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The effect of social media on body image.

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ABSTRACT

The present experiment examined the levels of body satisfaction of 30 female participants using two questionnaires created using Survey Monkey. Participants were randomly assigned to either a thin ideal or non-thin ideal condition. They were then administered a questionnaire, which included images of women with either ideal body types or more relatable bodies, and asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with their own bodies. The questionnaires were identical in all ways except for the body types portrayed in the images used. It was hypothesized that the increased exposure to the 'thin ideal' body image standards in the thin ideal condition would lead to an increase in body dissatisfaction as measured by the questionnaire. The results did not support the hypothesis, as there was no significant difference in body satisfaction across the two groups. These results provide further insight into social media's effect on body image perception and are discussed in terms of their relevance to current understanding of this topic.

1. Introduction

Social media plays an integral role in the way individuals perceive, address and internalize familial, peer, and societal pressures. As the ubiquitous nature of social media allows it to pervade people's daily lives, it is vital to understand this influence and the myriad of effects it has on individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Research on social media and body image has focused primarily on the effects that social media has by examining its omnipresent nature, the causal link between the concept of social comparison and body dissatisfaction, and how negative body image perception can be combated through media literacy initiatives.

Due to their notable reliance on social media (research has shown that women use social media sites including Instagram at slightly higher rates than men, Andsager, 2014), young women have been the most examined demographic when conducting studies relating to social media and body image (Perloff, 2014). Society often defines women by their bodies and this objectification leads to self-objectification. Moreover, the pervasive nature of social media has intensified how women receive, interpret, and internalize unrealistic images of beauty. Collegeaged women (ages 18 to 29 years) are particularly vulnerable.

Traditional forms of mass media, notably magazines and advertising, have always been influential in shaping societies perceptions of the ideal body image – deciding and defining what it means to be 'beautiful'. In Western societies, the 'thin ideal' has become the norm, a standard to

which women compare themselves, which leads to the mindset that "you can never be too thin." This 'thin ideal' has been presented through the media as desirable while any other body type is considered less desirable in comparison. A study conducted by Harper and Tiggemann (2008) examined the influence of this 'thin ideal' on women's body image perception and found that participants exposed to advertising depicting the thin ideal exhibited significantly greater body dissatisfaction and higher levels of negative mood compared to members of a control group that was exposed to advertisements not depicting thin, ideal women. These results reflect the findings of previously conducted experiments and existing empirical evidence which supports the assertion that exposure to the unrealistic body image ideals portrayed in the media leads to increases in body dissatisfaction among women. Social media personalities, including models, celebrities, and influencers, are often airbrushed, edited and retouched creating an unattainable standard, which makes it difficult for average women to feel content when looking at their own bodies. This unrealistic standard can lead to the development of a destructive sense of self and the belief that there is something wrong with the way we look, but not with the faces and bodies of those we admire in the media (Klein, 2013).

Social Comparison Theory, proposed by Festinger in 1954, suggests that people use social standards and perceptions of others to evaluate themselves (Sheldon, 2010). This relates to women's widespread reliance on the media as a model for the features, characteristics, and behaviours that are considered desirable and attractive. If women fail to see these ideal attributes within themselves it can lead to negative body image perceptions and body dissatisfaction. The ubiquitous nature of social media and its individual-based, user driven format has transformed ordinary people from mass media receivers into active contributors. This means that not only are young women constantly exposed to societal ideals of beauty, they are also able to make comparisons within their own social network. These peer comparisons intensify and increase rates of body dissatisfaction (Klein, 2013). Social networking sites are available for viewing, sharing and editing at any time on multiple devices, allowing for more opportunities for social comparison (Perloff, 2014).

Although exposure to social media and its facilitation of social comparisons has been identified as a contributory risk factor for warped perceptions of body image and increased body dissatisfaction, it is important to realize that it is not the only influence. Perloff (2014) argued that individual susceptibility factors and the roles they play in how women internalize body image concerns should also be considered when analyzing the impact that social media has on an individual's body image perception. A key aspect of social media is the reciprocal transactions between the media and the individual. People using social media are able to choose what they expose themselves to and, unlike traditional mass media, social networking sites present a larger array of body image ideals. Whether mere exposure to social media inevitably leads to body dissatisfaction is greatly debated. Perloff (2014) suggested that differences among women in relation to their values, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs surrounding societal ideals of body image might result in the internalization of the thin ideal for some and not for others. Many women may welcome social media and its varied portrayals of body image, which allow for the acknowledgment, acceptance, and celebration of all body

shapes and sizes in comparison to the traditional confines of the thin ideal that dominates mass media. For those struggling with body image disturbances however, the exposure to societal ideals and peer comparisons that social media provides can be detrimental, leading to body dissatisfaction (Klein, 2013; Perloff, 2014).

Whereas traditional mass media focused primarily on body ideals, social networking sites allow for young women to make increased facial, hair, and skin comparisons (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015). Social comparisons have become a critical factor in the formation of self worth, body image perception, and self-esteem, with the majority of college-aged women unaware that much of what they see as ideal and attainable is often edited and impossible to achieve (Klein, 2013). The ability for inauthentic representation on social media can lead an individual to cultivate distorted perceptions of themselves, their peers, and broader society. Unrealistic body image ideals are an excellent example of this. The majority of people take pictures posted online at face value, rarely stopping to think critically about the countless photos one needs to take to attain that 'perfect' selfie, or the time and effort taken to achieve a thin yet fit body. Often we only see what others want us to see - the part that they choose to portray online. We live in a society in which the body image ideals that we strive for are so easily created and posted that what we see as achievable is often impossible.

Today, young women live in an environment in which looks are often of the utmost importance, social support is low, and the pressure to achieve cultural ideals of attractiveness is high (Sheldon, 2010). In such an environment, the ability to think critically is more important than ever. Many present the concept of media literacy as a way of combating the negative social comparisons and body dissatisfaction that can result from social media use (Andsager, 2014; Klein, 2013; Perloff, 2014). Perloff (2014) suggested that the pervasive nature of social media itself could provide solutions to this growing problem. By posting and sharing words and images that promote a wide variety of body types and encourage perceptions of source-receiver similarity, individuals can come together to challenge the thin ideal that has been normalized within society. Even brief media literacy training, in the form of workshops and lectures, has been shown to be effective in moderating young women's response to the thin ideal body image standards imposed by the media (Andsager, 2014). Media literacy has also been credited with improving women's levels of body satisfaction (Andsager, 2014).

The present experiment compared the levels of body satisfaction of 30 female participants using two questionnaires created through Survey Monkey. This gender-specificity related to the fact that the experimental research design focused exclusively on images of women on social media. The questionnaire administered to a thin ideal group contained images of women on social media that reflect the 'thin ideal' that pervades society as the desirable body image type. These images include skinny, yet fit, women with toned stomachs and slim, muscular legs. The questionnaire administered to the non-thin ideal group contained images of the same women posted on social media but with rounder, softer, and more attainable body types. Body satisfaction was then measured. Based on previous research studying the effect of social media on body image perception it was expected that participants exposed to thin-ideal images would exhibit lower levels

of body satisfaction than those exposed to non-thin ideal images.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants in this study were females over the age of 18 years. The majority of participants were between the ages of 20 and 25 years. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways including face-to-face interaction, where the experimenters asked female students at a community college directly if they would be willing to participate in the study, and through the use of social media, where the experimenters messaged friends and asked them if they would be willing to take part in an experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to either the Thin Ideal (experimental) or the Non-Thin Ideal (control) Group. All participants completed their respective surveys, but one participant chose not to answer the final question, for reasons unknown to the researchers. This meant that the data from a total of 29 participants was analyzed.

2.2 Materials and Apparatus

This study utilized two questionnaires created using Survey Monkey. The questionnaire that was administered to the thin ideal condition used images of women on social media that reflect the 'thin ideal' that pervades North American society as the preferable and desirable body type. The other survey used images of women on social media that represent a more natural, typical and attainable body type. The only differences across the two questionnaires were the type of images used.

Images chosen for the thin ideal condition questionnaire were classified based on their portrayal of the 'thin ideal,' that is, a type of body image that is virtually unattainable for the vast majority of women. These images include skinny, yet fit, women with toned stomachs and slim, muscular legs. This body type reinforces the thin ideal that pervades mass and social media in Western cultures. It is not only uncommon among the majority of women, but is often unachievable, even with proper diet and exercise, due to genetic predispositions. As a result, the body image type represented in these images does not reflect the body type of most females.

When choosing the images for the non-thin ideal condition questionnaire, the researchers looked for more attainable and relatable body image portrayals of the same women pictured in the experimental images. These were found on the Instagram profiles of the women selected. Although social media often mirrors mass media in its reflection of the thin ideal, there is one important difference between the two. Unlike traditional mass media (e.g., magazines and television), social networking sites present a larger array of body image ideals. This allowed the researchers to find images of the same women wherein they reflected both the thin ideal and a more realistic body image type. When it came to defining what was meant by an 'attainable body type' the experimenters purposely chose body types that could be achieved without extreme lifestyle changes in diet or exercise. Essentially, the main requirement for these images was that they represented a range of different, relatable, and attainable body types. The reason the images chosen depicted the same women was to ensure that the only notable difference was the body type shown, in order to limit the influence any other confounding variables.

Each questionnaire contained 10 questions, 9 of which were fillers and 1 target question that measured body

satisfaction. Additional questions were used to gather demographic information about participants (age) as well as to encourage them to focus on the body image of the women shown in the images provided. The target question, which was used to measure body satisfaction, contained a 7-point scale with the numbers and corresponding labels. The question asked participants to indicate their overall level of body satisfaction from very dissatisfied (1) to very satisfied (7). Each numbered alternative was labeled in order to clearly define the meaning of each option and to reduce measurement error associated with an individual's possible interpretation (see Appendix A and B for the complete questionnaires used in the experiment).

2.3 Procedure

Participants were approached, either in person or online, and asked to take part in the present experiment by completing a brief questionnaire. If participants agreed they were provided with an informed consent form to sign and date. Participants were then randomly assigned to the Thin Ideal or Non-Thin Ideal Groups by being given a link to one of the questionnaires. This resulted in both the researchers and participants being unaware of which participants completed which questionnaire. Once respondents finished their respective questionnaires, they were instructed to inform the researcher. This was done to ensure accurate documentation of consent and completion. Following the experiment, all participants were debriefed and thanked for their involvement.

3. Results

The level of significance set in this experiment was .05. The mean body satisfaction rating for the Thin Ideal Group was 3.93 (SD = 1.71) and the mean body satisfaction rating for the Non-Thin Ideal Group was 4.50 (SD = 1.79). These data were analyzed using an independent samples t-test and the results were not statistically significant $t(27) = 0.87$, $p = 0.39$, suggesting that the two groups had an equal level of body satisfaction after viewing the images. See Figure 1 for a summary of descriptive statistics.

4. Discussion

The current study examined the effect of social media on body image perception, focusing specifically on how the thin-ideal body image standards of social media impact a woman's level of body satisfaction. It was hypothesized that respondents exposed to thin ideal images would exhibit lower levels of body satisfaction compared to participants exposed to nonthin ideal images. The results did not support this hypothesis, as participants exposed to thin ideal images did not exhibit statistically significant lower mean levels of body satisfaction than non-thin ideal participants. These findings were therefore not consistent with those of other studies that have demonstrated that the thin ideal body image standards depicted in the media can decrease an individual's levels of body satisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2015; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Klein, 2013; Sheldon, 2010).

There are several limitations relating to the current study. The first has to do with sample size. The small sample size used in the study may account for the lack of statistical significance found. Future research utilizing larger sample sizes that are more reflective of the population of interest is recommended to allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn. Secondly, the

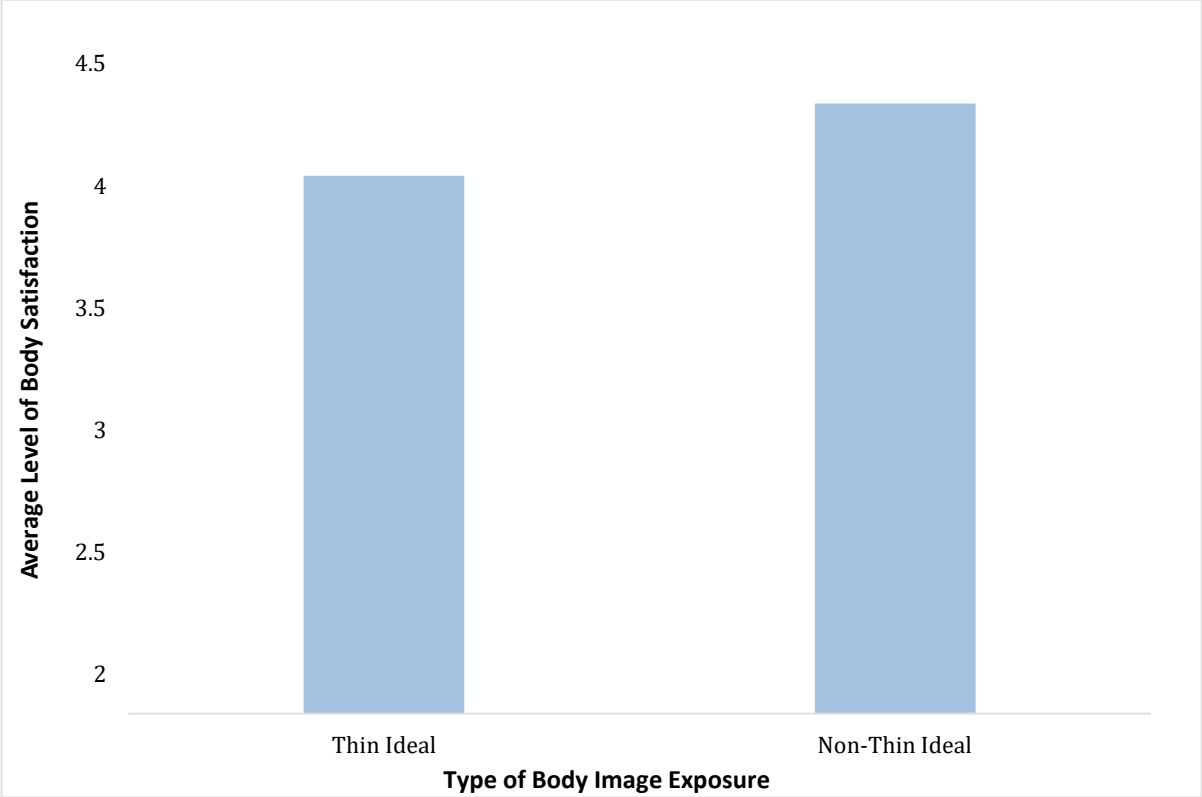

Figure 1. The mean level of body satisfaction in the Thin Ideal and Non-Thin Ideal Conditions.

gender specificity of this study, which was based both on previous research conducted on this topic that has focused predominantly on females, as well as the availability of social media images, may have compromised the external validity of the study. An exclusive focus on college-aged females limits the generalizability of results to other demographics, namely younger girls, older women and men of all ages. Third, the inability of the present experiment to control the environment or conditions in which participants completed their respective questionnaires may have impacted results in unintended ways. Finally, the self-report nature of questionnaires must be acknowledged as it may have resulted in the misreporting by participants of their overall levels of body satisfaction, either consciously or unconsciously, due to social desirability or bias.

Though the results of the current study were not statistically significant, the findings provide supplemental insight into the effects of social media on an individual's body image perception. This information could inform future research into this and related topics; research that is essential in order to understand the complex and multifaceted ways in which social media influences individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. As social media plays an integral role in the way individuals perceive and respond to their social environments, any research in this area has multiple and varied practical applications throughout diverse disciplines.

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Appendix A

The Questionnaire used in the Thin Ideal Condition

Social Media and Body Image

This survey is part of a experimental research study designed to learn about how social media influences our body image perception. The study is being conducted by Sierra McKenna and Stacey Johnston, students of psychology at Camosun College for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for Psychology 201, Research Methods in Psychology. The study has been approved by the Instructor of the course, Dr. Judy Caldwell. All responses to this survey are voluntary, anonymous and confidential.

OK

1 What is your age?

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 20-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 45+

2 How often do you use social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)?

- ◯ Once every couple of days
- ◯ Daily
- ◯ Once every 2-3 hours
- ◯ Hourly
- ◯ More than once every hour
- ◯ I do not use social media sites

3 Which of the following is your preferred social media site?

- ◯ Facebook
- ◯ Twitter
- ◯ Instagram
- ◯ Tumblr
- ◯ Youtube

4 Do you compare yourself with people (friends, strangers, celebrities) that you see on social media sites?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

5 When looking at the following image, I am most interested in...

- ◯ A specific item of clothing
- ◯ Her hair or makeup
- ◯ Her body shape
- ◯ Her overall look and style
- ◯ Her lifestyle (eating and exercise habits)

6 On the scale below indicate how comfortable you would feel wearing the bathing suit shown in the following photo.

Very uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable
○	○	○	○	○

7 How likely are you to wear the lingerie shown in the photo below?

- ○ Very likely
- ○ Likely
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Unlikely
- ○ Very unlikely

8 Using the scale below please indicate how accurately, in terms of body type, the following image reflects your current body type.

Very inaccurately	Inaccurately	Neutral	Accurately	Very accurately
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
○	○	○	○	○

9 Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the following attributes of your body.

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Hair	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Face	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Breasts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stomach	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Waist/Hips	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arms	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Legs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Butt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Body weight	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10 On the following scale please indicate your overall level of body satisfaction.

Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix B

The Questionnaire used in the Non-Thin Ideal Condition

Social Media and Body Image

This survey is part of a experimental research study designed to learn about how social media influences our body image perception. The study is being conducted by Sierra McKenna and Stacey Johnston, students of psychology at Camosun College for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for Psychology 201, Research Methods in Psychology. The study has been approved by the Instructor of the course, Dr. Judy Caldwell. All responses to this survey are voluntary, anonymous and confidential.

OK

1. What is your age?

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 20-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 45+

2. How often do you use social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)?

- ◯ Once every couple of days
- ◯ Daily
- ◯ Once every 2-3 hours
- ◯ Hourly
- ◯ More than once every hour
- ◯ I do not use social media sites

3. Which of the following is your preferred social media site?

- ◯ Facebook
- ◯ Twitter
- ◯ Instagram
- ◯ Tumblr
- ◯ Youtube

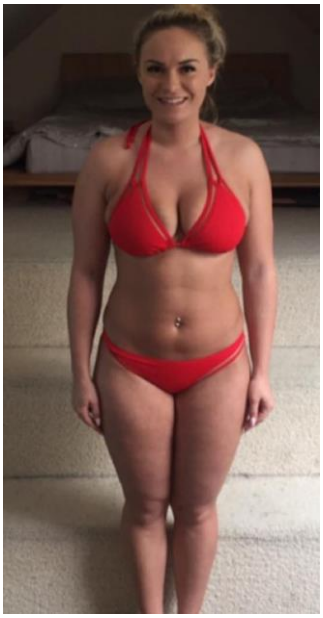
4 Do you compare yourself with people (friends, strangers, celebrities) that you see on social media sites?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

5 When looking at the following image, I am most interested in...

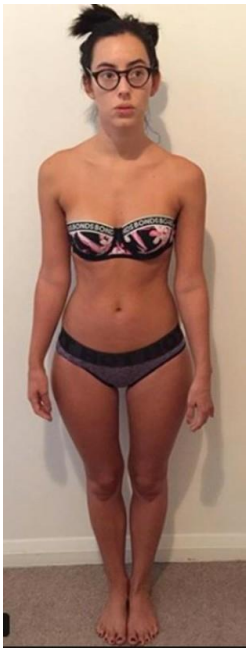
- ◯ A specific item of clothing
- ◯ Her hair or makeup
- ◯ Her body shape
- ◯ Her overall look and style
- ◯ Her lifestyle (eating and exercise habits)

6 On the scale below indicate how comfortable you would feel wearing the bathing suit shown in the following photo.



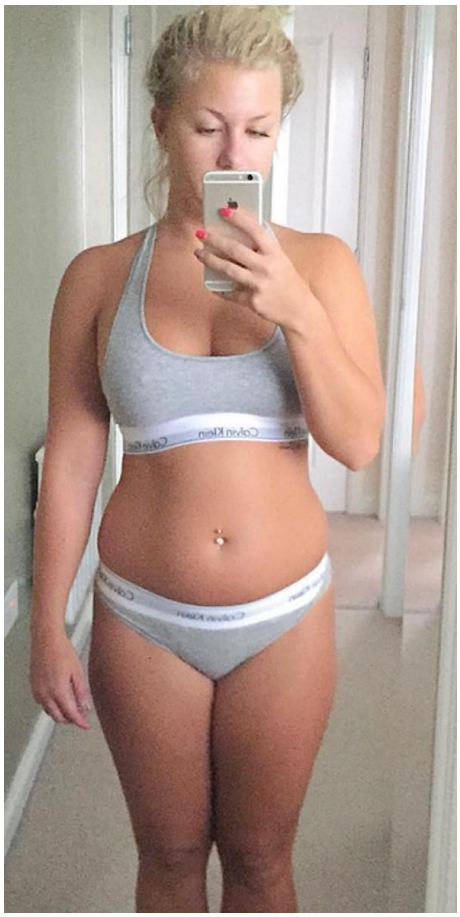
Very uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable
○	○	○	○	○

7 How likely are you to wear the lingerie shown in the photo below?



- ◯ Very likely
- ◯ Likely
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Unlikely
- ◯ Very unlikely

8 Using the scale below please indicate how accurately, in terms of body type, the following image reflects your current body type.



Very inaccurately	Inaccurately	Neutral	Accurately	Very accurately
1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

9 Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the following attributes of your body.

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Hair	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Face	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Breasts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stomach	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Waist/Hips	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arms	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Legs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Butt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Body weight	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10 On the following scale please indicate your overall level of body satisfaction.

Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯