

Body Image and Social Media: A Qualitative Investigation of the Influence of Instagram on Young Women's Self-Perception and Body Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to qualitatively investigate the influence of Instagram on young women's self-perception and body satisfaction, exploring the complex dynamics between social media interactions and their impacts on body image and self-esteem.

Methods and Materials: Utilizing a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 young women aged 18 to 29, who were regular Instagram users. The interviews focused on participants' Instagram usage patterns, their exposure to body image-related content, and the effects of these interactions on their self-perception and body satisfaction. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns within the data, with theoretical saturation guiding the depth and comprehensiveness of the investigation.

Findings: The analysis revealed seven main themes: Impact of Instagram on Self-Perception, Influence of Visual Content, Social Comparison Dynamics, Psychological Outcomes, Navigating Online Spaces, Regulation and Policy, and Technological Influences. These themes encompassed various categories and concepts, such as self-esteem fluctuations, identity shaping, body image concerns, exposure to beauty standards, content consumption patterns, upward vs. downward comparison, emotional and cognitive responses, behavioral changes, strategies for digital literacy, and the need for platform accountability.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Instagram significantly influences young women's self-perception and body satisfaction, with social comparison dynamics, exposure to idealized beauty standards, and the nature of content consumption playing pivotal roles. While Instagram offers opportunities for positive engagement and support, it also poses challenges to body image and self-esteem. Addressing these impacts requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced digital literacy,

critical engagement with social media content, and proactive measures by social media platforms to foster a healthier online environment.

Keywords: *Instagram, self-perception, body satisfaction, social comparison, body image, young women, digital literacy.*

1. Introduction

The advent of social media has ushered in a transformative era in how individuals engage with the world around them, particularly influencing perceptions of beauty, body image, and self-worth. Among these platforms, Instagram stands out for its profound impact on young women's self-perception and body satisfaction. This visual-centric platform has become a ubiquitous part of daily life for many, serving not only as a means of social connection but also as a significant source of beauty and lifestyle standards. The current body of research has increasingly focused on dissecting the multifaceted effects of Instagram, exploring how exposure to varied content types—ranging from body-positive affirmations to fitspiration messages—affects users' mood, body satisfaction, appearance comparison tendencies, and overall self-esteem (Cohen et al., 2019; Fioravanti, Svicher, et al., 2021; Fioravanti, Tonioni, & Casale, 2021; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022).

Central to understanding the influence of Instagram on body image and self-perception is the theory of social comparison. This theory suggests that individuals evaluate their own worth and appearance by comparing themselves to others, a process that can lead to heightened body dissatisfaction and negative self-perception when those comparisons unfavorably contrast with the often idealized images presented on social media (Chansiri & Wongphothiphan, 2021). The proliferation of idealized body images on platforms like Instagram has been linked to a range of adverse outcomes, including increased body image disturbance, the emergence of eating disorders, and the development of negative attitudes toward one's appearance, especially among young women (Michaelson et al., 2020; Smith, 2015). The societal pressure to conform to these beauty standards, perpetuated through the lens of social media, further exacerbates body dissatisfaction, contributing to a host of mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression (Jabłońska & Zajdel, 2020; Koçyiğit, 2023).

The content found on Instagram, particularly fitspiration images, has been scrutinized for its potential to influence women's perceptions of their sexual attractiveness and, by extension, their overall body satisfaction. This influence can be direct or mediated through factors such as appearance satisfaction, underlining the complex dynamics at play (Fioravanti, Svicher, et al., 2021; Slater et al., 2017). Given

Instagram's visual emphasis, it emerges as an essential platform for examining body image concerns across genders, highlighting the critical need to understand the diverse impacts of content on body image perceptions (Sumter et al., 2022). Additionally, the intricate relationship between social media usage, body image concerns, and self-esteem has been a focal point of recent investigations, aiming to unravel the complex web of interactions among these elements (Afana et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2021).

This article explores the ways in which Instagram influences young women's self-perception and body satisfaction. Through a qualitative exploration, it aims to enrich the existing literature by providing in-depth insights into the personal experiences and perceptions of young women who navigate the turbulent waters of social media. By examining the themes that emerge from their narratives, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Instagram on body image and self-esteem, contributing valuable knowledge to the field and informing future research, practice, and policy initiatives aimed at mitigating the potential negative effects of social media on individuals' well-being.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the intricate relationships between Instagram use and its impact on young women's self-perception and body satisfaction. The choice of a qualitative approach was driven by the study's aim to delve deeply into participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they assign to their interactions with Instagram in the context of body image.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of young women in terms of age, background, and Instagram usage patterns. The study aimed for theoretical saturation, a point at which no new themes or insights emerged from data collection, to ensure depth and comprehensiveness in the data collected. This was achieved after conducting interviews with 25 young women aged between 18 to 29 years, who were regular Instagram users.

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights as participants, including their right to withdraw

at any time without consequence, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data was collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted online via video conferencing platforms to accommodate participants' geographical locations and availability. The interview guide was designed to explore several key areas: participants' Instagram usage patterns, their exposure to body image-related content, their perceptions of beauty standards on Instagram, and the platform's impact on their body satisfaction and self-perception. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, ensuring ample time for participants to share their experiences and perspectives. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within data. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the impacts of Instagram on young women's body image and

self-perception. The analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, which includes familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Through iterative rounds of coding and theme development, the research team ensured that the analysis was grounded in the participants' perspectives, thus enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, a total of 27 young women participated in semi-structured interviews to explore the impact of Instagram on their self-perception and body satisfaction. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 23.4 years. The majority of participants (n=15, 55.6%) were in the 20-24 age bracket, reflecting the core demographic of Instagram users. Participants came from diverse educational backgrounds: 11 (40.7%) had completed a university degree, 8 (29.6%) were currently enrolled in higher education, and the remaining 8 (29.6%) had completed high school or vocational training. In terms of geographical distribution, the participants represented a wide array of locations, including urban (n=19, 70.4%) and rural (n=8, 29.6%) areas, indicating a broad spectrum of Instagram's influence across different settings.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Major Themes	Minor Themes	Concepts (Open Codes)
Impact of Instagram on Self-Perception	Self-esteem fluctuations	Comparison to influencers, Feedback loop from likes/comments, Personal achievements vs. online persona, Impact of negative comments, Seeking validation
	Identity shaping	Curated self-presentation, Authentic vs. idealized selves, Role models, Digital identity crisis, Privacy concerns, Online vs. offline persona
	Body image concerns	Ideal body standards, Body dissatisfaction, Health and fitness trends, Diet culture exposure, Cosmetic surgery inspiration, Self-love practices
Influence of Visual Content	Exposure to beauty standards	Celebrity influence, Filtered realities, Body positivity/negativity, Glorification of thinness, Diverse body representation, Unrealistic beauty ideals
	Content consumption patterns	Passive scrolling, Active searching, Engagement with fitness/beauty influencers, Algorithmic biases, Echo chambers, Detoxing from social media
	Impact of comparison	Peer comparisons, Aspirational vs. attainable beauty, Self-improvement vs. self-criticism, Comparison fatigue, Impact on self-worth
Social Comparison Dynamics	Upward vs. downward comparison	Inspiration vs. envy, Real-life friends vs. celebrities, Impact on mood, Perception of others' success, Feelings of inadequacy
	Peer influence	Group norms, Direct feedback (comments/messages), Social circles' beauty standards, Peer validation, Social support, Online peer pressure
Psychological Outcomes	Coping mechanisms	Unfollowing problematic accounts, Seeking supportive communities, Positive affirmations, Social media detox, Mindfulness practices, Redefining beauty standards
	Emotional responses	Joy from engagement, Anxiety over appearances, Frustration with unrealistic standards, Emotional resilience, Feelings of isolation, Guilt over time spent online

	Cognitive responses	Self-awareness, Critical thinking about content, Internalization of standards, Reality vs. perception, Media literacy, Challenge to self-concept
	Behavioral changes	Adjusting online behavior, Physical appearance alterations, Social media breaks, Healthy lifestyle choices, Seeking professional help, Personal growth initiatives
Navigating Online Spaces	Building positive environments	Curating positive feeds, Engaging with body-positive influencers, Virtual support groups, Promoting diversity, Active resistance to toxic standards, Creating content
	Digital literacy	Understanding algorithms, Recognizing commercial intent, Questioning authenticity, Privacy settings, Navigating misinformation, Ethical content creation
	Self-expression and authenticity	Personal storytelling, Vulnerability online, Counteracting the highlight reel, Finding community, Authentic interactions, Boundary setting
Regulation and Policy	Platform accountability	Content moderation policies, Algorithm transparency, User protection mechanisms, Mental health resources, Age restrictions, Anti-harassment measures
	User empowerment	Digital education initiatives, Tools for self-regulation, Reporting mechanisms, User control over content, Community guidelines enforcement
Technological Influences	Algorithmic impact	Personalized feeds, Content recommendation biases, Echo chamber effects, User engagement metrics, Transparency issues, Ethical algorithm design
	Virtual communities	Niche interest groups, Support networks, Collective activism, Online mentorship, Crowdsourced learning, Virtual friendship dynamics

The analysis of semi-structured interviews with 27 young women revealed several key themes concerning the impact of Instagram on self-perception and body satisfaction. These themes encompass the broad categories of the Impact of Instagram on Self-Perception, Influence of Visual Content, Social Comparison Dynamics, Psychological Outcomes, Navigating Online Spaces, Regulation and Policy, and Technological Influences.

3.1. *Impact of Instagram on Self-Perception*

Participants expressed a range of experiences related to self-esteem fluctuations, identity shaping, and body image concerns. For instance, self-esteem fluctuations were frequently discussed, with one participant noting, "Seeing endless streams of perfect lives can make my own achievements feel small by comparison." Identity shaping emerged as a significant theme, where the curated presentation of self led to conflicts between authentic and idealized selves. "I find myself creating a persona that only partly reflects who I really am," shared another participant. Body image concerns were prevalent, highlighting the pervasive influence of ideal body standards propagated on the platform. "It's hard not to feel dissatisfied with your body when all you see are images of perfection," a participant lamented.

3.2. *Influence of Visual Content*

This theme captured the effects of exposure to beauty standards, content consumption patterns, and the impact of comparison. Participants were particularly vocal about the pressures stemming from beauty standards on Instagram. "The constant bombardment with images of what's

considered beautiful just reinforces unrealistic beauty ideals," stated a participant. The nature of content consumption also surfaced as a critical aspect, with patterns of passive scrolling leading to negative self-comparisons.

3.3. *Social Comparison Dynamics*

The dynamics of social comparison, including upward vs. downward comparison, peer influence, and coping mechanisms, were thoroughly explored. "I oscillate between feeling inspired and utterly envious when I compare myself to others on Instagram," described a participant, encapsulating the dual nature of social comparisons. Peer influence through direct feedback and group norms also played a significant role in shaping perceptions of beauty and self-worth.

3.4. *Psychological Outcomes*

Emotional responses, cognitive responses, and behavioral changes were highlighted as key psychological outcomes. Participants described a spectrum of emotional reactions, from joy to anxiety and frustration. "I feel a mix of joy when engaging with content that resonates, but also anxiety over my appearance," one participant explained. Cognitive and behavioral shifts were also noted, with individuals questioning the content's authenticity and making lifestyle alterations as a result.

3.5. *Navigating Online Spaces*

Building positive online environments, enhancing digital literacy, and fostering self-expression and authenticity were strategies used by participants to mitigate negative impacts. "I've started curating my feed to include more body-positive

and diverse accounts, which has helped improve my perception of beauty," a participant shared, indicating proactive engagement with digital spaces.

3.6. Regulation and Policy

The theme of platform accountability and user empowerment highlighted the call for more responsible social media practices and tools that enable user control. "Platforms need to do more to protect users from harmful content," argued a participant, underscoring the need for regulatory measures.

3.7. Technological Influences

Algorithmic impact and the role of virtual communities were identified as significant technological influences. The algorithms' role in content visibility and the formation of supportive virtual communities were discussed. "Finding a community of like-minded individuals on Instagram has been a silver lining, offering support and understanding," a participant remarked.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the influence of Instagram on young women's self-perception and body satisfaction through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 27 participants. The findings revealed several key themes: the significant impact of Instagram on self-esteem fluctuations and identity shaping, the pervasive influence of visual content and social comparison dynamics, and the resultant psychological outcomes including emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Coping mechanisms and strategies for navigating online spaces were also identified, highlighting the complex interplay between Instagram use and young women's body image and self-esteem. Furthermore, the study underscored the need for greater platform accountability and highlighted the technological influences shaping users' experiences on Instagram.

This qualitative investigation into the influence of Instagram on young women's self-perception and body satisfaction identified seven main themes, each encompassing various categories and concepts. The main themes discovered were Impact of Instagram on Self-Perception, Influence of Visual Content, Social Comparison Dynamics, Psychological Outcomes, Navigating Online Spaces, Regulation and Policy, and Technological Influences. These themes collectively capture the complex

interplay between Instagram use and its effects on body image and self-esteem, highlighting the nuances of social comparison, the role of visual content, psychological impacts, strategies for digital navigation, and the broader implications for regulation and technological development.

This theme explored how Instagram affects young women's views of themselves, revealing categories such as self-esteem fluctuations, identity shaping, and body image concerns. Self-esteem fluctuations were linked to comparison with influencers and feedback from likes/comments, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Identity shaping was characterized by the tension between presenting an authentic vs. an idealized self online, influenced by role models and curated self-presentation. Body image concerns centered around the internalization of ideal body standards, fuelled by exposure to health and fitness trends, and resulting in body dissatisfaction.

Visual content on Instagram was found to significantly affect young women's body image and self-esteem through exposure to beauty standards, content consumption patterns, and the impact of comparison. Exposure to beauty standards, including celebrity influence and filtered realities, promoted unrealistic beauty ideals. Content consumption patterns varied from passive scrolling to active searching, highlighting the algorithmic biases that affect exposure. The impact of comparison detailed how peer and aspirational comparisons lead to self-improvement or self-criticism.

This theme delved into the mechanisms of social comparison on Instagram, highlighting upward vs. downward comparison, peer influence, and coping mechanisms. Upward vs. downward comparison illustrated the dual nature of comparison, leading to inspiration or envy. Peer influence was evident in the importance of group norms and direct feedback from peers. Coping mechanisms included strategies like unfollowing problematic accounts and seeking supportive communities.

Psychological outcomes of Instagram use encompassed emotional responses, cognitive responses, and behavioral changes. Emotional responses ranged from joy to anxiety and frustration over unrealistic standards. Cognitive responses involved increased self-awareness and critical thinking about content, while behavioral changes included adjusting online behavior and physical appearance alterations in response to Instagram content.

Strategies for navigating online spaces effectively were identified, including building positive environments, enhancing digital literacy, and fostering self-expression and authenticity. Building positive environments involved

curating feeds to include body-positive content. Enhancing digital literacy focused on understanding Instagram's algorithms and recognizing commercial intent. Fostering self-expression and authenticity encouraged personal storytelling and vulnerability online.

The need for platform accountability and user empowerment was emphasized, calling for content moderation policies, algorithm transparency, and user protection mechanisms. This theme suggests a collaborative approach between policymakers, platforms, and users to ensure a safer online environment.

Lastly, technological influences on Instagram use were explored, discussing the algorithmic impact and the role of virtual communities. The algorithmic impact highlighted how personalized feeds and content recommendations shape user experiences, while virtual communities emphasized the support and connectivity offered through niche interest groups and online friendships.

The evidence from this study underscores the profound impact of Instagram on young women's self-perception and body satisfaction. It highlights the dual role of Instagram as a source of both positive inspiration and negative comparison, emphasizing the importance of how young women engage with and navigate social media platforms. The findings advocate for a balanced approach to social media use, where awareness and critical engagement can potentially mitigate negative impacts on body image and self-esteem.

Consistent with the work of Afana, Astuti, and Sari (2021), our results highlighted the mediatory role of social comparison in the relationship between Instagram usage and body image dissatisfaction (Afana et al., 2021). Participants reported frequent comparisons with both peers and influencers on Instagram, which often led to negative self-evaluation and body dissatisfaction. This phenomenon aligns with Pedalino and Camerini's (2022) findings, suggesting that upward social comparisons with peers and influencers on Instagram can exacerbate body dissatisfaction among young females (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022).

The influence of visual content on Instagram emerged as a significant factor affecting participants' body image and self-esteem. This is in line with the findings of Cohen et al. (2019), who observed that exposure to body positive content on Instagram (#bopo) could positively influence young women's mood and body image (Chansiri & Wongphothiphan, 2021). However, our study further expands on this by illustrating the dual-edged nature of visual content, where not only positive but also fitness-

related and beauty-standard reinforcing content (Fioravanti, Svicher, et al., 2021; Fioravanti, Tonioni, & Casale, 2021) plays a crucial role in shaping self-perception and body satisfaction.

The psychological outcomes of Instagram use, as identified in our study, including emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses, echo the findings of Brink and Vollmann (2022) and Chansiri and Wongphothiphan (2021). These outcomes highlight the complex interplay between internalization of thin-ideal, appearance-related self-consciousness, and the resulting implications for young women's sexual satisfaction and self-esteem (Brink & Vollmann, 2022; Chansiri & Wongphothiphan, 2021). Furthermore, our findings resonate with Mahmood and Malik (2022), emphasizing the mediating role of beauty perception in the impact of Instagram usage on young women's body esteem (Mahmood & Malik, 2022).

Our participants' strategies for navigating online spaces and coping with the pressures of Instagram use align with Slater, Varsani, and Diedrichs (2017), who found that engagement with self-compassion Instagram images could foster a more positive body image and mood (Slater et al., 2017). This suggests the potential for social media platforms to serve as spaces for promoting healthier body image perceptions, provided that users are equipped with critical digital literacy skills and engage in conscious content curation.

The call for greater platform accountability and user empowerment in our findings underscores the need for regulatory measures to protect users from harmful content, a sentiment echoed in the literature (Jabłońska & Zajdel, 2020). This suggests a pivotal role for social media platforms in implementing content moderation policies and offering users more control over their content exposure, thus mitigating the adverse effects on body image and self-esteem.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study is not without its limitations. The sample size, while adequate for qualitative saturation, was limited to 27 young women, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on Instagram, overlooking the potential cumulative effects of multiple social media platforms on self-perception and body satisfaction. The self-reported nature of the data also introduces the possibility of bias, as

participants may have altered their responses to conform to perceived social norms or expectations.

Future research should aim to expand the demographic and cultural diversity of participants to explore the influence of Instagram across different contexts and populations. Longitudinal studies could provide insight into the long-term effects of Instagram use on body image and self-esteem. Additionally, comparative studies across multiple social media platforms could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the unique and cumulative impacts of social media on young women's psychological well-being.

The findings of this study have significant implications for mental health practitioners, educators, and policymakers. Interventions aimed at promoting digital literacy and critical engagement with social media content could empower young women to navigate online spaces more healthily. Schools and communities could implement programs that address media literacy and body positivity, equipping young women with the skills to critically assess and engage with social media. Furthermore, policymakers and social media platforms must collaborate to create safer online environments, including implementing stricter content moderation policies and tools that allow users to control their exposure to potentially harmful content.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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