

Adverse effects involving body image and self-identity experienced by adolescent females from viewing and posting idealised images of fit and healthy bodies on Instagram.

Kelsey Atkinson, 2019.

Abstract

This paper presents and discusses research on the process of adolescent females interacting with and posting idealised images of fit and healthy bodies on the social networking site Instagram, and the adverse effects this has on their self-identity and body image. This research finds that Instagram provides adolescent females with continuous access to peer culture and an influx of media representing idealised images of fit and healthy bodies. The adverse effects resulting from the viewing and sharing of these images include body image concerns, unauthentic displays of identity, self-dissatisfaction, conforming to gendered and sexualised stereotypes, objectification, poor self and social comparison and disordered eating. Issues around the need for peer validation and constant impression management practises are significant throughout the research.

This paper will discuss the process of adolescent females interacting with and posting idealised images of fit and healthy bodies on the social networking site Instagram, and the adverse effects this has on their self-identity and body image. Body image is found to be a socially and culturally formulated mental image of one's physical self (Fisher, 1986), which may be different to what someone represents and promotes on social networking sites. This can be closely related to the construction and upkeep of one's identity, which "is an ambiguous and slippery term ... [it] implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind" (Buckingham, 2007: p. 5). This construction and upkeep of identity relates to Goffman's (1959) concept of 'impression management', involving the control and regulation of information for the purpose of influencing perceptions. Female adolescents have more barriers in place than ever before when it comes to developing and maintaining a positive self-identity and body image, with the use of social networking sites such as Instagram and having full time access to peer culture (Mascherone et al., 2015), presented to them in forms and orders specially formulated by social algorithms (Cotter, 2018). Public spaces have evolved from mainly physical spaces to online spaces (Boyd, 2007; Hodkinson, 2017), which serve as "primary public spaces of interaction" (Hodkinson, 2015; p. 9). These primary public spaces of interaction include social media platforms such as Instagram. This platform allows female adolescents to interact with and post idealised images of a fit and healthy body, this can have adverse effects on their self-identity and body image (Buckingham, 2007; Ridgway, 2016). This will be discussed further throughout this paper, explaining how and why adolescents posting and viewing idealised images of fit and healthy bodies on Instagram has negative effects on their self-identity and body image.

Social networking sites such as Instagram are found to be an important part of adolescent social life and a representation of primary public spaces (Hodkinson, 2017). Instagram is a mobile app which was originally released on October 6th, 2010 for iPhones, before progressing to also include the Android system. In 2015, the app recorded more than 300 million active users and 70 million photographs uploaded every day, "allowing users to share life moments through pictures as they happen in real time" (Ridgway, 2016: p. 2). Instagram allows users to post photographs directly through the app or use photographs they've taken with their phone or camera beforehand, such as idealised images of fit and healthy bodies. When posting a

photograph to Instagram, users can add a description, a filter or other edits, and metadata, including hashtags and geotags. These forms of metadata can assist in grouping photographs together into categories, such as that of fitspiration or #fitspiration (fitness and inspiration). Users can search or follow specific hashtags, tailoring what they want to view and engage with on the platform. Posts can be commented on and liked by other Instagram users, and users can follow each other, allowing the other user's content to appear in their feed (Ridgway, 2016). Since 2016, user's feeds on Instagram are ordered using an algorithm (Cotter, 2018). This means that images in their feed are ordered depending on posts the user has interacted with, profiles they have searched for and their relationship with other users. Algorithms have an effect on social realities in ways that cannot be clearly seen (Cotter, 2018). This relates to the fact that Instagram has not given specific details around the workings of its algorithm – just that it is showing users what they most want to see. This could be influencing users to view and interact with specific categories of images, including #fitspiration. This act of liking, commenting and following of users can represent popularity and be a rewarding experience for users. Studies have shown that using Instagram regularly, as female adolescents commonly do, can have a negative effect on body image and body satisfaction (Ahazadeh, 2017). This can also relate to an increase in self objectification in adolescent females, which relates to comparisons between the self and models and celebrities (Fardouly, 2017). This act of self-comparison to models and celebrities relates to female adolescents experiencing adverse effects from using and viewing fitspiration images on Instagram. Algorithms can influence the particular images viewed and ultimately the act self-comparison. The negative effects of self-comparison experienced by adolescent females include negative body image and body satisfaction.

A common type of photograph which appears on Instagram is the 'selfie'. This was the word of the year by Oxford Dictionary in 2013, "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media web site" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). These images can involve the idealised images of a fit and healthy body, either posted by or viewed by female adolescents. The self-representation offered by posting selfies, has been found to be related to concepts of narcissism and even psychopathy (Ridgway, 2016). Selfies

can also represent a user's body satisfaction and "help to empower users by serving as a platform for self-representation" (Ridgway, 2016: p. 3), but still promotes negative body comparison and low internalised body satisfaction (Ridgway, 2016; Ahadzadeh, 2017). These types of photographs posted on Instagram are commonly representations of idealised fit and healthy bodies, also known as 'fitspiration' images (Fardouly, 2017). As mentioned previously, when uploading photos onto Instagram, filters and edits can be applied. This can be done directly through the app or from external editing platforms. The altering of selfies can be used to change one's appearance – including skin smoothing and body contorting to fit into societal gendered stereotypes of beauty. This can relate to presenting an unauthentic self, relate to impression management and have adverse effects on one's self-identity (Ridgway, 2016; Hodkinson, 2015).

Female adolescents can experience "the presence of sexual double standards in peer normative discourses" (Mascheroni et al., 2015: p. 1). Historically, mainstream media has been found to shape contemporary concepts and constructs of femininity through representations of women (Lupinetti, 2015) and "notions of the ideal female body" (Reade, 2016: p. 1). Social networking sites such as Instagram are found to represent significantly gendered identity spaces which can position adolescent females to be more subjected to sexualised stereotypes (Ringrose and Barajas, 2011; Mascheroni et al., 2015). These representations and stereotypes even involve "gender-typical poses and clothing" (Reade, 2016: p. 1) which are presented in images on Instagram, being strongly feminine or masculine and resembling "the visual codes of advertising" (Mascheroni et al., 2015: p. 11). This advertising style adapted through users' photographs can represent the sexualisation and objectification present on the platform. These stereotypes, double standards and sexualised feminine models of beauty presented to adolescent females on social networking sites have been found to be commonly conformed to. This is reportedly done in the hopes of peer validation and acceptance (Mascheroni et al., 2015; Lupinetti, 2015), which relates to impression management, and consistently trying to construct a desired identity to achieve this peer validation and acceptance. Conforming in social publics can result in validation in the form of likes, comments and followers – Instagram's currency of popularity (Tiggemann et al., 2018). This process of conforming can have adverse effects on the process of an adolescent's

construction of identity (Ringrose and Barajas, 2011). The process of constructing an identity has changed significantly throughout time, with people presenting themselves in predominantly physical public spaces, to online spaces (Boyd, 2007). This allows for more time to practise impression management, by contemplating, editing, constructing and formulating an identity, which may result in it being less authentic and stable (Hodkinson, 2017). Female adolescents conforming to these gendered and sexualised online representations, presents a more binary view of gender in the online public space. This may pose issues for those who may not feel they fit into binary gender roles, causing internalisation, self-objectification and appearance comparisons (Fardouly, 2017). These repercussions are an example of adverse effects experienced by adolescent females for viewing and posting idealised images of fit and healthy bodies on Instagram. In this instance – these idealised images representing binary gendered and highly sexualised representations of idealised bodies.

As discussed, Instagram is a social networking site which promotes popularity through likes, comments and follows. The platform hosts photographs posted by users, including selfies and fitspiration images, and represents a highly gendered space with female sexualisation and gendered stereotypes (Mascheroni et al., 2015; Lupinetti, 2015). These selfies and fitspiration images represent the idealised images of a fit and healthy body, which have adverse effects on female adolescent's self-identity and body image. Fitspiration is generally promoted as a positive term – promoting physical exercise and healthy eating. However, the viewing of fitspiration images is reported to have a direct cause of increased body images concerns in adolescent women (Fardouly, 2017), as well as reported poorer self-compassion (Slater, 2017). These adverse effects on adolescent women caused by idealised images of fit and healthy bodies have darker and more negative connotations than that of healthy food choices and exercise. Holland and Tiggemann (2017) found that women who post images of idealised fit and healthy bodies actually have a higher drive for thinness, bulimia and compulsive exercise compared to those who do not. It is found that these idealised images posted on Instagram can actually induce messages of guilt and promote stronger motivations toward appearance rather than health (Holland and Tiggemann, 2017). Even though these images promote messages and captions such as, 'Strong beats skinny every time', it is reported that

thin-ideal internalisation is common with those who post and interact with this type of content (Slater, 2017; Holland and Tiggemann, 2017). So much so, that some adolescent females involved with posting and interacting with fitspiration content on Instagram, are reported to be at risk for clinical eating disorders (Holland and Tiggemann, 2017). A specific eating disorder found directly linked to Instagram use is that of Orthorexia Nervosa, or obsessively pursuing a healthy diet (Turner and Lefevre, 2017). A study was done directly correlating the two using the ORTO-15 inventory, a questionnaire used to diagnose Orthorexia Nervosa. The study found that this link did not occur with any other social networking site (Turner and Lefevre, 2017).

This is a representation of internalisation experienced by adolescent females who use Instagram (Ahadzadeh, 2017). They promote one thing - healthy eating, being strong, loving yourself, and they feel another – negative body image, self-objectification and comparison to others (Fardouly, 2017). This relates to the popular use of social networking sites in a late capitalist society, which promotes immediate forms of interaction. This presents a lessened importance for authentic, stable displays of identity, through “cultures of ‘always on’ access via mobile technologies” (Hodkinson, 2017: p. 8). Adolescent females are using impression management by being able to carefully choose the images and content they put forward to others (Boyd, 2007). By doing this, they are commonly conforming to societal standards of appearance, gender and sexualisation which has adverse effects on their self-identity and body image (Mascheroni et al., 2015; Lupinetti, 2015). As discussed, Instagram promotes popularity through the use of likes, comments and follows. This culture of popularity and continuous access to peers through Instagram can involve an investment in likes and a feeling of need for popularity. This can not only lead to conformity, but also appearance comparison and self-dissatisfaction (Tiggemann et al., 2018). These consequences have been directly linked with viewing images on Instagram with a large number of likes, and reportedly being invested in the amount of likes the user or other users are receiving (Lupinetti, 2015; Tiggemann et al., 2018). As well as the number of likes received, users have also found to be adversely affected by viewing celebrity and peer images which are conventionally deemed as being attractive (Brown and Tiggemann, 2018). These findings show no difference between viewing of attractive celebrity or attractive peer images,

representing the high importance and power of peer culture and the importance of social media in adolescents' lives (Boyd, 2007).

Instagram provides adolescent females with continuous access to peer culture and an influx of media representing idealised images of a fit and healthy body. As discussed from the research cited in this paper, increased use of Instagram, including posting and viewing of these images has been directly connected with adverse effects related to body image and self-identity. These have shown to include body image concerns, unauthentic displays of identity, self-dissatisfaction, conforming to gendered and sexualised stereotypes, objectification, poor self and social comparison and disordered eating. Self-identity has been found difficult to authentically explore and construct when there is pressure to consistently appear 'perfect', which is controlled by impression management and rewarded with validation from peers in the form of likes, comments and follows. Since its inception in 2010, Instagram has continued to gain popularity with the assistance of technological advances. Due to current trends, Instagram use, and the viewing and posting of idealised images of fit and healthy bodies is likely to be sticking around for the time being. The adverse effects relating to body image and self-identity are likely to continue to effect female adolescents who use Instagram to interact with and post idealised images of fit and healthy bodies.

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