded by social media that is highly edited and sexualized, as it causes them to make comparisons between their own body and the edited body portrayed in the social media (Skowronski et al., 2021).

Furthermore, viewing sexualized images in the media will both, directly and indirectly, predict women valuing their appearance over their competence, which will then lead to increased body surveillance (Skowronski et al., 2021). Self-objectification is promoted in many aspects of social media, including through the use of dating apps as a way to start romantic relationships (Tufekci, 2008; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012). In dating apps, the profile picture can be

considered the most important aspect, thereby placing heavy importance on someone's appearance over their personality (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), and promoting sexual objectification. In addition, in research conducted, it was discovered that when women expose photos of themselves to the male gaze on these dating apps, they learn to "attach greater importance to their appearance and make them more conscious of their looks" (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Adolescents as an At-Risk Age Group

Adolescents are considered to be a particularly at-risk group for being affected by social media due to the number of changes that occur to their bodies and minds during adolescence, and their increase in social media usage during adolescence (McLean et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2015). Adolescence is a critical time of physical and mental growth, and the period of puberty in adolescence is a specifically important time in a person's development because there is rapid growth and development in all of the body systems (Viner et al., 2015). Specifically, puberty "results in very rapid somatic growth, brain development, sexual maturation and attainment of reproductive capacity" (Viner et al., 2015), as well and completes the maturation of many organ systems, including the central nervous system (Viner et al., 2015). In addition, there is a sudden psychosocial change where the dependent child will transition from reliance on their caregivers to stronger reliance on peers and intimate partner relationships (Viner et al., 2015). The volatility of relationships and lack of adaptive coping skills during the time of adolescence may contribute to the fact that the onset of about 75% of mental health disorders occurs during the time of adolescence up until 25 years of age (Viner et al., 2015; Kessler et al., 2005). Due to the changes that occur in the brain during adolescence, young men and women become more at risk to the negative side effects of social media, including having a higher

susceptibility to developing disordered eating behaviors, specifically restricting, bingeing, and purging (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). In addition, vomiting and bulimic tendencies are more common during adolescence due to the pressure put on adolescents to be thin by social media (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Rodgers et al., 2020).

Adolescents are also considered to be a high-risk group due to their lack of self-regulatory ability, their likelihood to experience FOMO, or the fear of missing out, and nomophobia, or the fear of being without social and mobile phone connectivity (Buda et al., 2021; Bhattacharya et al., 2019). As a result of the limited ability to self-regulate, many adolescents frequently experience difficulty sleeping, dissatisfaction with their own life, a poor perception of their sleep quality, and lower levels of physical activity (Buda et al., 2021). These negative qualities are experienced more frequently by girls and the decrease in physical activity due to social media causes a more critical view of one's body (Buda et al., 2021). Conversely, in adolescent boys, social media has been theorized to increase physical activity, although still having a negative impact on their body image (Buda et al., 2021). This difference can potentially be attributed to the emphasis on the "thin-ideal" for girls and the societal desire for boys to be muscular, otherwise known as the "muscular-ideal" (Skowronski et al., 2021).

Both sexes experience a delay in sleep onset and a reduction in sleep hours due to social media use. Specifically, late-night social media use "directly causes emotional or cognitive arousal causing disturbances in sleep" (Buda et al., 2019). For optimal health and functioning, adolescents require at least 9–9.35 h of sleep per night (Alfonsi et al., 2020). If adolescents do not get the minimum hours of sleep, they are at a higher risk of many different physical problems including "metabolic dysregulation and cardiovascular morbidity" (Alfonsi et al., 2020), "an increase in body weight, a higher risk of obesity" (Alfonsi et al., 2020), "increase in blood

pressure and high cardiometabolic risk” (Alfonsi et al., 2020), and somatic outcomes such as “headache, persistent fatigue, and lower back, neck, and abdominal pain” (Alfonsi et al., 2020). In addition to these physical effects of not getting enough sleep due to social media, there are also many neurocognitive effects including memory loss, attention deficit, and a decrease in executive functions (Alfonsi et al., 2020). Finally, adolescents who are sleep-deprived as a result of social media are at a higher risk of poor academic performance and dropping out of school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), bullying, unsafe sexual activity, physical violence, and its use is attributed to being the leading cause of motor vehicle accidents for the adolescent population (Alfonsi et al., 2020). All of these side effects of sleep deprivation caused by social media can also be considered causative factors of the development of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

A major problem in adolescent development is the high risk of mental illness. Due to the increase in social media usage in adolescent girls and boys in recent years, there have been associations with “predictive body image concerns and disordered body change behaviors” (Rodgers et al., 2020). Numerous studies have been conducted on social media's impact on adolescent body image and self-esteem by many different corporations and research facilities due to their apparent correlation. In one study conducted by the Girl Scouts, an online survey was sent out to over 1000 girls between the ages of 13 and 17. Through this survey, it was discovered that nine of every ten girls in the study expressed feeling pressure to look skinny by the fashion and media industries (Gallivan, 2014). Furthermore, in another study conducted by Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, in a study of 548 5th-12th grade girls, it was discovered that 69% of the participants stated that pictures in magazines influence their idea of a perfectly shaped body (Field et al., 1999), and 47% of the participants reported a

desire to lose weight after viewing magazine pictures with these “perfect bodies” (Field et al., 1999). These statistics emphasize how adolescents are an at-risk age group and can very easily be affected by social media because just by looking at edited and sexualized images in magazines, they began to evaluate their own bodies in reference to the ones seen in the magazine, thereby putting them at risk for depression and disordered eating (Rodgers et al., 2020).

One contributor to mental illness in the adolescent age group is sleep loss, as it has been connected to causing increased suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, an increase in risk-taking behavior including substance abuse, and tobacco use, illicit drug and marijuana use, and an increase in alcohol consumption, as well as a depressed mood and lower self-esteem (Alfonsi et al., 2020). Low self-esteem and body image concerns are causative of each other, as it has been discussed that the risk for body dissatisfaction is elevated due to a negative affect. This is because when an adolescent experiences both depressive symptoms and low self-esteem with negative processing bias, their perception of themselves will be inconsistent with what they view as socially acceptable, thereby contributing to their low self-worth (Rodgers et al., 2020).

Social Media’s Effect on Male Body Image

When researching social media’s impact on body image and disordered eating in young people, finding statistics and studies on males is particularly difficult because issues with body image and disordered eating are less researched among males (Rodgers et al., 2020; Skowronski et al., 2021). There is such a disparity between data about disordered eating among girls and information about disordered eating in boys that many scholars and researchers have been pushing for more research on social media and its specific effect on males, and for more studies to include a male sample (Skowronski et al., 2021). Although there is a lack of research on the

effect of the sexualization of men in social media on young people, studies have shown that between one-quarter and one-third of all those struggling with an eating disorder are males (Frank, 2021). Furthermore, due to the increase in pressure for boys to adhere to the “muscular-ideal” and “to be muscular and look sexy” (Skowronski et al., 2021) as a result of an increase in sexualized images of men in the media, specifically on Instagram in recent decades, the rate of disordered eating traits and behaviors is increasing at a more rapid rate in men than in women (Frank, 2021; Skowronski et al., 2021).

The muscular-ideal is particularly common in contemporary Western social media, as Western appearance ideals include a fixation on thinness and leanness, but also muscularity as aspects of appearance ideals in boys (Rodgers et al., 2020). As muscularity and weight are seen as more masculine traits, in one study, it was revealed that girls were more hesitant to reveal their BMI than boys, and boys were more comfortable revealing their BMI due to the pressure on girls to be thin, and the pressure on boys to be muscular (Rodgers et al., 2020). However, although boys were more comfortable discussing their BMI than girls when surveyed, BMI was associated with body dissatisfaction in boys in addition to depressive symptoms and low self-esteem, (Rodgers et al., 2020).

Western culture, in particular, places a strong emphasis on male muscularity and, oftentimes, directly correlates muscularity to sexual attractiveness and the probability that a male will succeed in life (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). In media, several different stereotypes about men are promoted, including the mocking of overweight men by saying they lack sexual appeal, and through promoting the idea that “boys without any sexual experience are ‘uncool’ regardless of their other capabilities or characteristics” (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). By viewing this type of content on social media, boys are taught that their physical appearance and

sexual reputation give them value over their personal achievements and personality (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). In addition, it is very common on social media that major platforms will promote different tips to change one's personal appearance to fit the ideal in order to increase sexual and romantic success (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). The promotion of this unrealistic, extremely muscular body type for men as the norm has the potential to cause eating disorders and body image issues in men (Victoria State Government Department of Health, 2021).

The promotion of the muscular-ideal in men may lead to “muscularity-focused body image disturbance” (Parent, 2013) or muscle dysmorphia. If a man presents with this illness, then they are susceptible to a myriad of comorbidities that are associated with attempting to achieve the muscular ideal. Some of these comorbidities include low self-esteem, relationship difficulties, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, anxiety, depression, financial strain due to the cost of many exercise supplements and gym memberships, academic difficulties, fatigue, and decreased athletic performance (Parent, 2013). All of these symptoms may be treated with psychotherapy, however, many men are not inclined to go to a provider due to the normalization of their desired body type in the media (Parent, 2013).

Another barrier to research on eating disorder prevalence in men is that the clinical symptoms may present themselves differently than they would in a woman. In men, some common symptoms of eating disorders are “excessive focus on and time spent exercising, rigidity around eating rituals, eating large amounts of food, going to the bathroom in the middle of meals or right after, refusing to eat certain food groups, having unusual behaviors around food (cutting food into small pieces, pushing food around the plate), obsessively reading nutrition information or counting calories, constantly weighing himself or looking in the mirror,

[and] avoiding or withdrawing from social gatherings involving food” (Frank, 2021). Many of these symptoms are directly related to the promotion of the muscular-ideal on social media because boys are being pressured into becoming more muscular and lean, and the symptoms of eating disorders for men, specifically, excessively exercising, reflect the desire to become more muscular. In addition, men exercising excessively is praised on social media, so if a boy begins to exercise multiple times a day for extended periods of time, it may not be seen by the public as an eating disorder due to the normality of exercise on social media (Frank, 2021).

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to explore different feminist theories to analyze social media's effect on body image, mental health, and the development of eating disorders in young people, through the examination of the adolescent age group, the societal normalization of oversexualized and unrealistic body types on social media, and the gendered etiology of body image and study of eating disorders (Borowsky et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2020; Vadenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Vadenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). From the discoveries about social media made in the paper, there are many considerations to be made in future research. One example of a consideration that can be made is the importance of finding “intervention programs that should target boys and girls alike and take gendered preferences for sexualized media content into account” (Skowronski et al., 2021). By utilizing effective intervention, social media's effect of creating a disturbed body image in young people may be lessened, and the prevalence of eating disorders may be reduced. Some ways to implement prevention of eating disorders caused by social media are to implement eating disorder prevention programs in schools where the primary goals are “to develop critical thinking abilities, challenge the glorification of thinness, develop a healthy body and self-image, increase

self-confidence and autonomy with peers, improve communication skills, and learn how to effectively use media for the promotion of healthy body image messages" (Bardick et al., 2004). Through the promotion of these techniques in adolescent schools, prevention will occur at the appropriate time in their lives and will also equip them with the skills necessary to not believe they need to look a certain way because of what is promoted in the media (Bardick et al., 2004; McLean et al., 2015).

A second and final consideration that needs to be made is that more studies need to be conducted on the impact of social media on men and boys, as well as generally studying men with eating disorders as well. However, in order to do this, the stigma around men having body image issues needs to be decreased (Sklar, 2017). This stigma needs to be reduced because even when men acknowledge that they have an eating disorder or body image issues, they are generally not willing to participate in psychotherapy for their illness (Parent, 2013). In addition, many men are reluctant to attend therapy due to the "feminine" stigma about expressing emotions (Parent, 2013). Therefore, a future consideration could be other possible treatment options for men suffering from eating disorders. In addition, there needs to be more research on treatment options for men with eating disorders due to the current stigmas associated with men's mental health (Parent, 2013).

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