

Beyond Size: Exploring Social Media's Impact on Health and Body Image Among Obese and Non-Obese Young Women

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Abstract

This thesis explored the impact of social media on the body image and health perceptions of young women, examining if different body sizes experience this impact and these perceptions differently. Through qualitative comparative research, interviews were conducted with fourteen women aged 18 to 26, focusing on their engagement with social media, especially Instagram, and its relation to their self-esteem and health awareness.

The study investigated three core areas: the definition of health and ideal body images as perceived by women of varying body sizes, their interactions with social media platforms and influencers, and their attitudes towards movements like Body Positivity. The findings revealed that while social media can serve as a platform for positive self-expression and support, its pervasive nature also presents significant risks such as body dissatisfaction and the propagation of unrealistic beauty standards. Notably, participants displayed varied responses based on their body size, with those perceiving themselves as larger expressing different, more intentional, interactions with social media compared to their slimmer counterparts.

This research highlights the complex role of social media in shaping health and body image perceptions among young women. It suggests that social media does not merely reflect societal norms but actively participates in their construction, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes about body image. The study underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of social media's impact across different body types and calls for strategies to mitigate its negative effects while enhancing its potential as a tool for positive body image advocacy and mental health support.

Dit onderzoek bekeek de invloed van sociale media op het lichaamsbeeld en de gezondheidspercepties van jonge vrouwen, en of verschillende lichaamstypes deze anders ervaren. Via kwalitatief onderzoek werden veertien vrouwen tussen 18 en 26 jaar geïnterviewd, gericht op hun interactie met sociale media, vooral Instagram, en de invloed daarvan op hun zelfbeeld en gezondheidsbewustzijn.

De studie onderzocht de definitie van gezondheid, ideale lichaamsbeelden, interacties met sociale media platforms en influencers, en houdingen tegenover bewegingen zoals Body Positivity. Bevindingen toonden aan dat sociale media een platform bieden voor zelfexpressie maar ook risico's zoals lichaamsonvrede en de promotie van onrealistische schoonheidsnormen met zich meebrengen. Opvallend was dat de reacties van de deelnemers varieerden op basis van hun lichaamsgrootte, waarbij degenen die zichzelf als groter beschouwden, andere, meer doelgerichte interacties met sociale media vertoonden in vergelijking met hun slankere tegenhangers.

Dit onderzoek belicht de complexe rol van sociale media in het vormgeven van gezondheids- en lichaamsbeeldpercepties onder jonge vrouwen. Het suggereert dat sociale media niet alleen maatschappelijke normen weerspiegelen, maar ook actief bijdragen aan het vormgeven ervan, vaak door schadelijke stereotypen over lichaamsbeelden te versterken. De studie benadrukt de noodzaak van een genuanceerd begrip van de impact van sociale media op verschillende lichaamstypes en roept op tot strategieën om de negatieve effecten te mitigeren en tegelijkertijd het potentieel ervan als instrument voor diversificatie en mentale gezondheidsondersteuning te vergroten.

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Introduction

Obesity rates have tripled since 1975, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), and are linked to serious health risks including high blood pressure, diabetes, and mental illnesses such as depression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Our World in Data (2017) shows a correlation between calorie intake and obesity rates by country. Previous theses already questioned participants about nutrition and obesity, including eating disorders and the pressure to diet, but is nutrition linked to health or is it linked to the desire to be slimmer? Is physical appearance (primarily weight) universally regarded as an indicator of health and is it primarily a vision promoted by society? Speaking of self-esteem and self-perception we may wonder if being overweight or obese leads to mental issues, or if the surrounding influences make one feel bad about their appearance (weight), which in turn leads to mental issues. On the other hand does everyone feel the pressure to fit a particular 'healthy' body image or does this body image differ between young women with different body sizes?

Social media, particularly Instagram, poses risks to young women's mental health due to its addictive nature and lack of "stopping cues" (Abrams, 2021). Studies suggest that the impact on mental health depends not on usage duration but on how platforms are used (Odgers and Jensen, 2020). Prior theses indicated that overweight women often curate their feeds to avoid the thin ideal, suggesting a conscious effort to mitigate social media's negative effects. This research aims to explore if these media habits are unique to women with larger body sizes or general coping mechanisms, and whether they lead to more positive self-perceptions and attitudes towards social media for everyone, as well as whether it results in more or less intensive use of the platform. During the research social media and influencers will often be put under the same umbrella of 'social media'. This because Instagram was the focal point for discussing social media platforms and influencers, since it was the first platform where influencers gained more power.

Social media often showcases various social/political movements and forms clusters of like-minded people. The Body Positivity Movement, originally for heavier individuals, evolved to include anyone not fitting current beauty standards or with "imperfections". Unfortunately,

its name sometimes misleads as requiring constant positivity, which is unrealistic. This shift caused larger people to lose their “safe space,” leading to toxic positivity and perceived “glorification of obesity” (Cremers, 2022; De Jaegher, 2023; Meysman, 2023). Positive body image theory suggests that engaging with body-positive content improves body image, raising questions about the source of negative connotations and differing perceptions across body sizes. So where do these negative connotations come from, besides linguistics, and is there a difference in how different body sizes see these types of body centred movements (Rodgers et.al, 2022)?

This leads to three secondary research questions:

- How do women with varying body sizes view their body and health?
- How do they interact with Instagram and influencers?
- How do they perceive movements like Body Positivity?

This qualitative comparative study will analyze interviews with 12 women aged 18 to 26, exploring their social media use and body size perceptions, informed by previous studies and theses.

Literary review

1. Defining 'health'

Health definitions have evolved to include both physical and mental aspects. The World Health Organization (WHO) initially defined health in 1948 as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease. This concept has broadened over time, complicating measures such as Body Mass Index (BMI), which has been critiqued for not distinguishing between muscle and fat mass or accounting for personal factors like age (Khanna et al., 2022; Nuttall, 2015).

Physical health, closely linked to fitness, involves the capacity to perform daily activities without fatigue, influenced by genetics, health status, environment, and lifestyle (Koipysheva et al., 2018). Koipysheva et al. (2018) also determined that physical health should be tested by physical examination and motor quality testing. However physical health, as described from a cultural standpoint, doesn't entail these specifications. Cultural perspectives vary, with Western ideals often focusing on thinness, impacting both physical and mental health perceptions. Even now, a time where diversity is sought after, the dominant ideal remains ever-present (Fardouly et al., 2019; Perloff, 2014).

The way health has been measured over the years, is by measuring ones BMI. This abbreviation stands for Body Mass Index and is calculated by dividing how much you weigh in kilograms by your height in metres squared. Although BMI can roughly determine if a person has a high risk of developing hypertension, diabetes, ..., it cannot be used as an indicator of body fat percentage and is overall better used in combination with other tests like waist-to-hip ratio and waist circumference. BMI doesn't leave room for the difference between muscles (lean mass) and fat (fat mass), this means that a person who is very lean can still have a high BMI. Furthermore BMI doesn't locate fat mass, which is prevalent in determining if a person is at risk of some diseases, like coronary heart disease, diabetes, ... because those are associated with fat accumulation in the upper body. It can be stated that physical health cannot solely be defined by BMI as it is also influenced by age and other personal factors (Khanna et al., 2022; Nuttall, 2015).

It can thus far be concluded that physical health is not to be generalized and should rather be addressed on an individual basis. For this study it is important to note that obese individuals do often suffer from many physical ailments like cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and many more and therefore are at risk of being less physically healthy (McCartney, Popham, McMaster, & Cumbers, 2019; Oleribe, et al., 2018; Ritchie & Roser, 2017; Salm, Ali, Minihane, & Conrad, 2021; van Druten, et al., 2022).

What influences health in every aspect is not only how much you move, a lot has to do with ones environment whether it's economic, social or even religious. Nutrition is an example of one of the factors we can influence ourselves (Oleribe, et al., 2018). A balanced diet is a cornerstone of good health. Consuming a wide variety of nutrient-dense foods ensures that the body receives vital vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients (Micha et al., 2017). Evidently malnutrition can lead to lessened immunity, while eating too much sugar puts you at risk of diabetes and obesity. Nutrition also plays a role in mental health, some specific foods and vitamins help release dopamine and endorphins (Adan, et al., 2019; Zavitsanou & Drigas, 2021; Saunders & Smith, 2010).

Over the last few years we can see a change in the definition of health, now including the concept of mental health. A Review by Fusar-Poli et al. (2020) defines good mental health as a state of well-being that allows individuals to cope with the normal stresses of life and function productively. According to Galderis et al. (2017) there are 14 domains that can be influenced to better mental health, one of which is physical health, once again, stating both are intertwined. It is important to note that the relationship between physical and mental health is interdependent as physical health issues concerning sleeping, eating or exercising can stem from mental health issues resulting from job loss, family loss, abuse, etc... while the impact of a crippling car accident can just as easily lead to mental health issues like depression (McEwen, 2005; Olafsen et al., 2021; Doan et al., 2022).

In conclusion, both medicine and literature seem to define health as a physical and mental state in which an individual is able to comfortably fulfil day to day tasks. Remarkably, this definition does not exclude the presence of either physical or mental illnesses. The definition does not speak on different societal and cultural views on health nor does it list the physical or mental traits that are commonly linked to the concept of health. For this research we stick

with the accumulated definition of health being both physical and mental, and both not having to be without imperfections. As we try to find out how much social media impacts young women's mental health, and simultaneously their physical health, we will first be confronted by the cultural view they have of health. It has been found that culture impacts body image and health ideals, and as we have seen the Western culture prefers a thinner figure (Fardouly et al., 2019; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018).

2. Health and social media

Quite some research has been done around mental health and social media platforms because of its all-encompassing presence in today's world. This chapter dives into the origin of social media, the grip it has on us, in particular mostly on our younger generation, and the side-effects and trends that are arising.

2.1. The rise of social media

Currently, 68.3% of the world uses social media, with Facebook being the most used but Instagram and WhatsApp are the favorites among Gen Z (Chaffey, 2023; Horberry, 2023; Kemp, 2023). Since the first social media platform launched in 1997, numerous others like Myspace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter have emerged (Samur & Cristison, 2023). Instagram, developed by Kevin Systrom and launched in October 2010, quickly gained popularity. By two years, it had 27 million users, and soon after, Facebook acquired it, allowing independent management but integrated advertising. Instagram's simple, picture-based design contributed to its addictive nature and successful transformation into an e-commerce hub with features like "Shoppable Posts" and "Instagram Checkout" (Blystone, 2022; Kim et al., 2020). The rapid growth of social media aligns with technological advancements and the increasing need for connectivity.

2.2. Impact on (young) people

Looking at generations Alpha (2012 – now) and Z (1997 – 2011), both have never known a world without the internet or social media, with the first social media, “Six Degrees,” launching in 1997 (Ngak, 2011). As social media platforms evolved, so did our interactions—we share, interact, and consume more, altering how we work and communicate, bringing both benefits and risks like fake news and addiction (Dandekar et al., 2018).

As said before social media, and Instagram in particular, is very addictive, there is no end to the feed presented before users. This unlimited amount of screentime however isn't what causes mental health problems, it's the poor sleep quality following all this screentime and it's the way people engage with the app and the content or each other, that causes harm. Older studies did find correlations between screentime and depression/ anxiety, saying heavy social media users have higher rates and the effects seemed to be way more prevalent with girls (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). It turns out adolescents looking for status or social comparison will more likely experience negative effects of social media. On top of that the problem lies within the fact that it is more often already troubled adolescents, adolescents from low-income families or adolescents that are prone to mental issues, that spiral using social media. Despite these risks, social media can also offer social support, increased self-esteem, and identity exploration. Online engagement multiplied and social media also became a way of connecting with offline friends and family when at home, which lessened the associations with depression and anxiety (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Abrams, 2021; Onyeaka, et al., 2023; Nesi, 2020).

Picture-based platforms like Instagram have been associated with body image and eating disorders, pressuring mostly girls to conform to thin ideals. Facebook's research confirms significant social comparison and body dissatisfaction among teens, especially girls, with 37% feeling worse about their bodies (Wick MS & Keel, 2020; Abrams, 2021; Wells et al., 2021; Midgley et al., 2021; Jiang & Ngien;2020). Interestingly, factors like education level and the tendency to compare oneself to others on social media play more of a role in body dissatisfaction than BMI, indicating that Instagram's impact depends more on personal perceptions than actual body size (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

2.3. Trends relating to health

The focus is put on trends relating to body image, since this was the focus of previous research. This part of the literature review starts off with some of the negative trends relating to body image, some of the trends triggering negative feelings regarding one's body and trends triggering mental issues, in particular eating disorders, on social media. Research from Silva & Steins (2023) showed that the exposure to hegemonic beauty standards in images causes body dissatisfaction in general. This shows that a general diversification is needed but it also shows that, when related to social media, users should be made aware of this consequence and they should be taught ways to diversify their feed (blocking certain tags/ users, more deliberately choosing who they follow,...). The rise of "fitspiration", otherwise described as the projection of a 'healthy' lifestyle including working out and restrained eating, did add to body dissatisfaction as well. While fitspiration seems like it promotes different body shapes, there is still a connection with wanting to be thin and the earlier, now banned, thinspiration trend that focused solely on being as thin as possible. Conjoint with these trends there was a rise in so called 'What I eat in a day' videos and posts that lead to more comparison and people trying to eat as little as possible (Dignard & Jarry, 2021; Vandenbosch et al., 2022).

With the rise of the influencer, came a new type of celebrity, one that lives off showcasing their lifestyle, their body, The whole influencer starting goal was to present the idealised life, their so-called 'best self'. As seen before, comparison to 'ideal' body images or an idealised person is bad for mental health and the exposure to glamorous lifestyles has also been linked to create more materialistic values and a worsened well-being (Tandoc et al., 2015). Of course the influencer trend has now broadened and there are a lot of different types of influencers, each supporting and presenting different norms and values. We already explored the 'fitspiration' trend, that came with its own type of influencers but there are also influencers following more body inclusive trends. There have been examples of advocacy driven and authenticity driven influencers that want to impact their audience in a positive and all-inclusive way (Nesi, J. et al., 2017; Sticca & Perren, 2013).

A prime example of a more inclusive body trend, is the Body Positivity Movement. It is called a movement because it originated in the 60's and 70's as a movement against the oppressive

beauty standards that were put on women. It was historically speaking initially a safe space for heavier bodied women. As social media gained traction, the movement also spread there and slowly but surely a more diverse beauty picture was being painted. In previous theses young heavier bodied women expressed both negative and positive feelings surrounding the trend, explaining that the use of the word 'positivity' made them feel like they have to be happy about their body all the time. A concern was also brought up that the movement is now being used for almost every imperfection, even the smallest ones, and doesn't leave much room for the initial group and its purpose. It has been researched, in previous theses, if exposure to body positivity content has a positive effect on mental health, body satisfaction and self-esteem in heavier women, and some effects have been found (De Jaegher, 2023; Cremers, 2022; Meysman, 2023). A side trend, resulting from the Body Positivity Movement, was the one where people posted side-by-side pictures of them with/ without filter, with/ without posing, This trend made many users aware of the unrealistic images they saw online every day and helped them distance themselves. A focus on body appreciation in posts, rather than body positivity, also seems to help users to feel better about themselves, as long as the posts weren't seen as 'brave' by other users. Besides viewing body inclusive images, the use of body-positive captions was also found to be beneficial to women's self-esteem (Santarossa et al., 2020; Alleva et al., 2020; Rodgers et al., 2023; Vandenbosch et al., 2022).

3. Conclusion literature

As we can see social media platforms, such as Instagram, are here to stay. They do definitely have an impact on our mental health, but the possible effects seem to be mostly linked to the social media user and not solely to the platform. A conscious and 'healthier' way of using social media seems to include less social comparison and, if this isn't possible, blocking people/ pages that trigger social comparison. Not all that comes from social media seems to be bad. People discover their likes and dislikes and it can also lead to higher self-esteem. Finding and following the right trends and influencers (for you) seems to play a big role. Whether your body size, which is as seen above not linearly linked to your health, makes you more accessible to be positively influenced by Instagram/ influencers is yet to be determined as there is no other research that explores this division.

Since many researchers found that social comparison is negative for social media users' mental health, one can't forget that following trends like the Body Positivity Movement, still causes social comparison. Another problem might be the creation of another beauty standard or the rise of tokenism, instead of a more inclusive representation, where different body types are merely used to stand out, not to create a more diverse picture and world vision where everyone feels like they fit in. As a final note, social media and its trends don't seem to be the only reason young woman feel negatively towards their body and other factors should be included and researched as well.

Research design

1. Method

The aim of this research is to see if social media and influencers have a positive impact on young women with different body types, as previous theses state they do on overweight/ obese women. To achieve this a comparative qualitative study has been chosen. All participants, regardless of their body type, will be asked the same questions. The goal is to investigate their views on health, in what way they differ, how they view their social media use, if social media influences their views on health and in what way they are generally positively or negatively influenced by social media and influencers. These are all in depth, emotional questions, which makes a semi structured in-depth interview ideal to be direct but also leave room for elaboration and deviation. 14 participants will be interviewed which isn't enough to have a generalisable result and because of criterium-selection of participants it's impossible to be completely objective, the researcher will however remain as objective as possible during the interviews and not let own experiences influence the results.

The research question that we will attempt to answer is:

How does social media influence women with different body sizes' (mental) health?

To formulate an answer 3 secondary questions will have to be answered:

- How do women with different body sizes define 'being healthy,' and how does this differ among them?
- How do women with different body sizes feel about/ engage with Instagram and influencers and why?
- How do women with different body sizes perceive the Body Positivity Movement and online diversification?

2. Participants

As this study constitutes a conclusion to several theses previously conducted at the University of Ghent, maintaining consistency in the participant profile is imperative. To stay close to all three theses and not make age too big of a variable, a participant age-window of 18 to 26 years has been decided. This way only participants that have grown up with the phenomenon of social media, will be chosen. Previous research and theses focused mainly on women after finding out social media beauty standards generally impact them more than men.

As an attempt to put together a varied group of participants, twelve females will be selected from those who voluntarily initiated contact after viewing the call for participants through Instagram and Facebook. The participants will be chosen by the researcher based on their activity on social media, as the point of this research is to question participants on their social media use. Participants will have the opportunity to choose a body type that they think matches theirs as the aim is to investigate how the participants perceive themselves. The objective is to recruit twelve participants, with six individuals self-identifying within the initial four categories and another six self-identifying within the final four categories. Given that participant recruitment is based on voluntary self-selection for the study, and the researcher lacks the capacity to selectively recruit specific body types, there is a possibility of an unequal distribution.

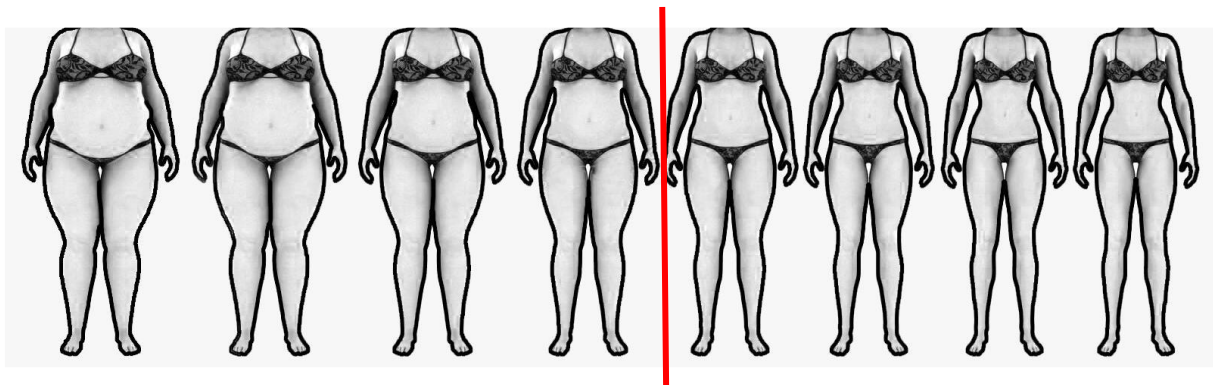


Figure 1 Self-devision participants

There is a possibility participants will choose a different category than they are actually in, this could be a sign of body dysmorphia and could be interesting while interpreting the results. As not all body shapes are included in this picture (for example: being heavier on top or in the bottom) a secondary choice will be made determining their body shape. Body shape could also impact one's view of their body type as some shapes are more prevalent in media and some are more desired (Connolly et al., 2004; Posey, 2012). This variable won't be used when analysing the results of this study, but might still be useful in later studies or just to paint the whole picture.

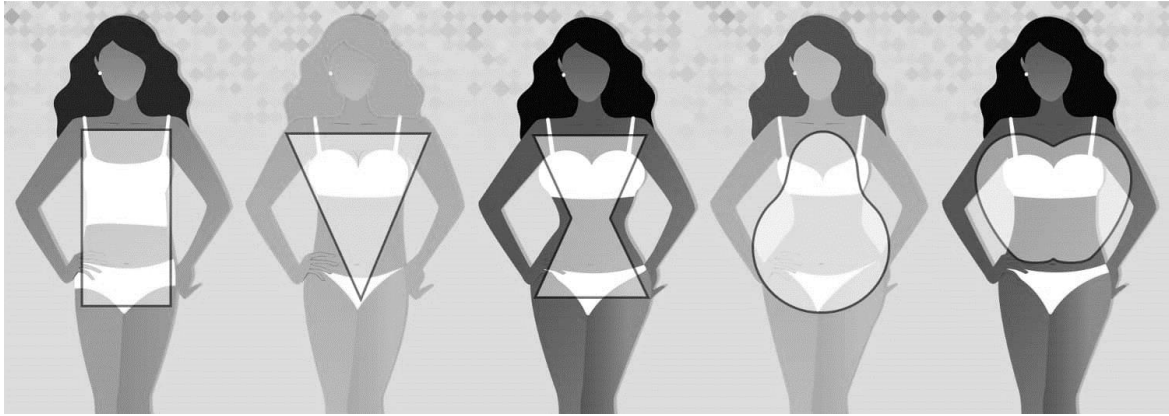


Figure 2 Self-devision participants

BMI will not be used to categorise the participants, because research has determined this measurement insufficient and this research is more appearance and representation based than it is weight-based.

To conclude, participants need to:

- Identify as female
- Be between 18 and 26 years old
- Use social media
- Feel comfortable talking about topics like weight, mental health and feel comfortable ranking themselves.

All topics in this research are sensitive and may evoke strong emotions among participants. When contacting women online, it is crucial to be careful and remain respectful. Initially, the researcher will post a story on Instagram, inviting friends and their acquaintances for interviews. Subsequently, the same invitation will be posted in various Facebook groups. Instagram is the primary platform due to its popularity and controversy among young women concerning mental health. Facebook allows reaching diverse groups without impacting research choices. The Facebook groups used, Ge zijt van Gent als ge... and Ge zijt van Gent... ier mag (alles), select participants by location, preserving varied social backgrounds. Details of the participant call are in appendix 1. This involves a criterium-based selection of participants.

3. Interview topic

Opening questions will include age, gender identity, definition of health, and whether participants consider themselves healthy. Before the interview, participants categorize themselves by body type; subsequent questions will explore their preferred body category, societal preferences, and what they observe on social platforms. This will lead to further questions about participants' feelings towards bodies they consider ideal or societal ideals. The researcher may inquire if participants have tried to emulate these ideals and their reasons for doing so.

To transition to social media usage, we ask which platforms they use, focusing on their specific use of Instagram. We will explore whether they perceive an impact of social media on their overall health and in what ways. Participants will be asked about content they prefer to avoid, reasons for avoidance, and strategies to prevent exposure to such content.

To shift the discussion, participants will be asked about trends and their emotional responses. If the Body Positivity Movement or related movements are not mentioned, the interviewer will prompt discussion on this topic. Participants will then have the chance to discuss their personal experiences with these movements, highlighting both positive and negative aspects.

Opening questions:

- Age
- Gender identity
- Social media use/ platforms
- Body type

Transition questions:

- Ideal body type (personally)
- Ideal body type (societal)
- What they see online
- When and where do you compare yourself to others
- Which social media platforms do you use
- What content don't you want to see

Key Questions:

- What is health
- Do you consider yourself healthy
- How do you feel looking at 'ideal bodies'
- How does social comparison influence you
- How does social media make you feel

- How do you use social media
- Which trends appear on your feed
- How do you feel about the Body Positivity Movement

Topic list:

- Health and the link to body type idealisation in women;
- The impact of a gap between actual body type and idealised body type;
- How is social media used by women in this age group;
- The impact of online trends and influencers on (mental) health;
- Perception of Body Positivity Movement and social media diversification.
- Which factors besides social media impact body image.

4. Coding and analysis

Before the interview, participants received a consent form ensuring agreement with the interview process and recording. The consent forms, found in appendix 2, guarantee interviewee anonymity, using numbers in reporting results.

Interviews were mostly conducted online due to location differences and ease of recording. Microsoft Teams facilitated online interviews, allowing for partial simultaneous transcription. In-person interviews were recorded using a phone and a laptop, with further transcription performed manually by the researcher. This manual transcription enabled in-depth data exploration. Interview durations ranged from 45 to 90 minutes.

Fourteen participants were interviewed, surpassing the initial target of twelve, due to an imbalance in body types. Despite adding two more participants, the imbalance remained. However, as theoretical saturation was reached, no further recruitment was necessary. Transcriptions in their original language are available in appendix 3.

Thematic coding focused on themes such as health (physical and mental, movement, diet, eating disorders), social media (usage, trends, influences, criticisms), body image (positive or negative, sexualization, social comparison, preference for smaller sizes, self-expression/growth), and social surroundings (culture, family, friends, gender, social pressure). Emotional valence was also considered, incorporating six commonly observed emotions into the coding schema. Analysis utilized axial coding methodology, employing ATLAS.ti software, which uses artificial intelligence to identify patterns and create distinct codes. A summary of this software is provided in appendix 4.

Results

Initially, a baseline was established regarding participants' views on health, their own body size, and the societal ideal. This helped gain insights into their self-image and possible origins. We then examined the participants' social media usage and the emotional effects of specific content, followed by in-depth discussions on online body image trends. Given the open-ended nature of the interviews, participants offered significant additional information, identifying further influential factors on body image beyond social media. This led to the formulation of an additional sub-question: 'What other factors influence young women's mental health in relation to their body size?'

1. Health versus beauty standards and self perceived body image.

1.1. Introduction

In this section, we address the first sub-question:

- How do women with different body sizes perceive their body and health?

Participants were initially asked to define health, a query that immediately highlighted their priorities concerning this concept. The literature review underscores that health definitions now include both mental and physical dimensions. Also noted is the generally negative influence of social media on young women's mental health. Thus, participants who prioritize mental health may be better prepared to counter external pressures. To verify the application of their health definitions, participants were queried about their self-perceived health and the reasons behind their perceptions.

Subsequently, participants discussed their self-assessment on a previously established scale and elaborated on the mental effects of their positioning. They were also asked to place the societal ideal image on this scale and to indicate any efforts made to align more closely with this societal ideal.

1.2. Health in practice

When queried about the definition of health, most participants (11 out of 14) acknowledged both mental and physical aspects, with only one focusing solely on the physical component. When discussing their own health, nine participants initially spoke about their diet, with four of these nine mentioning a reduction in eating. Six participants expressed feelings of insecurity and stress that adversely affected their mental health. Half of these six noted that their feelings of social comparison were influenced by friends or social media platforms..

‘But also, I mostly see it when I’m looking at friends, that they look very good. It’s not like it’s constantly on my mind. If it were, I would stop eating immediately, I would eat nothing, it’s a bit like that.’

-1-

1.3. The discrepancy between self perception and the ideal body size

In this section, we explore how women with different body sizes perceive their body and health. All participants placed themselves on a scale featuring eight distinct body sizes, and expressed their feelings about their own body and their perceived ideal.

For analytical purposes, participants on the left side of the scale are considered separately from those on the right, due to a notable imbalance—only five of the fourteen participants placed themselves in the first group. Notably, the first, second, and last body sizes on the scale were not chosen by any participant. The accompanying figure illustrates where participants placed themselves (marked in red above their perceived body size).

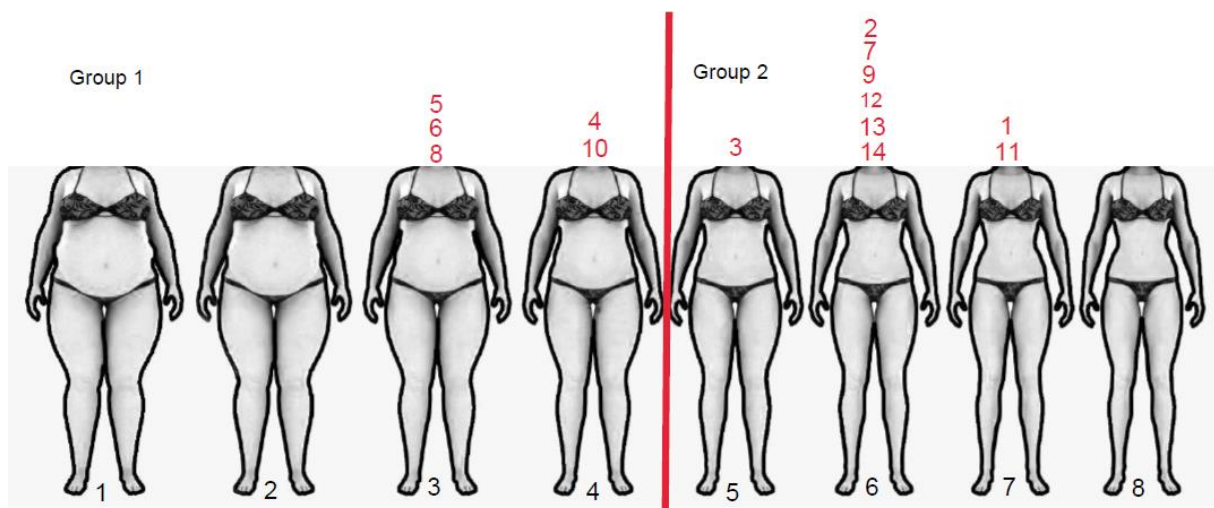


Figure 3 Self perceived body size participants

Below, in black, are the correlating numbers where each participant's perceived ideal body size is noted. Generally, the last two body sizes on the scale were most frequently chosen as ideal, with all but one participant (number 11) selecting a body size further to the right of the scale. Participant number 5, who is of Belgian and Cameroonian descent, noted that the ideal body images prevalent in these two cultures differed significantly.

‘When I have children, when I’m married, then it’s fine to look like this [body size 1 – 4]. But before marriage, you have to look like this first [body size number 8]... Here [in Belgium] I have noticed, based on my own experiences, that it doesn’t matter now which size you have...’

- 5 -

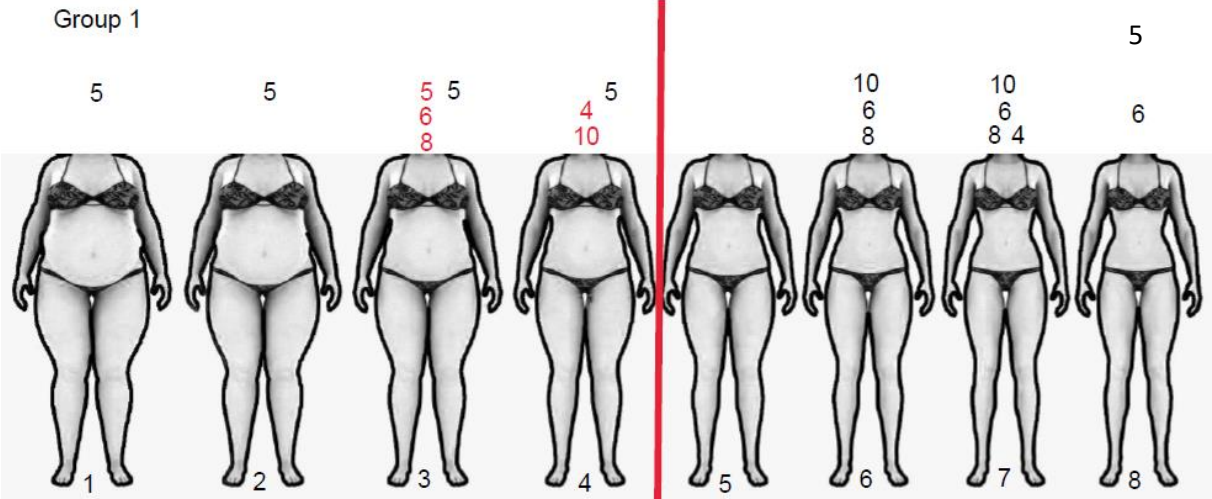


Figure 4 self perceived vs. ideal body size group 1

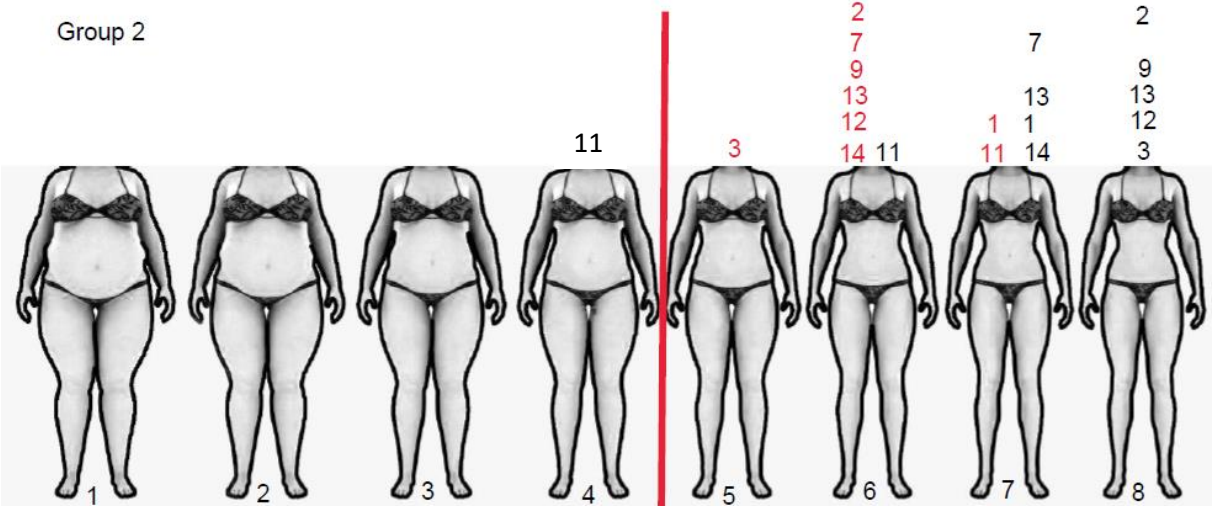


Figure 5 self perceived vs. ideal body size group 2

Participant 11 is the only exception, expressing that she sees the ideal female body size to be more to the left of the scale from her own perceived body size. She mentioned (involuntary) struggling with underweight when she was younger and always trying to gain weight, instead of losing it.

'My ideal body isn't the same as society's ideal body. I think society's ideal body is located around here [body 6]. My own ideal body size, when I think of an adult woman, is here [body 4].'

-11-

Group 1

Group 1 comprises five participants, with three selecting body size number 3 and two selecting body size number 4. When asked about their perceptions of their own body size, participants 4 and 10 explicitly expressed dissatisfaction with their size and occasionally trying to lose weight by dieting. Both participants reported a diminution of these feelings when growing older.

'So now I feel healthy myself, I'm not sick very often, but on the other hand, I skip breakfast so I don't gain much weight, which in itself is actually not very healthy.'

-10-

Participants 5 and 8 also mentioned negative body image and struggling with being overweight in the past. An important note is that participant 5 reported having weight fluctuations from a very young age due to depression and participant 8 was diagnosed with PCOS which causes hormonal imbalances and makes it very hard to lose weight. Both participants appeared to contextualize their weight fluctuations more effectively in light of these conditions.

All five participants in group 1 mentioned acceptance of their body size (in most instances) and prioritized health over body size. The reasons behind these participants feeling bad about their body size, now or in the past, include overall health (both mental and physical health aspects) and social pressure from friends/ family/ social media.

Group 2

Group 2 entails 9 participants spread out over body size 5, 6 and 7. Out of these participants seven communicated that they felt like having a smaller body size was better either extrinsically or intrinsically.

'I've noticed because of the industry I'm in [fashion industry] and spending so much time there, that I seem to like the skinny version of me more than the healthy version.'

-2-

'... and afterwards I thought that I looked good. Besides the fact that I lost all of my muscles, I'm super skinny. Skinny legend.'

-12-

6 out of 9 participants communicated feeling bad about their body size in the past, mostly because of social comparison with peers. In the current context, five out of the nine participants indicate a transition towards body size acceptance, two participants continue to harbour negative perceptions towards their body size, and an additional two participants report fluctuating perceptions of their body image, experiencing alternating periods of positive and negative self-view. Specifically, participant 2, employed in the fashion industry, articulates a dichotomy in body image perception. She expresses contentment and self-love when viewing her body through a personal lens, while also expressing a desire to lose weight in the pursuit of professional opportunities within her field.

'... I look in the mirror and I often think "my legs don't look like that". It's mostly because I think they aren't going to choose me for the job or I think they'll judge me. If I focus on what I think, I'm like "wow my legs look really good"... I notice I have a completely different view of myself.'

-2-

Participants who mentioned feeling bad about their body size still, already expressed feelings of social comparison and influence to lose weight from social media.

2. Is there a difference in social media use?

2.1 Introduction

The second and third sub-questions will be touched on below:

- How do women with different body sizes feel about/ engage with Instagram and influencers and why?
- How do women with different body sizes perceive trends like the Body Positivity Movement and online diversification?

As seen in the literary review, how one uses her social media platform does influence the impact social media has, whether it be positive or negative. When asking about social media use, participants were asked about the time they spend online, what they (dis)like watching and their overall mindset towards social media.

Additionally, participants were inquired on their daily encounters with body image trends and solicited for their perspectives on these trends, including the emotional responses elicited and the underlying reasons for these specific reactions.

2.2 Social media use

Group 1

Four out of five (80%) of the participants in group 1 characterized their screen time as "excessive" or indicative of a "mild addiction". All of them mentioned predominantly following their friends and family. Similarly, four out of five participants indicated that they actively block or avoid content they perceive as undesirable or harmful. This aligns with their recognition of the inauthentic or "fake" nature of most online content. Reflecting on their evolving understanding of social media and the way they are influenced, they acknowledged that these insights deepened with age. One participant mentioned that they felt an increased online pressure when comparing to their younger years, expressing concern for younger generations.

'... It's something that worries me. I have known a time before tablets and everything, just playing outside with the neighbours... the generation growing up right now, they won't be able to look at it as realistic. They see everything on social media. It's too much pressure on your mental health.'

All participants considered themselves “watchers of content”, with three out of five considering themselves to be “content creators” as well, albeit only for friends and acquaintances. In relation to body image perception, participant 4 and 10, who had previously shown signs of slight body dissatisfaction, are the only two participants in this group to demonstrate evidence of social comparison and influence from influencers or advertising.

‘I wouldn’t say I have suffered from... but I have been deceived to buy stuff because I feel like I want to lose some kilograms.’

-10-

Lastly, two participants independently reported encountering a greater prevalence of plus-size content than in the past.

Group 2

Among the nine participants in group 2, four expressed concerns about excessive social media usage. Only three out of nine (33%) primarily engaged with content from friends and family, while an equal proportion considered themselves “content creators” and 77,78% considered themselves as exclusively “watchers of content”. Compared to the first group, only a small percentage of this group (33%) reported actively blocking or avoiding content they perceive as undesirable or harmful. Interestingly, four participants disclosed having/ having had multiple Instagram accounts, whether for professional or private purposes.

‘Instagram isn’t a good place for me. I have 2 accounts, which is good because one shows me stuff I want to see... My other account is way bigger and more focused on my modelling career, so I constantly see photographers, other models, brands. You are constantly surrounded by very beautiful people...’

-2-

‘I have two Instagram accounts, I have my main account... I mean... they are both private, so I need to accept a request, but my biggest accounts is also friends of my parents or old classmates or ...’

-11-

One of the participants had a similar remark to participant 4 from group 1 about the next generations and their upbringing with social media.¹

‘Now it’s even more about the influencers with their perfect body en their perfect life but back then..., and maybe it’s for the better because if I were 14 right now and I saw the same for you page... I think it would be way harder now.’

-12-

Another big difference to the first group, was the amount of social comparison mentioned by participants of group 2. Some participants mentioned social comparison triggered by social media combined with feelings of insecurity that for them led to negative body image. Even if the participants were somewhat aware of the inauthenticity displayed on their feed, they still couldn’t seem to shake these feelings. Age did seem to heighten awareness in some participants, but not in everyone.

Generally, participants in Group 2 reported a more pronounced negative impact on their mental health.

2.3 The rise and fall of trends

As discussed in the literary review, trends have been around for ages. While discussing online trends with participants, a lot of them referred to general societal beauty trends and the way those affected them, with or without the intermediation of social media.

‘I think it has always been like that. I mean, women used to wear corsets to achieve the smallest possible waist, and now some women still do that with a waist trainer because they think it helps, but it doesn't really help. There's always something... whatever is happening in the fashion world, people are going to follow it.’

-8-

‘But in the past, all... that's really just an image now that a woman must be small, delicate, and super fine. But I hope that this thing now also swings back. We do now have more plus-sized women in the media and that just... yeah... I actually find that diversity really cool.’

-12-

¹ For you page: Content recommended by the social media platform especially for you.

Group 1

Participants in Group 1 expressed aversion to false information, unrealistic body images, and deceptive before-and-after photos. One participant observed that certain 'body positivity' trends predominantly feature images of individuals who, in her opinion, already conform to societal standards of an ideal body.

‘Especially when it comes to posts about how weight doesn't matter and so on, I then think, 'Okay, but you already have the ideal image. You can't really say that weight and such don't matter if you already have it. You don't know what it might be like to have too much of it.’

-8-

The group noted issues with social media algorithms that perpetuate content related to weight loss or depressing themes, despite their efforts to avoid such content. Participant number 5, who has African roots, also mentioned that certain body ‘trends’ seem to derive from African culture, exemplified by the recent emphasis on bigger behinds.

When asked about trends and content they enjoy, all of them in some way described trends and content that was genuine and realistic. The trend which shows bodies flexed/ posed and unflexed/-posed was most mentioned.

When specifically asked about the Body Positivity Movement, participants initially appeared unfamiliar with the trend until provided with background information. Subsequently, all participants were able to identify an influencer or celebrity associated with body positivity and expressed generally positive views towards the movement. One of the older participants contextualized it within broader societal trends and prevalent standards of attractiveness they had witnessed over the years, while also critiquing the potential risks of promoting certain body sizes without emphasizing the importance of health.

‘Yes, because if you think about how it was in the past, I mean, say the early 2000s, it was really very skinny, super skinny. And now, of course, take five years ago, it was more the Kardashian’s body type, large breasts, big buttocks, which was then considered beautiful. And now there's been a shift towards all body shapes. We're not there yet, but it's becoming more accepted, both in fashion and what is promoted.’

‘I don't think that as a larger person you should promote it, being large is okay for you, but I believe you should always include the side note that it's important to stay healthy in your own body. That's not always there.’

-10-

Group 2

In the second group, participants reported that they primarily follow content and individuals that appeal to them; however, they also encounter content featuring the 'ultimate body', promoting specific sports as means to 'get toned', and trends that diminish every conceivable physical imperfection. Same as the first group, participants mention they rather see authentic content, people with flaws and more diverse body types and sizes.

When specifically queried about the Body Positivity movement, the majority of participants demonstrated an understanding of its principles and expressed generally positive attitudes. However, there was also some criticism noted, and several participants indicated that they would not follow an individual solely based on their "body positivity".

'I think body positivity is good... but we have to remain objective and I don't know if it's always that healthy... Unhealthy bodies are being promoted, both skinny and big... a lot of the times we say 'you can be heavier' but when we see a very skinny girl we label her as being anorexic.'

-3-

'... For example looking at the Body Positivity movement, you see a lot of skinny women with a few small rolls, preaching that you have to accept your tummy... That's not the point... I think it's a good trend for the purpose it serves, but just not in the way it comes across on social media or something like that.'

-9-

'... sometimes I think it's a little unhealthy, mostly in America, because there are a lot of people that are like seriously obese... I feel like as soon as it's life threatening you shouldn't be able to do that. I'm not saying you shouldn't feel good about yourself but it's dangerous...'

-7-

Currently, participants acknowledge an increase in online diversity following the rise of the Body Positivity movement. However, there appears to be a diminishment in its prominence, and several participants have observed a resurgence of the skinny body type online.

‘I think we are evolving towards the “year 2000” body type. We have had the Kardashian’s for a while with their roundness but I fear we are evolving towards the other side.’

-3-

‘Yes, and you really notice how much influence those within that industry have. Like the Kardashians, how strongly they have been the epitome of the perfect body for so long, with a [narrow] waist and then buttocks three times larger and super large breasts, and then they all lost so much weight in just six months. They started exercising intensely... it all reversed, and then everything had to be so minimalistic, and that's just... It's just exhausting and yes... It's just insanely exhausting.’

-9-

3. Other factors impacting (mental) health and body image

Since participants mentioned many other factors influencing their (mental) health and body image, following sub-question will be examined in this chapter:

What other factors influence young women's mental health regarding their body size?

This section will not be analysed according to previous two groups but will be structured around several themes that consistently emerged during the interviews. These themes primarily encompass cues from social surroundings such as friends, family, and partners. Additionally, the disparity between male and female societal beauty norms is another frequently discussed theme.

3.1 Social surrounding: family and upbringing

As one might expect, family and upbringing significantly influence an individual's life beliefs; it appears they also profoundly affect perspectives on health and physical appearance. During the interviews, multiple participants recounted how their family had influenced their views on aesthetics, health, and dietary habits.

'Definitely [she felt insecure sometimes], but she could easily shake it off and thought, "fuck it. I'm a mom, I already work, I've studied," it's too much sometimes.'

-5-

'I was hardly allowed to watch TV by my parents, so as a child, I never really had the opportunity to compare myself to other people on TV or anything like that. I was allowed to watch for a maximum of half an hour per day at most.'

-7-

'Yes, my parents... my mom isn't really someone who places much value on beauty ideals or anything like that. She likes it, but it's not necessary, and I think that... that helped me a lot with my self-image when I was younger, but...'

-12-

Participants discussed both positive and negative comments they had received, how they were raised and the enduring impact some of these remarks had on them, persisting for years thereafter.

'I don't know. I know my dad always says, "I'm not going to visit you in the hospital if it's really too little [light] or if it's"... basically just if it's too little, you know?'

-1-

'Yes. Somehow, in the past, everyone always told me, 'Oh, you're so beautiful, you're so thin,' and I think that also had an influence... actually, you shouldn't assign value to something as if it's something good, because the moment it's gone, then you feel like, "oh, what's there about me now? Now I'm just not as thin, now I'm like everyone else."'

-3-

'It's just the Bosnian culture. People compare and if they think you look fat, they will tell you. But they will still give you food.'

-8-

'My parents made a very conscious decision... They consciously decided, "We will not give you any added sugars in your first two years of life," because they had read somewhere in a study that fat cells, the reserves you build up, mostly accumulate in your first two years of life and if you build up a lot of fat cells during that time, you will also very easily produce a lot of fat cells later in life.'

-11-

3.2 Social surrounding: friends and partners

Many participants reported experiencing feelings of social comparison well before engaging with social media, primarily comparing themselves to friends based on physical appearance. Additionally, when discussing friendships, numerous participants acknowledged having one or more friends who appeared to suffer from an eating disorder. Although not all participants were directly influenced by these disordered eating behaviours, they did express feelings of discomfort and pressure to also appear as thin.

‘I was at boarding school then, and I got along very well with a girl. She was skinny, but I thought that was really beautiful. I still think it's super beautiful. And, I just... I very quickly adopt other people's eating habits, it's really strange. So if someone eats really poorly or eats very little, I strongly adopt those habits.’

-1-

‘I mean, it's really a feeling that comes from within myself, comparing myself to my friends, or thinking about the next time I'll be sitting in a bikini, thinking “haha, I have the biggest butt of everyone again.”’

-4-

‘I used to have a friend who really had an eating disorder, and then we told her mom about it. Well, we were very careful about it, and we told her mom, “okay, yes, Emma doesn’t eat much. She takes one yogurt for lunch and sometimes doesn’t even finish it.” And then her mom said, “That’s really none of your business.”’

-12-

Yes, I have another friend as well, so I actually have three friends who I’m thinking of right now who have eating disorders, and the third one, who I didn’t mention just now, is also a model.’

-13-

The impact of having a partner varied among the participants. Some participants reported experiencing negative relationships that diminished their self-confidence, while seven participants indicated that they are currently in a romantic relationship. All seven described their partners as supportive and noted that their partners do not emphasize “ideal” female body images. However, it appeared that for some participants, even a supportive partner could not alleviate the inherent desire to be thinner.

‘My boyfriend is very supportive, in everything I do and how my body looks, and he really doesn't care about all that... we were recently discussing how body image is also shaped by a male perspective. I've also had boyfriends who placed more importance on that, and I felt a lot of pressure from them.’

-2-

‘He says he doesn't care, and if I want to lose weight, that's okay”... But then I almost force him to say “yes, you do have a little belly”. And then I'm like “?! So you think that too”, but it's actually me...’

-3-

‘I look like this, I identify this way, but I am also attracted to women. For me, maybe that makes it a bit easier to accept myself sometimes.’

‘Well yes, the last person I was dating was very skinny. She had her own issues with it, like eating and being very strict with herself... I'm not going to lie, sometimes it was also difficult. Because sometimes I felt like you are so strict with yourself. Like you won't eat that, then I won't eat it either because I'll feel a bit like a pig.’

-6-

‘Yes, I often tell Brent that now we really need to watch what we eat because he has also gained some weight. We have a bad influence on each other, let's put it that way.’

-10-

3.3 Social surrounding: gender norms and sexualisation

Participants expressed significant feelings of anger, frustration, and/or stress when discussing gender disparities related to body images and the sexualization of the female body. A distinction between female and male body expectations was noted by seven participants. According to the participants, these differences range from eating habits and the visibility of muscle mass to body hair growth, as well as specific male preferences for large breasts and butts coupled with an overall slender physique. They primarily attributed these differences to societal norms and Western cultural influences.

'I mean... for women, it's "don't eat too much", and for men, it's "eat"...'

-8-

'I hear that more often with women than with men. I mean, when men talk about women, it's not really desired, but when I talk about it with my girlfriends, they always say things like, "yeah, that is really beautiful" or "If I ever had a very light six-pack, oh, that would, that would look good on me" or something like that.'

-11-

'Yes, indeed, a man with a belly, nobody is going to look twice at that, but a woman who is a bit heavier...'

-12-

When queried about the contexts in which these differences manifest, participants discussed a range of media influences, including movies, advertising, music, and pornography. Additionally, they highlighted the prevalence of such disparities in work and educational environments. Two participants went more deeply and shared that they often felt sexualised, even from a young age.

'I once went blonder a while back and I received many more catcalls and was taken less seriously than when I had brown hair, with which I was taken more seriously. With short brown hair, I was taken very seriously, whereas with long brown hair I was highly sexualized because I also looked younger, it led to more sexualization and attracted different men.'

-2-

'Then, in high school, boys would always sing to me, "the hills of 5". I was the only black woman there... I told my parents I was being bullied, they said "They are just boys, don't take it personally"...'

-5-

Conclusion

Across previous theses, it became evident that influencers have a significant effect on the self-image and eating behaviours of obese young women, and that heavier bodied influencers generally exerted a positive influence. During the review, several concerns were raised which were further investigated and confirmed in this study.

The primary question addressed in this study was whether such positive impacts extend to all young women, not just those who are larger/ view themselves as larger. To explore this, two groups were constituted based on participants' own perceptions of their body image: group 1 consisting of five individuals who perceived themselves as larger, and group 2 consisting of nine who saw themselves as slimmer. Deep-dive interviews revealed a consistent understanding among participants regarding what constitutes health, encompassing both physical and mental aspects. Notably, when queried about their own health, 9 out of 14 participants immediately discussed their eating habits and diets, indicating that diet culture remains significantly prevalent. The majority of participants confessed to experiencing body image-related insecurities during their younger years. Interestingly, half of the participants reported an amelioration in these feelings as they aged, suggesting that while body image norms significantly affect most women, the impact is most pronounced around puberty. Comparing group 1 with group 2, not much difference was found. A plus or minus equal amount of participants from both groups still admitted to feelings of insecurity, attempts to lose weight and feelings of social comparison both on- and offline.

Examination of the participants' social media usage revealed a unanimous preference for authentic content across the board. The first group demonstrated a more conscious approach to their social media interaction, actively blocking content that triggered negative emotions or that they found uninteresting. Conversely, the second group exhibited a less deliberate usage of social media; notably, nearly half of these participants maintained a secondary Instagram account. This group generally experienced heightened levels of social comparison, which in some instances escalated to insecurities and body dysmorphic disorders. Interestingly, the only two participants in the first group who reported feelings of social comparison also disclosed attempts to lose weight earlier in their interviews. This suggests a possible correlation between social media-induced comparison and the pursuit of body alteration.

When discussing current trends, including the Body Positivity Movement, participants quickly associated these with broader societal trends, highlighting their transient nature. Despite recognizing

the temporary quality of such trends, all participants expressed a desire for greater diversity in their social media feeds, indicating a general demand for more representation and authenticity online. This suggests a complex relationship between media consumption, personal body image perception, and societal norms, underscoring the need for more inclusive and stable representations in media to mitigate negative impacts on self-esteem and body image.

During the interviews, numerous additional factors emerged that influence body image, including the impacts of family, friends, partners, society, and gender roles. In Appendix 5, a detailed profile is provided for each participant, which includes demographic information such as age, as well as self-reported data on their perceived body image, ideal body type, and additional factors including upbringing, education, and medical history. As anticipated, social media is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it reflects and amplifies the cultural values and norms with which we are imbued. The ways in which certain role models, such as our mothers, interact with norms surrounding female bodies definitely influence our perceptions and attitudes. Similarly, the manner in which friends manage their bodies and eating habits had a noticeable impact on some of the more impressionable participants. Character traits such as the need for belonging, susceptibility to influence, and insecurity also play significant roles in shaping these dynamics.

In addition to the factors previously mentioned, a significant driving force identified during the interviews was the cultural norms and values that our community upholds, including specific gender roles and stereotypes. Some participants highlighted the sexualization of their bodies (from a young age) and discussed the unrealistic standards women are expected to meet to attract men with their physical appearance. Furthermore, discussions also touched on the double standards that are evident from a young age, where societal norms permit men to be muscular, broad, or have a “dad bod”, while similar body conditions in women are often silently disapproved or never shown in mainstream media. This disparity underscores the complex interplay of gender norms and body image expectations that continue to challenge and shape individual perceptions and societal interactions.

Overall, Instagram and other social media platforms primarily seem to reflect societal norms and values regarding ideal body types, which impact all young women, not only women who are perceived as “larger”. The majority of participants who engaged with social media in a critical manner appeared to cope better with these portrayals, no matter their size.

Discussion

The research examined the impact of online representation and general social media on both heavier-bodied and non-heavier-bodied young women's (mental) health.

Fourteen women who volunteered were interviewed for this study, indicating that participants who had a pre-existing affinity for the subject matter self-selected into the study. This condition was advantageous for participant openness but detrimental to the representativeness of the sample. As this is a qualitative study, the sample size of fourteen participants is not representative of the broader population; therefore, the results cannot be indiscriminately generalized. Consideration must be given to the possibility that, despite voluntary participation, responses could still be influenced by social desirability bias, or that participants may have been reserved to share sensitive information due to the delicate nature of the subject.

The findings from this research can inform a larger-scale quantitative study where a more extensive investigation is conducted, and variables such as personality traits, mental, and physical health conditions are measured to determine the extent of social media's impact. This approach would help to understand better the dynamics at play and potentially offer a more generalized understanding of the influence of social media across different populations. It is also recommended to target a younger demographic to encompass the period of puberty, which may provide insights into how these dynamics are shaped during critical developmental stages. Educating young people about the use and realities behind social media may assist in mitigating some of its negative impacts. Determining the most suitable methodology for this investigation represents another line of research that remains to be explored.

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