The Body and Social Media

Body image and loving relationships with our bodies is something that is highly advocated for across all social media platforms. We are able to openly see on the internet how more and more women are making strides to share why they should love their bodies, and why others should too. But what did this root from? Where did they sudden rise in body positivity and overall more positivity in the internet come from? It starts with the problem, before there is a problem there is always a solution. Over the last decade, social media has planted the ‘skinny seed.’ So many individuals believe there is a competition on social media. Who can be the skinniest? Who looks the best? Who has the best body? Who gets the most attention? These questions are all driving factors behind the big problem millions of young women are facing everywhere: Body Dissatisfaction. Social media has changed the way women see and feel about their body. The impact social media has on a woman's body is not nearly as respected or thought more of as it needs to be. Many women are facing lifelong effects of confiding to society’s expectations, some are even facing death.

Surprisingly, there are a large group of young women who are obsessed with their weight. Take any teenage girl's phone and scroll through any of their social media feeds. What will you see? You will pass through dozens of picture perfect posts. Each undeniably flawless. These posted images, from celebrities or not, have led many users to believe that this is what they are supposed to look like. So many individuals are obsessed with the topic of thinspiration. Photos described as this are meant to come off as motivation and encouragement for other people trying to lose weight. These images that are glorifying being skinny are now causing eating disorders. What one individual sees as a thigh gap, another sees as a missed meal. Today the media does a disgusting job of publicizing the expectations of body image and the satisfaction that comes along with it. Mass media in the forms of television magazines and billboards are no longer A heavy resource to where all these disorders are originating from. Today social media is simultaneously one of the disturbing reasons why there is such a high number of women with an eating disorder as well as body dissatisfaction. This paper will be discussing how social media is a catalyst for changes in lifestyle and health, good or bad. Reasons such as thinspiration, photoshopped images, and body shaming cause women to go down destructive paths with their weight and mental health, but studies have shown that these same factors can lead to improvements in lifestyle and mental health.

For years, women have been shaping their bodies to fit the mold of what was considered beautiful. It originated with the embarrassment of being underweight. According to society many years ago, skinny and scrawny was a sign of weakness and failure. A time ago, to have curves in shape on your body was a sign of that one was well taken care of. Take Marilyn Monroe for example.. In the 1950s, she was considered and still is considered one of the greatest sex symbols of all time. Monroe was beautiful, which followed her setting beauty standards for women everywhere. Her body was anything but scrawny. However, Monroe‘s body and everyone’s obsession with it did not make it to the 21st century. As Americans began to grow more independent and wealthy, shifts were made everywhere. The rise in obesity became drastic. Obesity stopped being normalized and appreciated and the world began to idolize the sickly thin. Women in our society now have to fight wars, an increase in weight with a decrease in happiness.

For observing generations, it might be hard to understand why there is an addiction to body image and weight. Over the last half century, it has been recorded that the population worldwide is struggling with body image issues with the world shifting its beauty standards from “fat to skinny.” Anorexia is now on the most common disorders women are battling with. In 2007 a study was conducted on 9,282 English speaking American women about a variety of health conditions. These results were published into the biological psychiatry, which found that .9% of women had anorexia in their life and 1.5% of women had bulimia in their life. In addition researchers then followed a group of 500 adolescent girls for eight years (up until they were about the age of 20) and found that 5.2% of the girls met the criteria for DSM5 anorexia bulimia or a binge eating disorder. When researchers included non-specific eating disorder symptoms, a total of 13.2% of the girls had to suffer from DSM5 eating disorder by the age of 20. The idea of beauty in the past 50 years has turned into an unrealistic standard. Young girls and women are not sure how they are supposed to look. But what has grown the roots for the obsession of the shape and size? The answer is social media that extends from magazines to social apps. This modern day drug has single-handedly caused women to go down destructive paths.

The media gives users a reason to feel like they need to fit in into the narrow idea of beauty. Having a different body shape or weight from peers or from ideal body shapes in the media is why so many young girls are unable to build a healthy relationship with their body. Despite how many studies have been conducted with social media there is still not enough evidence to prove that these young and older women have been battling with these disorders because of social media but researchers believe that there is a correlation that can soon be proven. Prior to any further discussion about disorders and the media it is important to understand and no information about each. One huge misconception with these disorders and how they are broadcasted on all types of social media is that many individuals can find themselves self diagnosing based on what they see online or how they may feel in the moment.

According to the American Psychological Association, those with anorexia nervosa suffer from:

“a distorted body image that causes them to see themselves as overweight even when they're dangerously thin. Often refusing to eat, exercising compulsively, and developing unusual habits such as refusing to eat in front of others, they lose large amounts of weight and may even starve to death.”

According to the American Psychological Association, those who were diagnosed with Bulimia Nervoiusa suffer from:

“...eat excessive quantities, and then purge their bodies of the food and calories they fear by using laxatives, enemas, or diuretics; vomiting; or exercising. Often acting Klein 17 in secrecy,

they feel disgusted and ashamed as they binge, yet relieved of tension and negative emotions once their stomachs are empty again.”

Social Media has a negative effect on body image. The influence impacts the relationship with one's body and food. The increase of thin and tones bodies along with strict and unrealistic diets. 88% of women have openly admitted to comparing themselves to images they observe on social media. Following that, 65% of men are doing the exact same. This presents itself as a massive problem for people everywhere. As recorded, this has documented lower self esteem, difference in nutrients, unbalanced diets, and ultimately, an eating disorder. Body Image is the thoughts and emotions associated with one's body. It is all about how they see and love/hate themselves. There are four types of body image factors that one may encounter. They are as follows: perceptual body image, affective body image, cognitive body image, and behavioral body image. They are each defined as how you perceive, how you feel, how you think, and how you behave because of your body image. The visual representation of one's body holds a weight on their shoulders. Social media does a good job of highlighting each of these factors. When one sits on social media, they are scrolling through photos and videos that have been showered with likes and comments. This makes the user believe that the perceptions of this body are only positive, and it is what society wants. Social media leads girls to believe that their bodies aren't good enough, or are supposed to look different. Girls will begin to do this differently and feel differently about their bodies. Once it gets to the toxic level, they act upon it, which is when the eating disorders begin to form.

Body dissatisfaction is a negative subjective evaluation of one’s own body. This word perfectly describes the negative effects social media use leaves, women, with. Through the use of social media, women see what others find appealing and will compare themselves to what they see online. Women are constantly struggling with how they view their bodies and are impacted by what they see on the internet. Through a survey, it was concluded that most of the women that were interviewed felt insecure. Many young women reported obsessing over the number of “likes” they were getting and feared not looking beautiful in their photos. This new wave of communication has led women into obsessing over their looks and criticizing themselves because they do not look like the women on their Instagram feed. Body dissatisfaction consumes one’s life. The constant unhappiness and unattainable goals make women hate their bodies and compare them to others. Social media usage gives women body dissatisfaction because of the unattainable body image of women that is idolized on the internet.

With generations constantly changing it has led to technology evolving and access to limitless information. With many aspects of our life-changing to online, social media has skyrocketed. Social media has numerous perks that allow one to communicate with anyone, share posts with family members, and so much more. But the dark side of social media seems to dwell over all of the positives. The dark side of social media has impacted how women view themselves especially their bodies. It has been stated that adolescent girls and young women following fitness boards on Pinterest were more likely to report intentions to engage in extreme weight-loss behaviors. The unlimited access of comparison to others is fatal to women’s self-esteem and body love. Seeing unrealistic and photoshopped bodies on the main pages of our phones multiple times a day creates a false reality of what women look like. Not all bodies look the same and the unrealistic people on social media portray to their audience an appeal that leads one to desire to look like them. Through research, it has been announced that social media environments influence adolescent girls and young women to engage in social comparison leading to feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction. With the use of social media, women are shown an unrealistic version of what one should seek to look like leading one to have body dissatisfaction and feelings of inadequacy. Social media has negatively affected women and how they view their bodies.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms right now. Instagram is a platform where anyone from everyday people to famous celebrities gets to share photos and videos. Instagram is overpopulated with women who have unrealistic body types. These “perfect” women lead women who use the app to compare themselves to others. These comparisons leave women hating their bodies and having low self-esteem which is ultimately body dissatisfaction. Instagram has a direct correlation with body dissatisfaction because Instagram posts lead women to view themselves in a negative light. Scientists found that the appearance-based pictures of fitspiration have a negative impact on mood, body image, and self- esteem. The young women who view those images compare themselves and their life to what is on their Instagram feed. These are unrealistic body standards created by the power of popularity and leave Instagram users insecure. Social media has negatively impacted how women view themselves.

Thinspo and thinspiration is the “inspiration” of the idea that being tiny and skinny is what looks best. Thinspo is followed by a collection of photos and videos of women who are extremely thin, and who are preaching their tininess. “...photomontages of skeletal women, including some celebrities and models, would play all over the internet, uploaded from the United States, Germany, Holland and elsewhere. These videos were designed to inspire viewers- to fortify their ambitions. (Borzekowski, 2010)” Trends of thinspo include the thigh gap and detailed collar bones. A thigh gap is a large space in between the legs where there is no contact. In today’s society, it is seen as beautiful and fit. Over the years, women have expressed how they find it repulsive how the skin from their leg is making contact. Same goes for the collarbone. But what these users are not realizing is that by achieving the level of thinness, you are losing so many healthy aspects of your body. Today social media has created the ultimate platform for thinspo to be reached at quickly at any point in time. Sites like instagram have become pro anorexia. Back in 2012, instagram attempted to ban terms in relation to thinspo and thighs. During that time, thinspo was at its peak. However, it has made its return and the consequences seem to be larger than ever. Influencers on social media post and preach their sickly thin bodies. Doctors are now saying thinspo is a death sentence. Dr. Amy Middleman, Chief of Adolescent medicine at OU Medical. “She says the mental changes that happen in women who have protruding hip bones and ribs, and thin arms and legs make it impossible for them to ever think they’ve gone far enough...Dr. Middleman says the brain actually shrinks when women become that thin, and it happens with every muscle in the body, even the heart. Many women die of cardiac arrest before dying of starvation.”

Aside from thinspo and everything that has followed that trend on social media, another concerning factor is how the users are affecting others body images. These users have begun sabotaging each other. So many kids reflect back to social media as the controller of their lives. So when someone has something negative to say, it is taken to heart heavily. 27% of teens feel stressed about how they look in posted photos. The amount of followers, likes and comments one can collect has become a competition.

Confidence does not come easy to anyone, especially women. Women are raised in a world where people who seem untouchable are their idols and women strive to be like them. Social media makes this ten times worse. Through social media, women are exposed to women who have “perfect” bodies and lavish lifestyles. These social media users inevitably compare themselves to those they follow. Comparing oneself to another is a stairway into body dissatisfaction. Social media highlights these people and these people are photoshopped, staged, and fake. The negative effects of social media, like traditional media, have generally been attributed to the process of social comparison. Seeing something you cannot attain leads one into obsessing over that image. Growing body research has shown parallel negative effects resulting from social media exposure. Women are constantly comparing themselves to those they follow on social media and are influenced to have these unrealistic bodies and lifestyles. Social media has negatively affected how women see their bodies.

Advertising is a powerful part of social media. Companies pay influencers to advertise and these social media influencers promote their brand and or product. Advertisers take advantage of social media because it is where people are the most influenced by ads and people promoting those ads. Companies use images of “perfect” bodied women and share them on their page in relation to their product. Women are used and are objectified by advertising creating unrealistic standards. There is a famous saying that “sex sells” which when you think about it, that saying is dangerous. That statement is why advertisers pay these Instagram famous models and conform them to their product just to increase their sales. Studies have stated that there has been an increase in Instagram ads and that numerous companies started a new budget for social media advertising. Women are being objectified just so a company can gain attention from that user’s followers. Social media is a dangerous place where women are manipulated to be like others, live like others, look like others, and to buy what other people use. All of this unrealistic advertising women are left with comparing themselves to others and being dissatisfied with themselves. The usage of social media has negatively affected how women see their bodies.

More needs to be done on social media to express to any and every type of viewer that there is a difference between a fit body, and a sick body. The sick bodies are being idolized and accepted while the healthy ones are being mocked and called fat and ugly. More education needs to be done across the globe, and more awareness needs to be spread. Social media not only puts pressure on one's body, but it also puts pressure on the mind. The mental health issues social media has placed on users is just as detrimental or more than what was the original problem. More needs to be done to end skinny culture and body shaming.

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