Social Media and Women: A Qualitative Study

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Journal of Beauty in American Culture 2015; 1:1
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The purpose of this study is to gather data on social media and the influences it has on women’s perspective of beauty. I collected original data by conducting three in-person interviews with females, ages 18-24, who use social media daily. During the analysis phase of the research, I coded each theme for patterns in the interviews. I found that social media do, in fact, alter women’s perception of beauty. The previous research focuses on peers, family, and friends as main influences but I have found that social media combines all three influences into one powerful influence. I found that although social media have a strong influence on how the participants perceive beauty, they are still accepting of their own bodies and do not allow social media to dictate their lives.

Key Words: Body Image, Social Media, Beauty, Instagram, and Women.

Introduction

Women are constantly bombarded by influences in their everyday lives: their friends, families, peers, what they see on television, even the ads in magazines, although impersonal, have a large impact on the way women see themselves. Extensive research on these influences has been done by Jessica Alleva et al., Cate Curtis and Cushing Loomans, Christopher J. Ferguson et al., Unner Gudnadóttir and Ragna Gardarsdóttir, Lilac Lev-Ari, Inbar Baumgarten-Katz, and Ada H. Zohar and others. Although this research has lots of information on influences of body dissatisfaction, little research has been done so far on one of society’s main outlets and the impact it has on its users: social media. This gap in the research led me to ask my own research question: Do social media affect the way women perceive beauty? I wanted to focus on a demographic that is very in tune with social media, use it daily, and consider it a major part of their lives. I found that although social media have a strong influence on how the participants perceive beauty, they are still accepting of their own bodies and do not allow it to dictate their lives.
**Survey of Scholarship**

The purpose of this survey of scholarship is to synthesize some of the research that addresses the causes of body dissatisfaction. Though some researchers would argue that body image dissatisfaction comes from an internal struggle, other research indicates that peers, family and friends, and a multitude of other external factors such as materialistic values and media influence young women in their body dissatisfaction. While they may disagree on the exact causation, they all agree that body image dissatisfaction is prevalent.

Every article researched for this survey of scholarship addresses the pressing topic of body dissatisfaction and its impact on young women. Maxwell and Cole as quoted in Curtis and Loomans define body dissatisfaction as “the inconsistency between how a person perceives their body and how they would like their ideal body to be” (39). In their research, Cate Curtis and Cushla Loomans found that body dissatisfaction and the desire to change part of one’s body was a daily occurrence that began years prior to the study for the 18-25 year old participants (45). Jessica Alleva et al.’s research found that young women tend to focus on their unattractive qualities, leading to body image dissatisfaction. Going along with this idea, Curtis and Loomis found that women often perceive themselves as heavier than they realistically are because of this tendency found by Alleva et al. Although body image dissatisfaction is commonly found, not all women experience it; some overweight women do not experience body image dissatisfaction, and many underweight women do experience it (Alleva et al.). The desperate need to look and feel a certain way takes a toll on women as they strive for this lofty idea of perfection. Many studies link body dissatisfaction to dietary restraints, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and low self esteem (Curtis and Loomans; Gudnadóttir and Gardarsdóttir; Ferguson et al.). While most of the authors of the analyzed research agree that body image dissatisfaction is common among young woman, they disagree on the causation.

Lots of the current research on body image dissatisfaction centers on the question of how peers impact the way women see themselves. Lev-Ari Lilac, Inbar Baumgarten-Katz, and Ada H. Zohar found that women base much of their self-worth on what others think and tend to compare their own bodies to others around them. Because thinness is the number one thing women compare, women generally choose someone who is thinner than themselves to compare with (Baumgarten-Katz, Lilac, Zohar). In their research, Alleva et al. asked their subjects to rate an image of their own bodies along with twenty-four other women’s with regard to the concept of “fat-thin.” They found that women with high tendencies for eating disorders rated other bodies to be thinner than their own. However, when they asked women with low tendencies for eating disorders to do the same thing, they rated other bodies no differently than their own (Alleva et al.). A study done by Baumgarten, Lilac, and Zohar using research assistants dressed either formally or frumpily found that when a woman is in a room with another woman who is dressed formally, she will have more body dissatisfaction than if she were in a room with a woman dressed frumpily. Through the experiment, the researchers found that peer influence is the strongest social causation of body dissatisfaction.

Another strong influence researchers analyzed is the influence peers, friends, and family members have on the way women see their bodies. According to Baumgarten-Katz, Lilac, and Zohar, women are more likely to compare themselves to what is near them than to a distant image of a model in a magazine. Generally focusing on their mother, sister, and friends, women
learn to be dissatisfied with their bodies: friends being more influential than sisters and sisters more so than mothers. A family’s focus on appearance correlates to a young women’s body dissatisfaction (Baumgarten-Katz, Lilac, and Zohar). Even infrequent negative comments from a mother, father, or sibling can be linked with the development of an eating disorder. On the other hand, a family that has knowledge and supports good nutrition can prevent body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Starting early on, a mother’s comments can permeate the way a young woman sees herself. Hearing her mother’s negative comments toward herself can cause the daughter to reflect that behavior and make negative comments about herself (Curtis and Loomans 52). When addressing their mother’s body images, most of the young women in the study opined that their mothers should not be concerned about their weight, but they did not extend that positive view to their own bodies (Curtis and Loomans 46).

The extensive research shows that peers, family, and friends are no the only impact on body dissatisfaction, materialism and media play a hand as well. Another influence found in the current research is the impact of society’s materialism. Walking through the toy aisle, children see unrealistic dolls and action figures portraying the perfect man. Without knowing any better, children begin to aspire to be like their dolls, turning their materialism into causation for body dissatisfaction. When their life revolves around materialistic items, woman have a strong desire to change their appearance and in turn change their behavior to achieve the appearance they desire (Gudnadóttir and Gardarsdóttir, 152). Another factor influencing young women today is media: television shows, magazines, and social media sites all play a hand in body dissatisfaction. In a study conducted regarding media, parent, or peer influence, media predicted body dissatisfaction whereas parent or peer criticism did not (Baumgarten-Katz, Lilac, Zohar). It is important to note these other influences are also important factors in the way women see themselves.

The current research indicates that there is not just one cause of body dissatisfaction and that simple, everyday factors can impact the way women perceive and compare bodies. Although the research reviewed here is extensive, it lacks information on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and the correlation these media may have to body dissatisfaction in women; more research is necessary to fully understand the way women use these media and let the contents influence their lives. The gap in the research has prompted me to conduct this qualitative study to learn more about whether or not social media plays a role in women’s body dissatisfaction.

Methods
In researching this topic, I collected data using interviews of people who have previous knowledge of social media and use it daily. All three participants were female college students, between the ages of 18-24, and used at least two social media sites on a daily bases. I conducted these interviews all on one day, back to back, in a private office room to ensure a quiet environment where the participants could comfortably answer the questions honestly. Each interview consisted of the same questions; the only variation in questions came from follow up questions that were prompted by the previous one. I asked questions surveying the participants’ uses of social media and how it affects their everyday choices. Some of the questions I asked were:
• Can you tell me your perception of beauty?
• Is there any thing about your body you like or dislike?
• Do you think that social media affects the way you, specifically, perceive beauty?
• Do you think that social media affects the way women across the United States perceive beauty?
• Everyone on social media has the ability to untag themselves from pictures, have ever you ever untagged yourself from a picture because you didn’t like the way it looked?
  If YES: What didn’t you like about yourself in the picture?
• Is it important to reach a certain number of likes on any given picture?
• How does the number of likes affect they way you feel about yourself?
• Have you ever taken down a picture because it did not receive enough likes?

Participants
Participants in this study were females, ages 18-24, who use at least two social media sites daily. All of the participants are current college students, attending school somewhere in the southern region of the United States of America. I chose females because they stereotypically relate to body dissatisfaction more so than men do. By choosing my participants using purposive sampling, I was able to obtain more data on women and the impact of social media specifically rather than the general causes of body dissatisfaction.

Procedures
In doing my qualitative research, I conducted three individual interviews. Based on my criteria, I asked my participants if they would be interested in doing an interview. Upon getting their consent, I conducted and recorded the interviews. All of my interviews were done face-to-face in a private room to ensure that my participants were comfortable enough to answer the questions to the fullest. The questions I used were specific to beauty and fashion, self-image, social media, and the combination of those things. I used these types of questions because it maximized the potential for new data on the subject.

Data Analysis
During each interview, I used a recording device to keep a log of exactly what each participant said. After conducting each interview, I listened to the full recording and transcribed it. Reading through the transcription a second time, I ensured its accuracy. After transcribing all of the interviews, I analyzed the transcripts and looked for patterns. I categorized these patterns under three over-arching themes, and then turned them into codes that included every smaller pattern that was relevant.

Results/Findings
The analysis of the data revealed three main patterns: (1) the uses and influence social media has on women, (2) the perspective that personality defines beauty, and (3) the concept of keeping up appearances online.

Influences
To participate in this study, each participant had to use at least two social media sites. During the interviews, each woman claimed to use at least three sites on a daily basis. Each one mentioned
using Instagram along with other sites such as Tumblr, Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook, and Youtube. Coding the data showed that the number of social media outlets they use each day correlates to how much influence it has on their lives.

Participants One and Three share a commonality in that they use social media outlets as a way to access new trends and shop. Both participants follow fashion blogs that they claim impact their fashion choices. Whether positively or negatively, they all agree that the media impact how the women view fashion. When asked what her favorite social media site was and why, here was Participant One’s response:

Well, there is this one. And she is this little fashion blogger--her name is Jane. And I like her because she has this fashion blog thingy for people who are 5’1 and under. So, uhm, most people don’t focus on short people clothes and style and she focused on how the fit is better and how to alter things to look better on short people. But also, she is super freaking smart and she lives in Boston. (78-82)

Among the other reasons they chose their respective sites as their favorites, both Participant One and Three stated that the social media they follow act as a motivational tool and inspiration. In her interview, Participant One said, “I think it has a pretty big influence cause it helps motivate me but it also helps me realize what goals are attainable like it helps me know what to strive for. Both fashion and fitness—but I’m too lazy for one of them” (62-64). For them, these accounts serve as a reminder, as they are scrolling through, to try to dress more like Jane, go do the abdominal workout, or keep up with the latest sorority event fashion.

Another pattern found in the research dealt with the certain trends each participant was attracted to and why. When focusing on specific trends, the participants were typically more attracted to the trends that accentuated parts of their bodies they liked. Both Participants One and Three stated that the part of their body that they disliked most was their butts, while Participant Two was quick to answer that she loved her butt. When it came time to answer a question regarding a current trend of having larger butts, Participant Three gave this answer:

Oh my gosh. I don’t know, like a 2. I’m still—I mean like I said, my butt is my least favorite part. I don’t know why I’m just-- I don’t know. I just don’t see why people love butts. I just don’t see the hype about butts. But if you have that butt and you love it, props to you! (528-531)

Participant One’s answer was similar in that she did not like her butt but recognized other girls who liked and followed this trend, while Participant Two fondly gave the trend a five stating, again, that she loved her butt and that is why she liked the trend.

The participants spoke on many other varying influences on social media such as celebrities, friends’ comments, and the type of girl who is posting. This indicates that there are many reasons women turn to social media for comparison and along with that, body dissatisfaction.
**Beauty Defines Personality**

When asked to define their perception of beauty, all three participants answered in a similar fashion. Overall, they said that beauty is something that comes from within; each pinpointed different specific traits that spoke to how adept one is at holding a conversation, how kind one is, how generous one is, and how good of a person one is. Summing up her definition of beauty, Participant Three said,

> Beauty is not on the outside it is on the inside. Okay, well, obviously you can look on the outside of someone and tell if they are beautiful but, pretty sure, we’ve both met tons of people who are beautiful on the outside and then you talk to them and it takes a completely different turn, cause I have that happen all the time. So I really think most of it comes from your personality and how you treat people and I don’t know, just having a kind heart. I guess. (378-383)

The participants did not limit the expectation of inner beauty to just women. Participant Three named, Josh Duhamel, a male celebrity, as someone who she considered beautiful. One of the reasons for her answer was the character he played in the movie *Safe Haven*. In a follow up question, Participant Three described his character as a kind, loving man with children.

On the other end of the spectrum, when asked what makes someone ugly all three of the participants address character traits before naming compromising physical traits; naming meanness, jealousy, and vindictiveness as their least favorite traits.

Although all three participants eventually named physical traits that they deemed unattractive, their first response was to name character traits that they found to be beautiful. The character traits meant more to them in the long run.

**Keeping Up Appearances**

The final pattern noted throughout the data was the way women use social media to create an appearance for themselves that may or may not be accurate. The participants talked about the glamour of social media and self-consciousness.

When asked the question, “Do you think that social media affects the way women across the United States perceive beauty?” All three women proceeding to answer similarly: they all spoke to the idea that social media accounts tend to only show the glamour side of everything. Participant Three went on to say,

> Uhm. Definitely. Like I said last time, you always put up the good stuff. You don’t really see the bad so you always think someone is prettier than you and you always think they’re more beautiful and they have this and they have that, so it makes you feel less about yourself. (438-441)

They all agreed that glamour and surplus images of perfection make the onlookers feel less good about themselves and increase the feeling that they need to change. The strongest drive the
participants felt when maintaining their appearance on social media was self-consciousness. This feeling caused embarrassment and lack of confidence. Participant Three said this about self-consciousness,

I guess like the people you see who are pretty but they are like obviously self-conscious so they like over do it. So like the girls that have on way too much make up and completely bleach out their hair and it’s just like, you could be so pretty but you’re just so self conscious that you have to over do everything and it just makes you look like so much worse. (405-409)

The three participants agreed that self-consciousness leads to over analyzing the way others judge appearances, that in turn leads to more self-consciousness. All participants said that getting comments, favorites, and likes makes them feel happy and good about themselves, but only Participant Three noted that it is embarrassing to get a low number of likes on a picture. She said, “Oh no, honestly its not that important but it kinda sucks if you put up a picture and only get like 12 likes. You want to have at least like over 20. Otherwise it just looks like you don’t have friends” (456-458). This comment, along with the other participants’ comments that they at least paid attention to feedback on their post indicate that they do turn to social media for reassurance about her self-image.

**Discussion & Analysis**

The results above make it clear that social media is one of the most powerful influences on young women’s perceptions of what makes a person beautiful and how beautiful they are themselves. Through Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and the countless other social media platforms, the powerful influences identified by previous researchers are combined and at young women’s fingertips through friends’ comments, family status updates, and peers posts. As Participant One indicates, the influence is not all negative: the fashion account she follows for women under 5’1 is a positive way to spread body acceptance even when high fashion aims at women over 5’5.

Although women often find negative pressure in social media, the participants highlighted certain ways social media can be used for good as well. The most common pattern I saw throughout the interviews was each woman defining beauty as something that can be found within. They all made it clear that personality and character were more important than physical characteristics. The parallel Participant Three made with what she found beautiful in a man was interesting because her expectations were the same for both men and women: someone with a kind heart. With social media’s emphasis on looks and physical beauty, this suggests that although it is a big influence, social media does not totally dictate what traits are important to women. In the last pattern, each participant said that they were not directly impacted by the responses from their friends and peers on social media, but their responses show otherwise: they felt happy when someone comments on their pictures and embarrassed when they do not get enough likes. This pattern indicates that women do pay attention to the comments, favorites, and likes they receive, for better or for worse.

These patterns all point to the idea that social media do impact young women’s perceptions of beauty. Through this research, I was able to pick out a specific, potential influence and find out if
It impacted women: I found that social media does influence women’s perception of beauty, but it does not always necessarily do it in a bad way. The previous articles focus on peers, family and friends, materialism, and the way they influence women’s body images. On social media, all these influences are present; therefore, it also makes a very strong impact on women and the way they perceive beauty.

**Evaluation & Conclusion**

While all of the participants in my study agreed that social media is a big influence across the nation, they did not all initially believe it made a great impact on their own lives. The research told otherwise. Each girl, whether negatively or positively, was affected by social media and its many portals. Together, the participants indicated that although the levels and ways may differ, social media has impacted their perceptions of beauty. This research is significant because of the number of women who use social media and the amount of time they spend on these sites continues to increase.

If I were to conduct this experiment again, I would definitely consider revising the questions used. Although I was able to get interesting answers that gave me insight into my question, I feel that I would have benefited from stronger, more focused questions. Also, while conducting my survey of scholarship, I would find more information that pertains to specific media outlets as influences rather than the social influences women have. Although this study provided more insight into whether or not women’s perception of beauty is influenced by social media, more research must be done in order to provide an answer to this question.
References


Participant Two. Personal Interview. 16 July 2015.


Appendix A

1. Can you tell me your perception of beauty?

2. What makes someone attractive in your eyes?

3. Can you think of a celebrity who is beautiful, what is beautiful about them?

4. What do you perceive as ugly?

5. Is there any thing about your body you like or dislike?

6. Do you have any social media accounts?

7. How many?
   a) What do you look at most often?
   b) Why is that your favorite?

8. Do you think that social media affects the way you, specifically, perceive beauty?
   a) **If YES:** How much power do you think it is has on your everyday life?
   b) **If NO:** What does affect the way you, specifically, perceive beauty?

9. Do you think that social media affects the way women across the United States perceive beauty?
   a) How so?

10. Do you follow any social media accounts that are specific to beauty, and/or fashion?
   a) **If YES:** Describe your favorite social media account that is related to beauty, and/or fashion. Why do follow them?
   b) **If NO:** Why do you not follow these types of accounts?

11. How many times a day on average do you check your social media?

12. Is it important to reach a certain number of likes on any given picture?

13. How does the number of likes affect they way you feel about yourself?

14. Have you ever taken down a picture because it did not receive enough likes?

15. Do you regularly get comments on pictures you post of yourself?

16. How do you the comments/responses affect they way you feel about yourself.
17. Everyone on social media has the ability to untag themselves from pictures, have ever you ever untagged yourself from a picture because you didn’t like the way it looked?  
   a) **If YES:** What didn’t you like about yourself in the picture?

   a) Ask “Rate this trend 1-5, 1 being you hate it, 5 being you love it.”  
   b) Why?  
   c) When you see a girl doing this trend, what assumptions do you make about that girl?

“Trapped in a High-Waisted Hell.”

*Flash Tattoos.*

“Face Contouring.”

*Celebuzz*
“Embrace The Wide Pant Trend This Summer.”

Wavy Hairstyles.

“Kim Kardashian: Has She Gotten Butt Injections?”