

The Portrayal of Women's Bodies in Contemporary Social Media

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Abstract

This study investigates the portrayal of female bodies on Instagram, with a focus on diet culture, hyper-sexualization, Eurocentric beauty standards, and the body positivity movement. Concerns about the potential impact on young girls' mental health and the development of eating disorders and body dysmorphia prompted this research. We examined 125 publicly available Instagram posts to assess their influence on body image and self-esteem among young girls, using content analysis and surveys. Our findings reveal that Instagram's depiction of women's bodies can have detrimental effects on young girls, leading to negative body image perceptions and reduced self-esteem. This highlights the urgent need for increased awareness and intervention strategies to mitigate these harmful effects on vulnerable demographics. This paper underscores the undeniable influence of social media, especially Instagram, on adolescents, raising concerns about the unregulated dissemination of such content. To address these issues, collective efforts involving social media platforms, parents, educators, and policymakers are crucial to create a safer and healthier online environment for young people.

Introduction

In the age of digital interconnectedness, social media platforms have brought about a profound transformation in how we engage, communicate, and perceive the world. Among these platforms, Instagram stands out as a powerful player in the digital landscape, offering users an aesthetically captivating realm to share their lives, interests, and notably, their physical appearances (Verrastro et al., 2020). While Instagram unquestionably offers a means of self-expression and connection, it wields a considerable influence over individuals, especially young girls, shaping their perceptions of beauty and body image (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Piccoli et al., 2022). Indeed, social media platforms like Instagram have permeated contemporary society, exerting a significant impact on how we define beauty and body ideals, much like the teenage-oriented beauty and fashion magazines of several decades ago.

This influence is wielded through various means, including the use of filters, the hypersexualization of content, and the promotion of Eurocentric beauty standards, all of which may contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and body dysmorphia among young girls, who are actively encouraged to view such content on their Instagram feeds (Piccoli et al., 2022).

Given the omnipresence of social media in the lives of today's youth, there arises a pressing need to reevaluate our digital landscape. This reevaluation underscores the importance of responsible content creation and the implementation of comprehensive educational programs. These measures are essential to equip young girls with the necessary tools to navigate digital spaces safely and maintain their mental and emotional well-being in an era characterized by digital interconnectedness. As underscored by research, these efforts are crucial in safeguarding the next generation's mental and emotional health (Lazuka et al., 2020).

Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to contribute to a broader discourse and a collective endeavor aimed at preserving the mental and emotional well-being of the next generation within the context of our digitally interconnected world.

Methods

For this research, conducted between June to early September of 2023, a curated dataset was assembled by collecting the first 25 public images in a newly created Instagram account and associated with each of the five selected generic hashtags: #women, #femalebodies, #girls, #beauty, and #pretty. It is essential to note that this study does not seek to stigmatize or condemn the use of hashtags but aims to understand the potential effects that certain hashtag-associated content may have on the self-perception and well-being of young girls. Subsequently, these images underwent an in-depth analysis to unveil their underlying characteristics and potential effects on young girls' perceptions. These posts have been selected to represent a cross-section of the content that floods the platform daily, encompassing both the positive and negative aspects of body image promotion. This multifaceted analysis encompassed the evaluation of:

1. Photo Modification and Filters:

A keen focus was placed on any noticeable photo alterations or filters applied to the images. This critical examination aimed to reveal the extent to which these digital enhancements may have influenced a message and also contributed to the visual appeal of the content (Nerini et al., 2022; Rousseau et al., 2017).

2. Tonal Attributes:

Each image was studied to discern the emotional tone it conveyed (such as affirming, neutral, and disapproving) providing insights into the sentiments and messages conveyed through visual content.

3. Beauty Perspectives:

The depictions of beauty standards and perspectives within the images were looked into as well, shedding light on prevalent trends and ideologies related to beauty and body image that has been shaped by society and advertised on social media. Delving into this allowed for the discovery of how diverse the platform really is, when advertising certain posts on certain hashtags.

Following this comprehensive analysis, the images were thoughtfully categorized into three distinct groups: affirmative, neutral, and disapproving. The affirmative code means it contained content that aimed to empower women by promoting self-love and sharing personal journeys related to their bodies. In essence, it signifies content that fosters a positive and uplifting atmosphere for young women. "Neutral" mean posts did not contain any overtly positive or negative content regarding self-image or body image. Disapproving signifies that the content potentially included harmful imagery that could negatively impact the self-perception and body image of young girls. It suggests that these posts may perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards or have a detrimental influence on how young girls view their own bodies compared to others. This categorization was informed by the insights from the analysis and shifted into how these images could potentially impact the minds of young girls. Moreover, this categorization allowed us to assess the potential harm on their body perception, emphasizing the significance of our findings in understanding the complex interplay between social media imagery and body image development among young individuals.

Independent Variable: Public Instagram Posts Using Specific Hashtags

The independent variable pertains to the content of public Instagram posts. The independent variable is the "portrayal of beauty standards" on the posts, specifically focusing on whether they promote the themes of Eurocentric beauty and body dysmorphia or self-love and the celebration of body diversity through the content analysis. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have witnessed an exponential rise in popularity over the past decade, even paying famous individuals to post and gain a massive following. The prevalence of hashtags on Instagram allows users to categorize and discover content related to topics, people, trends, or themes, enabling the exploration of a wide range of subject matter.

Results

Figure 1



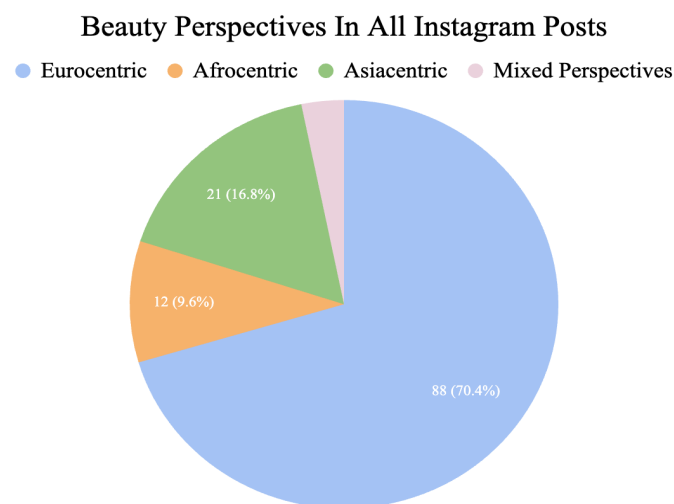
Figure 2



The inclusion of the word and hashtag "body" in social media discourse appears to be instrumental in promoting greater diversity compared to hashtags like "women." This phenomenon

can be attributed to the broader and more inclusive connotations associated with "body." By incorporating "body" into the hashtag and making it #femalebodies, individuals were encouraged to celebrate the diversity of human bodies, embracing various shapes, sizes, colors, and forms. These phenomena are prevalent in Figure 1 where we see body diversity, whereas we see Kylie Jenner, a famous social media influencer, in Figure 2 with extremely smoothed down skin. Moreover, the term "body" has become synonymous with the body positivity movement, which has gained significant traction in recent years (Lazuka et al., 2020). This movement encourages self-acceptance and challenges unrealistic beauty standards, emphasizing the importance of loving one's body instead of conforming to societal norms. In contrast, generic hashtags such as "women" may inadvertently overlook the complexities of diversity, particularly in terms of skin color and body size. The failure of these hashtags to encompass a wider range of body types and ethnic backgrounds raises questions about their effectiveness in fostering inclusivity within online communities, especially for young women. As social media platforms continue to serve as arenas for self-expression and advocacy, it becomes crucial to explore and understand the linguistic choices that can either promote or hinder diversity (Kelly & Daneshjoo, 2019).

Figure 3



Further analysis of these Instagram posts unveiled a disturbing trend, shown in Figure 3. Many posts consistently and unapologetically promoted Eurocentric beauty standards, glorifying features like fair skin, slender yet toned hourglass figures, high cheekbones, and sharp jawlines. Strikingly, these posts often fell under the neutral or disapproving ratings, Figure 4, highlighting the disconnect between societal ideals and real-world perceptions (Piccoli et al., 2022). In contrast, posts that championed self-love, body acceptance, and the celebration of diversity tended to receive affirmative or neutral ratings seen in Figure 1 compared to Figure 2. This suggests that, while Instagram does contain both harmful and positive influences, there is a growing awareness of the need to embrace diversity and promote more inclusive standards of beauty to aid young girls (Fioravanti et al., 2021).

Categorization of Instagram Posts

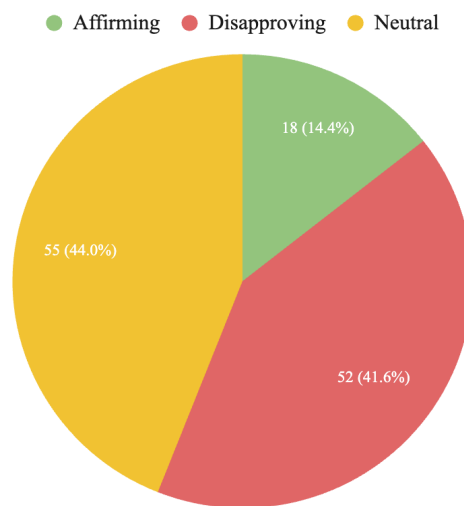


Figure 4

Discussion

In the age of Instagram, filters and editing tools have become a part of peoples' lives. These digital enhancements offer users the power to present themselves in carefully curated versions,

allowing them to craft an idealized image of themselves, which can be harmful for both the creator and viewer (Piccoli et al., 2022). Filters can distort reality, smoothing away imperfections and erasing blemishes shown in Figure 5. This distortion and creation of abs and the smoothing of the skin can inadvertently create unrealistic beauty standards that are nearly impossible to attain naturally (Nerini et al., 2022). For instance, the ever popular "face tune" effect can blur the line between reality and fantasy, leading many individuals, especially young girls, to feel like they are not good enough, when they compare themselves to these filtered, flawless images (Nerini et al., 2022).

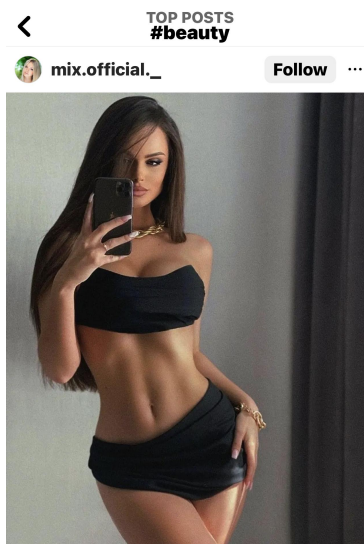


Figure 5

Furthermore, the hyper-sexualization of women's bodies is another concerning theme prevalent on Instagram (Schettino et al., 2023). The platform is full of sexually suggestive imagery and poses, especially when searching generic terms. This overt sexualization seen in Figure 6, can lead to a distorted sense of self-worth among young girls, as they grapple with societal expectations surrounding their bodies and sexuality (Schettino et al., 2023). Through provocative poses, revealing clothing, and suggestive captions, Instagram can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes that tie a woman's value to her sexual attractiveness. This not only objectifies women

but also gives into the idea that their worth is primarily determined by their physical appearance. For young girls, this hyper-sexualization can severely limit their perceptions of their own potential. It can contribute to a cycle of gender inequality by emphasizing surface-level attributes over intelligence, talents, and character (Schettino et al., 2023).



Figure 6

A significant issue that Instagram as well as basic society promotes is that of Eurocentric beauty standards. Scrolling through the platform, one can easily notice a preponderance of posts featuring individuals with all the Eurocentric features, like in Figure 7, perpetuating the idea that these features represent the pinnacle of attractiveness (Nerini et al., 2022). This lack of representation for diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can have harmful effects, particularly on young girls of color. When they see such a narrow definition of beauty being celebrated repeatedly, it can erode their self-worth, as they may feel that their own unique features are not valued or appreciated in society's eyes (Nerini et al., 2022).



Figure 7

Lastly, the only affirming theme was that of the body positive movement. Fortunately, amid the seemingly endless scroll of idealized images, there are creators of Instagram dedicated to promoting positive body image and self-acceptance (Kelly & Daneshjoo, 2019). These initiatives aim to counteract the detrimental effects of unrealistic beauty standards that are constantly being shown in everyone's' recommended pages. It's important to note that these messages of self-love, like Figure 8, may not reach a broad audience, as much as it would be appreciated for young girls to see. They often exist within small communities or niche accounts, which can limit their impact. Additionally, even within these communities, there might be gaps in representation, as they may not cover all body types, sizes, or ethnicities, leaving some individuals feeling overlooked and unrepresented (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). While still trying to accomplish a mission and message, there is always going to be more that needs to be done, so everyone is included.

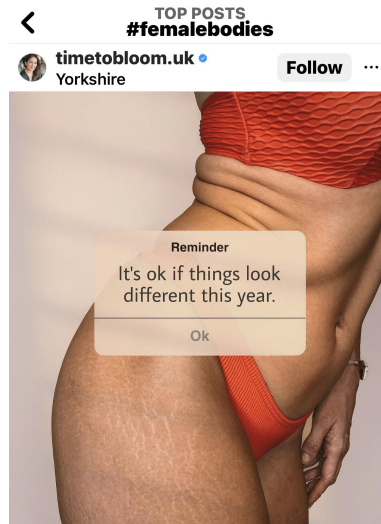


Figure 8

Limitations

Despite the creation of a brand-new account, the influence of the way that Instagram's algorithm runs and on the displayed images remains a potential limitation in the research. The limitations of this research also include a relatively small sample size of 125 Instagram posts, which potentially limits the generalizability of findings to the broader content landscape. The categorization of posts into affirmative, neutral, or disapproving groups is subject to interpretation and researcher bias, which may introduce variability in results. Ethical concerns related to privacy and consent arise from the analysis of publicly available content as creators don't know they are being researched (Lazuka et al., 2020). Additionally, while the research identifies associations between Instagram content and negative self-perception among young girls, it cannot establish causality, and other factors may contribute to these outcomes. Lastly, geographical and cultural variations in content and its impact are not fully explored, limiting the study's applicability across diverse contexts.

Implications

The importance of collective efforts to mitigate the negative impact of social media on young girls' mental health and body image perception is profound. By raising awareness, implementing responsible practices, and providing support, society can strive to create a healthier digital environment for the next generation (Frison & Eggermont, 2017). Policymakers should consider regulating social media content to promote responsible creation and filter out harmful media. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to maintain open communication with their children about online experiences and set positive examples. Social media platforms should invest in robust content moderation and algorithm adjustments to minimize harm (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). Society should promote diversity, inclusivity, and support advocacy movements to foster a healthier digital culture, ultimately ensuring the well-being of young girls in the digital age (Lazuka et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper sought to dive deeply into the complexities surrounding the portrayal of women's bodies on Instagram to shed light on the potential consequences for the mental health and well-being of young girls. By examining the impact of filters, body image promotion, hypersexualization, and Eurocentric beauty standards, we hoped to foster a greater understanding of the role that social media plays in shaping society, our perceptions of self, and others. Ultimately, this exploration demonstrates the urgent need for responsible and mindful engagement with social media platforms to lessen the adverse effects they may have on the most vulnerable members of our society, young girls.

Next Steps

Soon, we aspire to engage in one-on-one interviews with individuals to explore the impact of Instagram on real people. The dependent variable in this study revolves around the potential effects that these public Instagram posts may have on young girls' self-perception, particularly in relation to their body image and overall self-esteem. Our objective is to search into the intricate connections between body dissatisfaction, diminished self-esteem, mental health, and behavioral changes. To accomplish this, we hope to employ real-life interviews in the near future.

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