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Abstract

Social media is an ever-growing phenomenon, and while having the world at our fingertips proves convenient, it also has the potential to cause harm in the form of mental distress. Several studies have investigated whether the use of social media may be linked to body image issues. The present study further explored the potential link between social media and body image, specifically looking for a correlation between the number of hours spent on social media and intensity of body image concerns. Adult participants were recruited through the social media platforms of Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and Facebook. Participants completed a survey about their social media use, as well as about their feelings regarding body image through the Social Media Appearance Preoccupation Survey (SMAPS; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). The results of this study will be discussed along with their implications.

Keywords: social media, body image, appearance preoccupation, comparison, body dissatisfaction, media ideal

Social Media and Body Image: Is Body Image Linked to Social Media Usage?

The use of social media has continued to grow and dominate societies around the world. With technological advancements and the introduction of social media, the ability to give and receive immediate commentary on posts is easier than ever. While it proves to be convenient, studies have found that this aspect of social media is less beneficial than it appears. Social media has been linked to appearance preoccupation and has led to personal comparison with peers and the desire to fit in (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). Due to the rise in social media usage and an increase in the observation of body image issues, several studies have been conducted to explore a potential link between the two.

The Pew Research Center conducted an online survey in early 2021 to explore social media usage. This study found that in 2021, 84% of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 say they use social media sites, similar to the 81% of adults ages 30 to 49. The population of this study was limited to U.S. adults, who reported YouTube and Facebook as the most used social media sites. It was found that adults under the age of 30 use the platforms of Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok more than any other sites. The data collected from this survey showed that, overall, 72% of Americans use social media sites (Auxier & Anderson, 2022).

A study designed to assess the degree to which people adopt the media ideal as their own was conducted on 7th grade girls. This study explored the potential relationships between social appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, and media internalization in young girls (Rodgers et al., 2015). Participants completed a questionnaire to assess the degree to which they internalized the media ideal. Through the completion of this study, Rodgers et al. (2015) found that media-internalization predicts social appearance comparison which, in turn, predicts body dissatisfaction.

Another study conducted by Burnell et al. (2021) explored commentary on Instagram posts. Participant's 10 most recent Instagram posts were examined, and researchers considered both like count and the types of commentary left on each post. These variables were then correlated with body dissatisfaction. They found that positive comments on social media posts were more common than negative comments. The data suggested a positive correlation between likes, body surveillance, and appearance related social media consciousness. They found more likes were also linked with lower body dissatisfaction and BMI. A higher comment count positively correlated with body surveillance, appearance-related social media consciousness, and appearance-contingent self-worth (Burnell et al., 2021). However, this study failed to find any evidence that negative comments were linked to body image concerns.

Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2021) conducted a study that included the creation of their own measure, the Social Media Appearance Preoccupation Survey (SMAPS). This study took the results of the SMAPS measure (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021), and correlated it with other questionnaires evaluating appearance anxiety symptoms and social media use. They found that both adolescents and young adults report high levels of appearance concerns, and that these issues may be on the rise due to social comparison because of social media. The SMAPS measure (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) includes the subscales of online self-presentation, appearance-related online activity, and appearance comparison. The data indicated that the general usage of social media interacted with all of three subscales of the SMAPS measure (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021), which led to further understanding of why young social media users may experience higher levels of appearance related anxiety.

Sumter et al. (2021) observed a trend that most existing studies focused on the female viewpoint of body image and sought to change this. They conducted a study that assessed how

men react to social media posts. In this study, male participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which they were shown either muscular non-sexualized images, muscular sexualized images, non-muscular sexualized images, non-muscular non-sexualized images, or the control group in which they were shown only landscape images. Results revealed only that participants' exposure to muscular non-sexualized Instagram posts can have a negative impact on body image. Researchers concluded that body image concerns are not as pronounced in men than women but indicate the importance of more research (Sumter et al., 2021).

The present study was conducted to further investigate a potential link between social media usage and body image concerns. The aim of this study was to build on studies previously conducted, while expanding data collection. My hypothesis was that there is a positive correlation between social media usage and body image concerns. I predicted that people who spend more time on social media will have higher levels of body image concerns, and those who spent less time on social media will have lower levels of body image concerns. The collection of my data came from an online survey in which participants were asked to complete a survey assessing social media usage and body image concerns.

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were required to be 18 years of age or older. The survey began with three demographic questions, including age, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. Of the sample ($n = 138$), 105 were female, 32 were male, and 1 participant identified as non-binary. Age was asked as an open-ended question and answers varied from 18-75 years of age, 57% being 18-30 and 38% being 31 years and older. There were 7 participants who did not disclose their age. My sample was predominately white or European American, with 129 people selecting

this ethnicity. The remaining participants consisted of 3 who selected Hispanic, Latino, or

Hispanic Origin, 3 who selected more than one ethnicity, categorized as multiracial, and 3

participants who selected other, none of which chose to specify.

My social media script was posted with a link to the online survey on Instagram,

Snapchat, Reddit, and Facebook, all of which allowed such actions in cooperation of their terms

and services. Anyone who was able to access the link was able to participate in the study;

however, the consent statement stated that participants were to be 18 years of age or older. The

intended sample for this study was 100-200 participants, and the final sample was 138.

Participants received no compensation for their participation in this study. This study met the

ethical standards and was evaluated and approved by the Lindenwood Institutional Review

Board and the Lindenwood Psychology Program Scientific Review Committee.

Materials and Procedure

My survey was created on Qualtrics and consisted of a consent statement, 28 questions,

and a thank you statement (see Appendix). Questions 1, 2, and 3 of the survey were demographic

questions which asked participants to provide their age, gender, and ethnicity. These questions

were followed up by 5 questions used to measure social media usage. The next 13 questions

came from the original 18-question SMAPS (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) and were answered

on a 5-point scale, where 1 is *strongly disagree*, and 5 is *strongly agree*. Higher SMAPS scores

(Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) indicated higher preoccupation with appearance in relation to

social media and a lower score indicated lower preoccupation with appearance. These questions

were followed by 4 questions regarding the frequency of body image interference in everyday

activities.

Questions 22 and 23 asked about frequency of body image issues, or how often participants find themselves thinking or worrying about their physical appearance. Question 24 asked participants about the ways in which concerns about physical appearance has interfered with everyday life, if at all. Question 25 asked about experiences outside of social media that have led participants to worry about their body image. After this question, those who reported they do not use social media were finished with the survey and redirected to the thank you statement. Those who reported using social media were asked three more questions about their body image in relation to social media (see Appendix). After the completion of the survey, participants were taken to the thank you statement where they were thanked for their participation and provided contact information in case of any questions.

Results

My hypothesis was that there is a positive correlation between hours on social media and body image. The originally 174 participant sample was reduced to a final sample of 138 due to several data having to be excluded. A total of 36 responses were excluded from the final sample, as some participants reported being under the age of 18, others did not answer the question of "how many hours do you spend on social media," and some left the survey incomplete, which led to the disqualification of their data. A correlational analysis was done to evaluate a possible correlation between hours spent on social media and SMAPS (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) on IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Only a weak positive correlation was found between these two variables $r(136) = .220, p < .01$.

The average of questions 22 and 23 of my survey was taken to determine the level of interference body image concerns have in participant's daily lives. Question 22 was asked on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being never and 4 being always. Question 23 was asked on a scale of 1-10.

The overall mean score of interference was $M = 4.09$ ($SD = 1.57$). Those who identified as female had an average interference of $M = 4.2$ ($SD = 1.52$), whereas the average interference of male interference was $M = 3.5$ ($SD = 1.66$).

Other qualitative analyses were conducted to explore what people were concerned about in terms of body image, outside experiences that have contributed to body image concerns, and how these concerns interfere with participants' daily lives. Not all participants chose to answer these open ended questions. Question 28 of my survey asked participants to disclose the ways in which concerns of physical appearance has interfered with their lives. The most common answer to this question involved clothing choices, with 19 participants mentioning clothing in their answers. Many participants went on to say they change their outfits several times before finding one they feel confident and comfortable in and talked about how shopping has become a difficult task simply because they do not like how clothes fit their body. Other common answers to this question included mental health, with 11 participants mentioning this, eating habits, with 9 participants mentioning this, and social interactions, which 14 participants mentioning this. Several participants reported starving themselves or not eating as much as they should to emulate the body they feel is portrayed as "ideal" by the media.

Question 29 of my survey asked about experiences outside of social media that have affected body image concerns. The most common answer included mention of commentary by peers. A total of 18 participants mentioned how people in their lives, some close to them, have made comments concerning their body that has led to preoccupation with their appearance. Another common answer was the mention of social standards. A total of 10 participants alluded to the fact they feel pressured to fit societies standards to fit in and feel confident in themselves. Another popular answer was participant's own criticisms. Fourteen participants reported that

simply looking in the mirror has had negative effects on their body image. Other answers included relationships, health, and shopping.

Participants were also asked to describe what they believe the media promotes as the "ideal" body type for their age and gender identity. Despite age or gender identity, the most common answer was "fit," with "skinny" or "thin" close behind, with a total of 57 participants mentioning one of these. Other answers included "strong," "athletic," and "healthy." Some participants took it a step further, describing specific hair and eye colors, one even including the names of specific celebrities they felt fit the media ideal.

Discussion

While my hypothesis of a positive correlation between social media usage and SMAPS scores (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) was supported, I expected a stronger correlation between the two. This could be due to the smaller sample size, as opposed to other studies on this topic. My findings further supported data found in other studies such as Rodgers et al. (2015) and Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2021), both of which sought to explore correlations between social media and body image. My findings were also similar to Sumter et al. (2021) as I found body image concerns were more prevalent in those who identified as female, as opposed to those who identified as male. My data showed also a weak positive correlation between hours spent on social media and SMAPS (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) for the female participants, $r(103) =$ .277, $p < .01$. A weak negative correlation was shown between the two variables for the male participants in my sample $r(30) = -.066$, $p > .01$. These differences could be explained by the lack of gender diversity within this sample. The final sample was predominately female, limiting the true understanding of gender differences. Sumter et al., (2015) found that even in a fully male sample, preoccupation with body image regarding social media was not as predominate as other

studies have found with female social media users. Zimmer-Gembeck et al., (2021) also noted a gender difference, stating women reported higher body preoccupation than men. Future research can be used to further explore gender differences within social media. This may include more in-depth studies, through which types of social media consumed and gender differences within the consumption of media may be explored. This further exploration can lead to a deeper understanding of social media as a whole and lead to greater knowledge of what social media usage entails.

A limitation of this study included time. This study was to be conducted throughout the length of one academic semester, including the creation of the study. In conducting a similar study, allowing a longer time slot and the opportunity to reach a larger sample would be beneficial and allow for more data collection. Another limitation was the way in which participants were recruited. In recruiting more participants outside of social media, a greater understanding of how social media specifically correlates with body image issues. While a few participants in the sample of this study reported not using social media, their incomplete surveys lead to the disqualification of their data, therefore not allowing analyses to be conducted on these participants or differences to be found.

Implications of this study include further understanding of the correlation between social media and body image. In finding a positive correlation between the two variables, social media users can recognize how their consumption of media may be linked to body image issues they may have. The results of this study call for further discussion of the potential dangers of social media and its relation to mental health and body image. The continuation of this study can be taken in several different directions, including the further exploration of gender differences, or the finding of other correlations between social media and mental health. Future research can

include a more in-depth study in which different types of disorders may be correlated with social media usage. These disorders could include eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. Other studies could focus on specific social media platforms and determine whether there are differences in consumption of media and internalization of the media ideal between the different platforms. Studies could also expand this study in recruiting participants outside of social media and reaching a greater audience and participants outside of social media. This expanded sample can be used to further understand the difference in body image issues between social media users and non-social media users.

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Appendix

Survey

Social Media and Body Image

Start of Block: Block 1

Q23
Informed Consent Statement

You are being asked to participate in a survey conducted by Sydnie Hoyt under the guidance of Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair at Lindenwood University. I am doing this study to investigate a potential link between social media usage and negative experiences with body image. For this study, participants will be asked a series of questions regarding social media usage, as well as questions regarding experiences with their own body image. It will take no more than 20 minutes to complete this survey.

 Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time by simply not completing the survey or closing the browser window.
 There are no risks from participating in this project. I will not collect any information that may identify you. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study.

 <u>**WHO CAN I CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS?**</u>
 If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please use the following contact information:
 Sydnie Hoyt: snh366@lindenwood.edu
 Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair: mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu
 If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the project and wish to talk to someone outside the research team, you can contact Michael Leary (Director - Institutional Review Board) at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu.

 By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by closing the survey browser. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.

 You can withdraw from this study at any time by simply closing the browser window. Please feel free to print a copy of this information sheet.

Q24 I have read and understand the above consent form and am willing to participate in this study

   ○ Agree (1)

   ○ Do Not Agree (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If I have read and understand the above consent form and am willing to participate in this study = Do Not Agree

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Demographics

What is your age?

_____

Q2 Which gender identity to you best identify with?

   ○ Male (1)

   ○ Female (2)

   ○ Other, please specify if comfortable (3)
_____

   ○ Prefer not to say (4)

Q31 What race/ethnicity do you identify with? Please select all that apply.

☐   White or European American (1)

☐   Black or African American (2)

☐   Asian (3)

☐   American Indian or Native American (4)

☐   Hispanic, Latino, or Hispanic Origin (5)

☐   Alaskan Native (6)

☐   Other, please specify (7) _____

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Social media usage

Q3 Do you use social media?

◯ Yes (1)

◯ No (2)

Skip To: End of Block If Do you use social media? = No

Q4 If yes, which platforms do you use? Please select all that apply.

☐   Snapchat (1)

☐   Instagram (2)

☐   Facebook (3)

☐   TikTok (4)

☐   YouTube (5)

☐   Others, please specify (6) _____

Q5 Approximately how many hours are spent on a social media platform per day?

_____

Q6 How old were you when you got your first social media account?

_____

Q7 On what platform was your first social media account?

○ Snapchat (1)

○ Instagram (2)

○ Facebook (3)

○ TikTok (4)

○ YouTube (5)

○ Other, please specify (6) _____

End of Block: Social media usage

Start of Block: Body Image interference

Q26 Approximately how often do you think about or worry about your physical appearance per day?

○ 1- Never (1)

○ 2- Sometimes (2)

○ 3- Often (3)

○ 4- Always (4)

Q27 Does the concern of your physical appearance interfere with your everyday life?

○ 1- Never (1)

○ 2- Sometimes (2)

○ 3- Often (3)

○ 4- Always (4)

Q28 Please explain the ways in which concern of your physical appearance has interfered with your everyday life.

_____

Q29 Outside social media, what experiences or thoughts have lead you to worry about your physical appearance?

_____

End of Block: Body Image interference

Start of Block: SMAPS

Q25 Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1-5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. These data will be used to measure body image in relation to social media.

Q8 I prefer to only upload photos of myself to social media where I look physically attractive.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q9 I prefer to only upload photos of myself to social media where I look fit and healthy.

    ○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

    ○ 2- disagree (2)

    ○ 3- neutral (3)

    ○ 4- agree (4)

    ○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q10 When others upload photos of me to social media, I focus on whether I looked good.

    ○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

    ○ 2- disagree (2)

    ○ 3- neutral (3)

    ○ 4- agree (4)

    ○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q11 I check to see who is commenting on, liking, or viewing photos of me or my body on social media.

    ○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

    ○ 2- disagree (2)

    ○ 3- neutral (3)

    ○ 4- agree (4)

    ○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q12 When others upload photos of me to social media, I get upset when I don't look my best.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q13 I approve photos of myself before anyone can tag them.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q14 When I upload photos of myself, I usually use filters or alter/change them to make myself look better.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q15 I am often dissatisfied with my weight or looks in my social media pictures.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q16 I feel inadequate in appearance compared to my friends on social media.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q17 I feel like I want to change my diet after viewing other people's pictures online.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q18 How I feel about my body and appearance is influenced by other people's social media pictures.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q19 Seeing pictures of others tends to make me feel down on myself.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

Q20 I feel like I want to change my excercise or fitness level after viewing pictures online.

○ 1- strongly disagree (1)

○ 2- disagree (2)

○ 3- neutral (3)

○ 4- agree (4)

○ 5- strongly agree (5)

End of Block: SMAPS

Start of Block: Social Media and Body Image

Q30 How often do you catch yourself comparing your own appearance to those you see on social media?

○ 1- Never (1)

○ 2- Sometimes (2)

○ 3- Often (3)

○ 4- Always (4)

Q31 According to what is seen and advertised on social media, what would you describe as the "ideal" body type for someone of your age and gender identity?

_____

Q32 On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being a strong influence, how much do you believe your social media usage influences the way in which you see yourself?

○ 1 (1)

○ 2 (2)

○ 3 (3)

○ 4 (4)

○ 5 (5)

○ 6 (6)

○ 7 (7)

○ 8 (8)

○ 9 (9)

○ 10 (10)

End of Block: Social Media and Body Image