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# Social Media and Its Effects on Beauty

*Mavis Henriques and Debasis Patnaik*

## Abstract

Beauty is concerned with physical and mental health as both are intimately related. Short-term decisions to alter one's body structure irrespective of genetic, environmental, occupational and nutritional needs can leave medium- and long-term effects. This chapter analyzes the role of social media and its effects on the standards of beauty. The researchers have summarized the literature on how social media plays a role in affecting beauty trends, body image and self-esteem concerns. There is support that social media affects individuals negatively, in pushing them to engage in life threatening beauty trends due to social compliance and acceptance in society. The aim was to review social networking sites' impact on perception of standards of beauty and newer unrealistic trends gaining popularity that could alter opinions and also cause harm to individuals in the long run. This is an emerging area of research that is of high importance to the physical and mental health in the beauty, health and hospitality industry with the latter being manifested in depression, anxiety and fear of non-acceptability and being seen as a social gauche.

**Keywords:** social media, self-esteem, body modification, body dissatisfaction, beauty

## 1. Introduction

Social media refers to the use of websites and applications to create and share content or to participate in social networking [1]. Technological developments have given rise to various gadgets including smart-phones, tablets, and laptops to robots too. Living in a digitized era, communication has now become easier and faster with the emergence of various social applications available at the click of a button. While many may agree that social media has connected individuals globally, it has also been used to set standards of beauty for males, females as well as the third gender. This in turn has been known to affect the self-esteem of individuals with regards to body image, body modification and how they view themselves in society. In order to be accepted in society females have to battle body image issues from a very young age, where thin is considered to be the ideal body type [2].

This chapter focuses on the effects of social media on standards of beauty. We review the literature on the role of social media and how they affect the physical and psychological beauty of individuals in society.

## **2. Effects of social media on the aspects of body image**

Today, Social Media is one of the most important factors contributing to the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health of an individual. With the media constantly portraying ideal beauty and body image comparisons, the decisions of men and women's beauty choices are globally affected.

"Body image refers to a person's perception of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings, positive, negative or both, which result from that perception" [3]. Social media has had a major impact on the perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects of body image [3] by encouraging lean body patterns and delivering anti-obesity messages [4]. Eating disorders determine a distorted relationship between the individual, their eating behavior and body shape [5]. Adolescence being a crucial age for positive and negative development of body image, the self-esteem and body dissatisfaction adolescents feel are known predictors of eating disorders [6]. Continuous pursuit for the perfect slender lean body may generate negative feelings which can result in a change in eating behavior, thereby increasing the chances of weight issues and eating disorders [4, 7]. Social media portrays women who are slim as being more beautiful and successful compared to overweight women [8]. Body image misperception and dissatisfaction with body weight highlight an association between body dissatisfaction and psychological wellbeing [9].

## **3. Self-esteem issues in response to social media effects**

Body image concerns are common in women and men globally, but social media has now increased these concerns through advertising, videos and the use of social media. Milkie [10] conducted in-depth interviews on 60 white and minority girls to examine the effect of media on self-esteem. Results indicated that most girls felt that the images shown in media were unrealistic and not real. White girls felt that boys evaluated them on the basis of the images found on media platforms whereas the minority girls felt that the images portrayed on media did not meet the expectations of the reference group they oriented themselves with. The evolution from adolescence to adulthood has seen 12–16 teenage girls experience emotional changes in interpersonal and intrapersonal development as well as bodily changes such as sudden weight gain and transition from a young girl to a fully grown woman [11, 12]. In today's world, the self-presentation of beauty and perceptions of others plays an important role in developing identities in girls [13, 14]. New interactive platforms present in social media demonstrate how self-presentations and peer influences are interrelated with the standards of beauty [15]. Many women may imitate their ideal media personality due to the social, psychological and practical rewards associated with this ideal and the belief that their life would change for the better [16].

## **4. Social media: trends in behavioral outcomes**

Social media comprises of social networking sites, image sharing sites, video hosting sites, community blogs, bookmarking sites and gaming sites. Fellow comparisons about self-image and appearances in teenagers have resulted due to social networking sites (SNSs) such as Instagram and Facebook [17]. Teenage girls engage in online self-presentation of posting selfies and sharing the outfit of the day pictures to differentiate themselves with their peers [18]. Media images of ideal beauty standards influence the content and sharing of pictures teenage girls' post [19]. Individuals are constantly seeking feedback on SNSs through likes,

followers and comments to uphold a perfect and stable image of themselves [20]. Teenage girls are vulnerable to the upward comparison as it means that they need to improve their beauty standards, thereby leaving them dissatisfied with their physical bodies, having doubts about their self-worth and also driving them to self-harm behavior [20, 21].

Taking selfies and sharing them on popular social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat has increased at an alarming rate during the recent years. A recent study compared selfie takers and non selfie takers and their perceptions of their selfies versus photographs clicked by others. Results indicated that selfie takers perceived themselves as more attractive and likable in their selfies as opposed to pictures taken by others leading to positive distortions of the self [22]. Biases in self-face recognition were seen in men and women in selecting the most attractive modified pictures of themselves [23]. Selfies are no harm per se. But obsession with physical features reveals a lack of holistic perception of self-generated sub-consciously, following an “outside” standard of beauty not defined by the “inner self” of the receiver.

Popular socialites Kim and Khloe Kardashian have been slammed with media reports of them using photoshop to edit Instagram selfies by making unrealistic alterations to look thinner and more toned. Emily Bryngelson, an associate designer struggling with an eating disorder, admitted to deleting pictures if they did not receive enough “likes.” The time spent on Facebook photos was linked to self-objectification, weight dissatisfaction, thin idealization and pursuit of thinness [15].

## **5. Social media and unrealistic beauty standards**

There are multiple factors that affect the beauty standards in the world today, which involve women and men and the third gender individuals trying new trends to be socially accepted. The purchasing decisions of millennials are influenced majorly by social media [24]. 72% of millennials procure beauty products based on Instagram posts and other social networks [25]. Makeup consists of the application of cosmetic products to beautify or change the way one looks either artistically or to conceal flaws. Jang-Soon and Hye-Jin [26] investigated 240 teenage males’ preferences for makeup use. Results indicated that their appearance was one of the major reasons for their social success. The male respondents who were young, unmarried and city residents had an overall positive perception about cosmetics [26]. With bloggers constantly advertising on social media, cosmetic products, have gained popularity.

The images on social media sites are idealized and unreal, due to digital alteration thereby setting high expectations from individuals in society. Imperfections are removed by airbrushing and using other digitized apps to whiten teeth, slim waists and reduce sizes in order to be accepted as beauty ideals [27]. These techniques may further lead to negative consequences of increased body dissatisfaction, body modification and low self-esteem issues. Unrealistic images of femininity, beauty, success and body shape promoted through social media images are associated with development of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction disorders [28, 29].

Filters and beauty apps represent another area in which social media has a major influence. Beauty apps encourage women to see and surveil themselves within a “pedagogy of defect” [30]. They include filters and modification apps, surgery try out apps, and esthetic benchmarking apps which help individuals visualize how they will look after certain changes such as teeth whitening, eye bag removal and also whether the individual looks old or young [31].

“Body modification refers to the deliberate or permanent altering of an individual’s human anatomy or appearance” [32]. They involve two aspects: the processes that modify form or contours of the body such as metabolic manipulation (weight lifting, extreme dieting, use of drugs/steroids, hormones), cosmetic surgeries and procedures (liposuction, face-lifts, rhinoplasty, botox, eye lash extensions), genital surgery and sex reassignment surgery, restriction or compression (waist training, foot binding), abrasion (teeth filing, scourging, flagellation), elongation (neck, lips, earlobes), partial or full removal of body parts (breasts, penis, ribs, nose etc.), implantation of foreign objects (silicone implants, decorative items under the skin), and prosthetics (false limbs, finger nails, lenses) and processes that mark the surface of the body such as tattooing, piercing, tanning/bleaching, scarification, branding and hair removal [32].

Young women and teenage girls following fitness boards on Pinterest were likely to have intentions to engage in extreme crash dieting or extreme exercising as a result of social comparison leading them to feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction [33, 34].

## **6. Body modification trends in society**

From professional athletes to celebrities, contouring, tattooing and body piercings has gained popularity in today’s society [35]. Individuals who get tattooed refer to it as a piece of art and piercing as fashion accessories, for the purpose of embellishment or as a self-healing effect after having being abused [36–39]. A survey conducted at an American University found body piercings in 42% of men and 60% of women with piercings involving tongue, lips, nose, navel, genitals, nipple and eyebrow besides the earlobe piercing. Bacterial infections, bleeding and local trauma were common complications faced. “Tattoos were present in 22% of male students and 26% of female students” [40].

Another reason why individuals engage in body modifications is to maintain self-identities and be distinctive from others [41, 42]. Physical endurance, lust for pain, spirituality and cultural traditions, addictions, resistance, sexual motives, group commitments are reasons why individuals adopt modification procedures [43]. Social Media has had a tremendous effect on how individuals perceive and endure painful tattooing and body modifications after viewing popular Instagram and Pinterest handles. Brief exposure to body modifications on popular social networking sites has seen an increase in tattoo searches and body modification procedures in young as well as older individuals, proving the impact of Social Media on Beauty trends in society.

## **7. Adopting to ever changing social media trends: Is it right?**

Social media has a robust influence on the beauty, health and hospitality industry with women and men engaging in weight loss and diets to avoid gaining fat identities that impacted their wellbeing in the long run [44–46]. Women and men have turned to waxing, shaving and removal of unwanted facial and body hair in order to meet the beauty standards of societal acceptance [47, 48]. Women who did not engage in hair removal were negatively evaluated as being dirty or gross [49, 50]. In 2010, a concept of living dolls emerged online with women practicing the art of appearing “doll like.” These women would engage in usage of wide rimmed contact lenses, hair extensions, corsets, photo editing and surgery including, eye widening, breast implants, liposuction and rib removal to enhance their beauty [31]. Even

though women knew the risks in false eyelashes and acrylic nails, they still reported to be continuing to engage in it to feel socially accepted [31].

## 8. Using social media for body positivity

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other networking sites have the potential to influence positive beliefs and attitudes in individuals [51]. The online platform has given many individuals a feeling of a “sense of belonging.” Men and women are obsessed with images on social media portals and often search for esthetic body types which are not similar to their own body. Instagram and Facebook often have stories of individuals who have fought hard to change beauty standards through sheer dedication and hard work, be it exercising, eating healthy or building self-esteem and body acceptance through support groups and communities found online. Blocking body shamers can help reinforce confidence in men and women globally. Promoting videos on life struggles with weight motivate others to believe in never giving up and taking charge of their lives. Today social media includes individuals of different race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, thereby focusing more on breaking stereotypes and building communities to support each other.

## 9. Conclusion

With technology advancing by the minute and newer apps surfacing online, social media has an immediate effect on beauty. Due to the ever changing body images depicted online, individuals are turning to social media handles for acceptance and support. The selfie culture has brought about a positive and negative change in how individuals perceive themselves. While most research today focuses on the negative impacts of social media on beauty, more interest should be laid on body positivity and using social media as a medium for self-acceptance whether beautified or not.

### Author details

Mavis Henriques<sup>1\*</sup> and Debasis Patnaik<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Goa Campus, Zuarinagar, Goa, India

<sup>2</sup> Department of Economics, Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Goa Campus, Zuarinagar, Goa, India

\*Address all correspondence to: [mavis\\_henriques@hotmail.com](mailto:mavis_henriques@hotmail.com)

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