

## Social Media, Body Image Dissatisfaction, and Disordered Eating: A Systematic Review of Studies on Young Women

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### ABSTRACT

Social media has become a prominent communication tool, transforming how people interact and influencing various aspects of their lives, including body image and eating behaviors. This systematic review aimed to comprehensively analyze the growing corpus of research examining the impact of social media on young women's body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating. A search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and MDPI databases, following PRISMA guidelines. Twenty studies meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed, revealing several key findings. Exposure to appearance-based content on social media was strongly linked to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating behaviors. Increased time spent on social media, particularly on appearance-focused platforms like Instagram and Facebook, was significantly associated with body image concerns and eating pathology. Self-esteem and satisfaction with body image were negatively affected by excessive and problematic social media use, with women being more prone to self-comparison and internalization of unrealistic beauty standards. Underlying processes, such as self-objectification, appearance comparison, and thin-ideal internalization, were identified as mediators between social media use and body dissatisfaction. These findings highlight the need for greater awareness and intervention strategies to mitigate the negative impact of social media on young women's body image and eating behaviors. Media literacy programs, diverse representation on social media platforms, and mental health professionals' awareness of these issues are crucial in addressing this growing concern.

**Keywords:** *Body Image, Body Dissatisfaction, Self-Esteem, Disordered Eating, Appearance Comparison, Self-Objectification*

Social media has become one of the most prominent communication tools today, transforming how people interact, whether for work, education, news, or staying connected to family and friends. Consequently, it holds a significant place in the lives of young people, who highly value social relationships. According to a Hootsuite report (2023), people now spend an average of six hours and thirty-seven minutes on social media daily. Constant updates from celebrities, peers, and influencers can lead to negative self-perceptions of one's career, status, appearance, and weight. As young adults transition out of adolescence, concerns about body image remain prevalent and social media affects them

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both positively and negatively. Although this encourages learning and social engagement, it can also promote misinformation and foster dependency. Prolonged exposure to advertisements, videos, and images from peers, influencers, and celebrities, often edited to portray an idealized, unrealistic appearance, can negatively affect self-esteem and body image.

Given the sharp rise in mental disorders associated with social media use, which is a public health concern, research on the psychological effects of SM use and exposure is gaining traction (Ljungberg et al., 2020). Recent research has shown that excessive exposure to social media leads individuals to develop self-esteem issues brought about by failing to comply with specific beauty norms (Arjona et al., 2024). The purpose of this study was to conduct a systematic review of the existing literature in this field. By comprehending this topic, mental health practitioners can recognize problematic habits, such as excessive social media use or shared pictures that encourage disordered eating attitudes and behaviors (Šmahelová et al., 2019)

### **Body Image**

Body image is a significant element of personal identity, representing an individual's subjective perception of their own body regardless of its actual appearance. It encompasses a complex mix of beliefs, emotions, evaluations, and behaviors that focus on one's physical self. Body image is a multidimensional concept that includes the following aspects.

- **Cognitive:** thoughts and beliefs about one's body
- **Perceptual:** how individuals perceive the size and shape of their body and its parts
- **Affective:** feelings and emotions related to one's body
- **Behavioural:** actions taken to monitor, care for, modify, or hide aspects of the body (Hosseini & Padhy, 2023)

### **Social Media and Glorification of Thin Ideal**

The "Thinspo" trend—an online culture across social networking sites (SNS) that exclusively promotes a lifestyle centered around extreme weight loss—is one of the troubling impacts of social media that has recently surged in popularity. This trend encourages habits, such as prolonged fasting, intense exercise routines, heavy coffee consumption to suppress hunger, and excessive sleep to prevent fatigue. In these communities, young women motivate each other through words and images to push through the periods of weakness, hunger, and tiredness. Even more concerning, community members recognize their eating habits as unhealthy, yet actively embrace and spread this mindset, attracting visitors who may initially be looking for healthier lifestyle tips. Research on online behavior highlights that "thinspiration" and "thinspo" are among the most frequently encountered and potentially harmful terms that affect users' mental health (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2014).

In modern society, being slender has become the ideal female body type. Women who are slender or even underweight are preferred in all industries that place a high value on a person's physical beauty, such as fashion, cinema, and idol. Individuals are indoctrinated to believe that being slim is ideal and attractive, whereas being overweight is unattractive and undesirable. As if that were not enough, the "ideal body image" idea is becoming even more popular thanks to social media sites such as Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. Social media has been strongly connected to the rise of eating disorders, particularly bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa, by instilling an unrealistic ideal of what a woman should look

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like in young women. It is not surprising that young women worldwide are becoming dissatisfied with their bodies and are searching for unhealthy ways to alter them, as their social media feeds are constantly flooded with images and advertisements of slender women, whether they are naturally thin or not.

### **Involvement of Social Media in Body Image Dissatisfaction among Women**

Young women are more prone to have a poor body image, especially body dissatisfaction (Fallon et al., 2014). Numerous studies have demonstrated that social media have a particularly strong effect on women's perceptions of their bodies. Additionally, some research indicates that social media exposure leads to changes in eating habits, with many women embracing unhealthy eating habits in addition to body image dissatisfaction. O'Brien Instagram study (2015) is a famous study involving eight women who had unhealthy eating habits. The survey participants stated that they learned to chew gum and fill up water instead of eating and that they acquired recipe ideas for meals with the fewest calories, fats, and carbohydrates from Instagram. According to research, 81% of 10-year-olds fear becoming overweight, and despite the media's constant promotion of idealized thinness, only 5% of women are slim.

Social networking sites play a crucial role in not only establishing unrealistic expectations for women, but also encouraging harmful habits to meet those expectations. Hashtags such as #whatieatinaday, #mealspo, and #edtwt are among the most popular hashtags on social media platforms such as Tik Tok, Twitter, and Instagram, which together have over two billion users (Jareb & Moras, 2020). It has been shown that females are more likely than men to be affected by social media, experience body image dissatisfaction, and engage in unhealthy eating habits (Srinidhi, 2017). Although previous systematic reviews have explored the impact of social media on body image, most have not specifically focused on its effect on women. In light of the aforementioned, the purpose of this work is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of a growing corpus of research that examines how social media affects young women's perceptions of their bodies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Search Strategy***

In accordance with the PRISMA guidelines for methodological design—procedure, search process, selection, and synthesis of results—a systematic review was used to analyze the literature for this study (Moher et al., 2009). In October 2023, a search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and MDPI databases to identify articles for evaluation. Combinations of phrases such as "social media," "body image," "disordered eating behavior," "women," "Tiktok," "Instagram," "thin ideal," "adolescents," and "young adults" were used to search databases. The references of the collected articles were reviewed to identify additional relevant studies.

### ***Selection Criteria***

The studies had to fulfill the following requirements in order to be considered for the analysis: 1.) Examine the influence of at least one widely used social media platform on body image. 2.) Measures that primarily assess or measure body image dissatisfaction or EDs include the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT, EAT-26; Garner et al., 1982), Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI, EDI-2, EDI-3; Garner, 2004), Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ; MBSRQ-AS; Cash, 2000), Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2001), and Body Dissatisfaction Scale (BDS;

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Mutale, 2016). Other validated scales and questionnaires were included. 3.) The study had to be conducted in English or other languages with the largest number of speakers globally as such studies tend to report a large number of results. 4.) Studies that included women as participants have shown that women are largely affected by social media.

For this investigation, the following exclusion criteria were developed: 1.) Studies that were mainly qualitative; 2.) Studies involving individuals from certain professions where diet is important (such as dancers, actors, athletes, models, and others); 3.) Studies using self-made or dubious validity instruments; and 4.) These studies were limited to male participants.

### Selection of Studies

A flowchart was used to provide a broad overview of the article selection procedure in accordance with the PRISMA recommendations (Moher et al., 2009). Following the search, papers were chosen first on the basis of their titles, then on the basis of their abstracts, and finally, considering the entire journal article (Rodriguez et al., 2021). The search strategy generated 131 studies, of which duplicate studies (n=49) were excluded. Subsequently, studies in languages other than English or languages spoken globally were excluded (n=9). Publications with only abstracts and/or qualitative articles (n=32), articles that had people from specific career paths (n=5), studies that used self-made scales or scales with questionable validity (n=11), and studies that focused only on men (n=5) were removed, leaving 20 studies that met all the desired criteria.

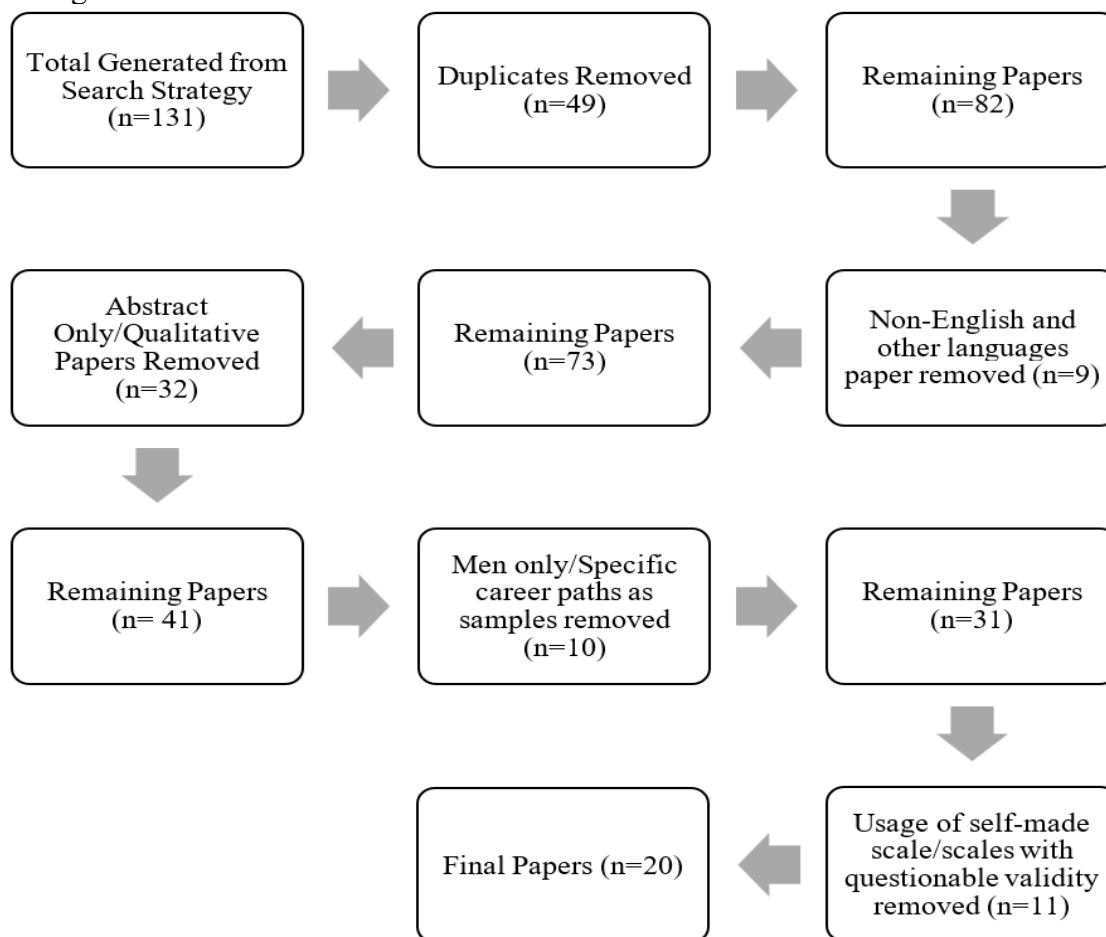


Figure No.1: Search Strategy

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### *Ethics declaration*

Not applicable.

## **RESULTS**

In the results phase, 20 studies that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed. Of these 20 studies, 13 were correlational and seven were experimental. More than half of the studies had female participants (n=15), but five included men; however, they were a minority in terms of the sample size and results. Five studies were conducted on U.S., Canadian, and Australian participants, while seven studies included European participants of different ethnicities. Five studies were conducted with Asian participants, including people from East Asia, West Asia, and India. Three studies claimed that they included participants of different ethnicities.

**Table No.1: Summary of articles included in the review**

Author (year)	Country	Design	Sample	Female (%)	SNS Measure	Body Image/ Eating Behaviour measure	Key Findings
Arjona (2024)	Spain	Correlational	605	48.42	Social media usage Exposure to appearance based content on social media	Body Dissatisfaction Manifestation of disordered eating behaviour	Adolescents and young adults are more likely to develop eating disorders when exposed to content that emphasizes physical appearance, regardless of their level of body dissatisfaction.
Brown & Tiggemann (2016)	Australia	Experimental	138	100	Exposure to appearance based content on social media	Body Dissatisfaction	Exposure to thin ideal images may have a negative impact on body satisfaction, regardless of the context or individual featured.
Chang et al (2013)	Taiwan	Correlational	2992	48	Thin-ideal media exposure	Body Dissatisfaction Disordered Eating Behaviours	Females were more frequently exposed to thin-ideal advertisements and

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<b>Author (year)</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Female (%)</b>	<b>SNS Measure</b>	<b>Body Image/ Eating Behaviour measure</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
							messages. They also reported higher levels of media pressure to conform to thin ideals and were more likely to internalize these standards as compared to males.
Cohen et al (2017)	Australia	Correlational	259	100	Average time spent on SNS Total Facebook use and Facebook appearance exposure	Thin Ideal Internalisation Body Surveillance Drive for Thinness	Exposure to Facebook appearance-focused content and following celebrity or health and fitness Instagram accounts showed a significant positive correlation with thin-ideal internalization and increased body surveillance.
Jiotsa et al (2021)	France	Correlational	1331	97.7	Comparing physical appearance to the people on social media	Body Dissatisfaction Drive for Thinness Disordered Eating Behaviour	More the participants compared themselves to the people on social media, the more their body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness increased.
Karam et	Lebanon	Correlation	292	89.72	Social	Body Shape	Individuals

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al (2023)		al			media addiction	Concerns Frequency of Physical Activity Eating Behaviour	addicted to social media had higher chances of having moderate to high body image concerns.
Kleemanns et al (2018)	The Netherlands	Experimental	144	100	Exposure to manipulated Instagram pictures	Body Image Appearance comparison	Exposure to manipulated Instagram photos led to lower body image. Girls with higher social comparison tendencies were found to be more negatively impacted by the photos.
Kotara et al (2023)	Poland	Correlational	460	100	Frequency of information searched about body image on social media	Body Image	Potential negative impacts of the knowledge provided by social media on the development of body image and self-esteem were shown.
Mader et al (2023)	Germany	Correlational	122	58	Frequency of social media usage Type of social media usage i.e. content creator or content consumer	Disordered Eating Behaviour Exercise Dependence	Disordered social media usage was significantly related to eating pathology and poorer body image in men and women.
Pedalino & Camerini (2022)	Italy	Correlational	291	100	Instagram Usage	Body dissatisfaction Body Appreciation	Higher levels of Instagram usage was associated

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						n	with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower levels of body appreciation. Being an adolescent female and having a higher BMI is associated with worse body appreciation.
Price et al (2023)	United Kingdom	Experimental	690	100	Thin-ideal media exposure	Body image	There was a significant decrease in BI after viewing the thin-ideal images as compared to the other conditions. Self-esteem acted as a moderator.
Prichard et al (2023)	Australia	Experimental	230	100	Thin-ideal media exposure	Body dissatisfaction Appearance comparison Self-objectification	Viewing images of influencers led to body dissatisfaction, appearance comparison and self-objectification than viewing control images.
Pryde & Prichard (2022)	Australia	Experimental	120	100	Exposure to tiktok videos promoting thin-ideals	Body dissatisfaction Appearance comparison	Exposure to tiktok videos increased appearance comparison as compared to the control videos.

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Puglia (2017)	USA	Correlational	339	100	Time spent on social media. Motivation to use social media for body comparison	Body comparison Body esteem Body satisfaction	Participants who engaged in higher levels of social media use displayed significantly lower body satisfaction than those with lower levels of social media use.
Rafati et al (2021)	Iran	Correlational	241	100	Instagram usage	Body dissatisfaction Drive for thinness Appearance comparison	Instagram use and appearance comparison with fitspiration and images of celebrities, relatives, and friends had significant positive relations with body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and internalization of beauty ideals.
Samson & Zaitsoff (2023)	Canada	Experimental	161	100	Exposure to body transformation imagery	Body satisfaction Appearance comparison	Viewing fit ideal or transformation imagery is associated with lower body satisfaction and higher appearance comparison. Appearance comparison mediated the relation

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<b>Author (year)</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Female (%)</b>	<b>SNS Measure</b>	<b>Body Image/ Eating Behaviour measure</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
							between image type and changes in body satisfaction.
Srinidhi (2017)	India	Correlational	298	NA	Exposure to social and other forms of visual media	Disordered eating behaviour Body dissatisfaction	More girls than boys are at risk of developing an eating disorder. Media was found to significantly influence body image and eating disorder.
Tiggemann & Barbato (2018)	Australia	Experimental	128	100	Exposure to appearance-related comments on Instagram images	Body dissatisfaction Self-objectification	Exposure to appearance comments led to greater body dissatisfaction than exposure to control comments. Self-objectification predicted increase in body dissatisfaction following the exposure to the comments.
Yang et al (2020)	Singapore	Correlational	100	100	Social media usage	Body image Appearance comparison Social appearance anxiety Weight beliefs	Excessive social media usage leads to lowered body esteem, which further increases appearance comparisons and social appearance anxiety.
Yumen et	Japan	Correlation	196	100	Social	Body image	Higher

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Author (year)	Country	Design	Sample	Female (%)	SNS Measure	Body Image/ Eating Behaviour measure	Key Findings
al (2023)		al			media usage	Eating behaviour	social media usage was found to be associated with thinner and ideal body shapes, less consumption of healthy foods like milk and other dairy products and poorer access to health information.

The table above provides a summary of all studies analyzed in this review.

### DISCUSSION

After analyzing the main findings of the studies included in the review, some categories were identified that summarized the results on the use of social media and its association with body image and eating behaviors. Those categories are: 1.) Exposure to appearance-based content on social media; 2.) Time spent on social media; 3.) Self-esteem and satisfaction with body image; 4.) Underlying processes

#### Exposure to appearance-based content on social media

Exposure to appearance-based content on social media and the development of body image issues have been strongly linked in studies that considered both variables. A study conducted on Spanish students showed that the type of content on social media was strongly linked to body dissatisfaction but not the time that young people spend on social media (Arjona et al., 2024). Brown and Tiggemann (2016) showed that exposure to celebrity images increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction among women compared to travel images. It was concluded that exposure to such content could be detrimental to women's body image. Cheng et al. (2013) found that thin-ideal media exposure increased the likelihood of body dissatisfaction. Both media exposure and body dissatisfaction ultimately contribute to unhealthy eating behaviors. There were studies that revealed that appearance focused social media use, such as greater engagement with appearance focused content on social media platforms and following celebrity and health related accounts was related to body image concerns in young women (Cohen et al., 2017; Prichard et al., 2023; Rafati et al., 2021)

Jiotsa and colleagues (2021) found an association between the participants comparing themselves to people on social media with body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, eventually rendering them vulnerable to unhealthy eating behaviors. An experimental study by Kleemans et al. (2016) showed that manipulated Instagram pictures directly led to lower

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body image among young girls. Other similar studies have shown that exposure to thin-ideal media leads to a significant decrease in body image compared to control conditions (Price et al., 2023; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Samson & Zaitsoff, 2023).

### **Time spent on social media**

A strong association was observed between time spent on social media and body image issues in many studies that analyzed both variables. Appearance focused on social media (Facebook and Instagram) is more relevant to body image concerns in young women (Cohen et al., 2017; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; Rafati et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). Disordered social media usage has been found to be significantly related to poor body image and eating pathology in individuals, especially women (Karam et al., 2023; Meder et al., 2023). Higher levels of social media use significantly contribute to body image dissatisfaction among young women (Puglia, 2017; Yang et al. 2020; Yumen et al. 2023).

### **Self-esteem and satisfaction with body image**

A systematic review showed that in some studies, excessive and problematic social media were associated with decreased self-esteem, satisfaction, and negative mood. The study by Chang et al. (2013) showed that women had a higher exposure to thin ideals, because of which, they were more vulnerable to thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction. Other studies have shown that women are more prone to comparing themselves with people on social media, making them vulnerable to body image and self-esteem issues (Jiotsa et al., 2021; Kleemans et al., 2018). In a study by Price et al. (2023), self-esteem acted as a moderator, as participants with low self-esteem showed a greater increase in body image under the control condition. Many studies have shown that engaging with appearance-focused content on social media leads to appearance comparison, further lowering self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Prichard et al., 2023; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Yang et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018).

### **Underlying processes**

The sociocultural theory of body image (Thompson et al., 1999) posits that women and girls often adopt unrealistic beauty standards shown in the media, leading them to compare their appearances to these ideals. Likewise, objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that the media's frequent display of sexualized beauty norms encourages self-objectification and heightened body scrutiny among women and girls. Together, these processes—internalization, appearance comparison, self-objectification, and body monitoring—are considered to contribute to increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. In the context of social media, Tiggemann and Barbato (2018) examined how exposure to appearance-related comments on Instagram affects body dissatisfaction. The results showed that exposure to appearance comments led to greater body dissatisfaction than exposure to control comments did. In addition, self-objectification was identified as a predictor of increased body dissatisfaction following exposure to appearance-related comments. Furthermore, Yang et al. (2020) found that excessive social media usage increased appearance comparisons and social appearance anxiety. In a study by Samson and Zaitsoff (2023) on the effects of body transformation imagery on body satisfaction, appearance comparisons mediated the relationship between these two variables. Puglia and colleagues (2017) also found that body comparison tendencies has a direct negative effect on body esteem. Aligned with the sociocultural and objectification theories, these findings indicate that increased time spent on social media is associated with higher body dissatisfaction among women. This link appears to be partly due to internalizing unrealistic

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beauty standards, engaging in self-objectification, appearance comparisons, and constant self-monitoring.

### **Comparison with Existing Reviews**

Recent systematic reviews based on the impact of social media on body image have focused on different aspects of this phenomenon. Mironica et al. (2024) explored the influence of social media on body image dissatisfaction and motivations for cosmetic surgery. The review included 25 studies with over 13,000 participants, emphasizing how platforms such as Instagram promote thin-ideal and appearance-focused content that intensifies dissatisfaction and encourages appearance-altering behaviors, such as cosmetic surgery. While their focus was broader, including motivations for cosmetic procedures, this review complements their findings by concentrating on body image issues and eating behaviors, offering a deeper look at psychosocial impacts beyond surgical considerations.

Padin et al. (2021) examined the role of social media in eating disorders and body image, highlighting how social media fosters unrealistic beauty standards that impact mental health, especially among young women. Their analysis primarily focused on general media literacy and the need for educational intervention. Building on this, the current review focuses on specific mechanisms, such as self-objectification, appearance comparisons, and internalization processes, providing a more nuanced understanding of how these factors interact to shape body image dissatisfaction. By addressing gaps in these reviews, this study adds value by emphasizing psychological mediators, such as self-monitoring and social anxiety, as well as focusing on young adults' vulnerability in social media-driven environments. Additionally, it identifies the specific content types and platforms that are most associated with negative outcomes, offering actionable insights for intervention and policy-making.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This systematic review highlights the strong connection between social media usage and issues related to body image and eating behaviors among young women. Key factors, such as exposure to appearance-based content, time spent on social media, and underlying psychological processes (e.g., appearance comparison and self-objectification), emerged as significant contributors to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. The pervasive presence of unrealistic body ideals on social media, coupled with high user engagement, encourages individuals to internalize these ideals, fostering body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and increased comparison-based behaviors. These findings suggest a need for greater awareness and intervention strategies to mitigate the impact of social media on body image. Media literacy programs could equip young people with the skills to critically evaluate appearance-based content, helping them resist the internalization of unrealistic beauty standards. Additionally, social media platforms can promote a positive body image by implementing stricter content guidelines and offering diverse representations of body types. Mental health professionals should also be aware of the impact of social media on their clients' body image, especially young women, and should incorporate strategies to address the influence of social media on self-perception and well-being. Future research should continue to explore these relationships across diverse populations, and examine the effectiveness of interventions to reduce body image concerns associated with social media use.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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