

The Impact of Instagram on Risks of Developing Eating Disorders: Young Female Adults and Appearance-Focused Accounts

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Abstract

The prevalence and extensive usage of Instagram as a social media platform have drawn my attention to the issue of appearance-oriented accounts on Instagram that endorse unrealistic standards of beauty. These accounts may contribute to the development of eating disorders, especially among young adult women. Various studies consistently indicate a connection between exposure to idealized depictions of female beauty in the media and negative effects on mood, self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and a desire to be thin. Recent research has specifically focused on appearance-oriented accounts on Instagram, which prominently display manipulated images of beauty showcasing unattainable body ideals and flawless appearances. Given that a significant portion of Instagram users are young adult women, who are particularly vulnerable to societal pressures, it is crucial to understand the association between appearance-oriented Instagram accounts and the risk of eating disorders. Eating disorders have severe psychological and physical consequences and disproportionately affect young adult women. The research establishes a theoretical foundation by comprehensively reviewing literature on gender and power dynamics, female body image, ideals of female beauty, the connection between media and eating disorders in women, social media, and Instagram, with a specific focus on feminist perspectives and the impact of media on women's perceptions of their bodies. The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between appearance-oriented Instagram accounts and the risk of eating disorders among young adult women. The experiment study examines the influence on body image, body satisfaction, self-esteem, mood, and drive for thinness and explores the relationship between appearance-oriented Instagram accounts and eating disorders. The main hypotheses of this study propose that extensive exposure to appearance-oriented accounts on Instagram has a negative impact on mood, self-esteem, body image, and increases the likelihood of developing eating disorders.

Keywords: Appearance-focused accounts; body dissatisfaction; body image; eating disorders; Instagram; young female adults

INTRODUCTION

Instagram is one of the most globally popular and widely used social media platforms in the world. According to Statista (2023), Instagram has 1.35 billion users in 2023, which, according to Data Reportal (2023), makes it the fourth most active social media platform in the world. While Instagram offers a platform for self-expression and community-building, it has also brought to light a major issue: the concerning rise of appearance-focused accounts that set and promote unrealistic beauty standards and potentially contribute to the development of eating disorders, particularly among young adult women. The effects of media on body image has been widely studied by researchers, with studies consistently linking exposure to media portrayals of idealized female beauty and body shape with negative mood, lower self-esteem, increased body dissatisfaction, and increased drive for thinness.

Understanding the association between appearance-focused Instagram accounts and the increased risk of eating disorders in young adult women is crucial for several reasons. To start with, recent Instagram statistics (DataReportal, 2023) show that 49.4% of Instagram users are female, and 32% of Instagram users are aged 18 to 24 (My study defines “young adult females as aged 18 to 25). This age range of young adulthood is critical as it is the time we form our identities and are most sensitive to cultural and societal pressures. In turn, a major audience group of Instagram, which is one of the highest appearance-focused social media platforms, is mostly young adult women who are susceptible to negative influence on body image and self-perception. Furthermore, eating disorders affect up to 15% of women at some point in their lives (Huryk, et al. 2021). Eating disorders also pose a significant public health concern, with severe psychological, physical, and social consequences. Young adult women are disproportionately affected by these disorders, and studies have indicated that exposure to media that idealizes thinness and emphasizes appearance can contribute to the development and perpetuation of disordered eating patterns.

This thesis aims to study the relationship between Instagram’s appearance-focused accounts and the risk of eating disorders among young adult women. Through a comprehensive review of the existing literature, an analysis of user behaviors, and an experimental study, I will explore the ways in which appearance-focused Instagram accounts influence body image, body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, self-esteem, appearance perfectionism, mood, and, in turn, increase the risk of eating disorders in young women by influencing their eating attitudes.

Ultimately, this research strives to contribute to the understanding of this pressing issue in order to pave the way for evidence-based interventions and strategies to promote positive body image and mental well-being for women in the era of social media. I have, for a long while, been itching to see whether Instagram use contrarily influences women's self-perception, and, if so, in what ways and to what extent. I have additionally had a steady and solid interest in the reasons for eating disorders in women and how they are associated with web-based media use. In view of this, I chose to do my own investigation to address the following research questions:

Does high exposure to appearance-focused accounts on Instagram impact young women's mood?

Does high exposure to appearance-focused accounts on Instagram impact young women's body image and body satisfaction?

Does high exposure to appearance-focused accounts on Instagram impact young women's self-esteem?

Do these impacts on body image, body satisfaction, mood, and self-esteem lead to higher risks of developing eating disorders in young women?

To form a solid theoretical and conceptual foundation before beginning my experiment, the literature in several fields will be thoroughly studied. This will help us have a complete understanding of all dimensions of the topic of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in women, as well as the role of both conventional and modern forms of media in them. Those parts of my literature review which are about body image, beauty myth, and social media look at body shape ideals, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders in women from cultural, social, and political perspectives.

Next, this research is taken forward by applying it to today's world and examining if the same results and connections are found by looking at all previous research within the social media context, not only to give a contemporary and accurate context but also because my own experiment falls within the scope of social media. Thus, academic papers and studies up to 2022 will be used in thesis, with many focusing on Instagram and carrying out similar methodologies as my own for other similar research goals. The strengths of such studies, as well as those done on conventional media, will be adapted for my methodology where applicable to maximise the accuracy and reliability of my experiment results.

RESULTS

Instagram Usage Patterns (Tables 2 to 10)

Experiment Results (Tables 11 to 19)

DISCUSSION

In the pre-experiment phase, both the experiment group (Group A) and the control group (Group B) participated in answering Questions 2 to 22, derived from Meier and Gray's (2014) Facebook Questionnaire. These questions were administered to examine participants' usage of Instagram before and over the long term. These questions were not employed to test the hypotheses related to mood, body image, or self-esteem, were excluded from the numerical comparative analysis, and were not repeated in the post-experiment questionnaire. A descriptive analysis was conducted on these questions to provide context regarding the general nature of Instagram use within the sample. This contextual information will support the subsequent analysis of results. The adapted questionnaire examined participants' Instagram usage, which was vital due to the weeklong experiment's short duration. This context aids in accurately analyzing results and relating them to broader effects on young women. The participants' responses to Questions 2 to 22 revealed that all 26 participants had daily internet access and active Instagram accounts, with most accounts set to private. Additionally, the majority of the participants were already close to or exceeding the defined "high exposure" level of 2 hours per day.

It was observed that appearance-focused content sharing on Instagram, particularly self-photos, was common among the participants. Nature, artwork, and photography-related posts were also frequent. However, sharing Reels, especially of themselves, was less common, possibly due to the challenge of maintaining appearance and creativity in dynamic videos. Communication via Instagram was also common. Sharing news or external internet content was less prevalent, indicating that appearance-focused activities were the most prominent. Viewing friends' photos of themselves on Instagram was also a common practice, potentially indicating a tendency toward appearance comparison. While sharing content like news stories, videos, and websites was less common, there was greater interest in peers' shared content of this nature. This suggests a disparity between content sharing and content consumption patterns on Instagram.

The experiment results revolve around the impact of appearance-focused Instagram accounts on mood, self-esteem, body image, body satisfaction, and the risk of eating disorders in young women. Group A experienced negative effects, while Group B showed positive changes. The study validates the hypotheses:

1. **Mood Impact:** Group A's mood slightly worsened during the experiment, validating the hypothesis that appearance-focused Instagram accounts negatively affect mood (BMIS decreased from 37.2 to 35.8). Group B, however, experienced improved mood (+3.1). The control group's mood enhancement exceeded the negative change in Group A.
2. **Self-esteem Impact:** Group A's self-esteem declined post-experiment, affirming that high exposure to appearance-focused accounts leads to lower self-esteem. Group B demonstrated increased self-esteem scores, suggesting reduced exposure positively affects self-esteem.
3. **Body Image Impact:** High exposure to appearance-focused accounts in Group A resulted in increased appearance perfectionism and lower body image. Conversely, Group B showed a decrease in appearance perfectionism when distancing from such accounts, confirming the negative impact.
4. **Eating Disorders Risk:** Group A's scores on the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT26) increased (+6.4), indicating increased risk. Group B exhibited similar results (+6.2), suggesting existing symptoms may have been alleviated. The findings correlate with participants' behavior, particularly those who shifted into engaging in eating disorder symptoms for the first time during the experiment.
5. **Drive for Thinness and Body Dissatisfaction:** Group A's scores for drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction increased, while Group B's scores decreased, supporting the impact of appearance-focused accounts.
6. **Media Influence:** Both groups' Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Test scores increased post-experiment, with Group A's increase being more significant. This suggests increased awareness of Instagram's influence on body image for both groups, particularly those with high exposure to appearance-focused accounts.

The results underline that appearance-focused Instagram accounts can negatively affect mood, self-esteem, body image, and increase the risk of eating disorders in young women. Group B's

positive changes suggest that reduced exposure can lead to improvements. The study suggests that educational interventions and support can help young women protect themselves from the negative impact of such accounts.

CONCLUSION

All result analysis shows that Group A was much more negatively impacted during the experiment. This experiment's main hypotheses were proven:

H1: If a young female adult is highly exposed to appearance-focused accounts on Instagram, then her mood will be negatively impacted.

H2: If a young female adult is highly exposed to appearance-focused accounts on Instagram, then her self-esteem will be negatively impacted.

H3: If a young female adult is highly exposed to appearance-focused accounts on Instagram, then her body image, and body satisfaction will be negatively impacted.

H4: If negative impacts on body image and mood occur in young female adults due to high exposure to appearance-focused Instagram accounts, then they will be at higher risk of developing eating disorders due to unhealthy drive for thinness.

The risks of high-exposure appearance-focused Instagram accounts can potentially have drastic effects on mental and physical wellbeing of young adult women. Both my literature review and my experiment show that mood, self-esteem, and body satisfaction can be severely negatively influenced and in turn increase risks of developing eating disorders. in young adult women. My hope is that young and adult women both educate themselves on the risks, and public structures to support the free delivery of such education as well as easy access to support resources. My ultimate hope is that through awareness and education, more women will be encouraged to protect themselves, and more women will be encouraged to demand protection and support when Instagram or similar platforms start to impact wellbeing.

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TABLES

Table 1: Timeline of different cultural preferences/ideals of female body from 1800s to late 1990s

1800s	1920s	1930s and 1940	*1950s	*1960s	*1960s and 1980s	1980s	1990s	*Late 1990s
The ideal was still a plump female body. For example Courbet's The artist's studio of 1855 (Grogan, 1999).	The idealization of slimness begins because of fashion industry marketing which became the standard of cultural beauty in industrialized societies (Gordon, 1990). Until 1920s, fashion ads were hand-drawn and not actual pictures (Grogan, 1999). In 1920s photographs in mass media like magazines began to be used for fashion marketing (Grogan, 1999).	Ideals moved to more shapely figure. (Grogan, 1999).	The trend continued when Hollywood prompted larger breasts with smaller waists (Grogan, 1999), for example Marilyn Monroe (Grogan, 1999). Miss America winner measurement averages increased in bust and hip size and decreased in waist size (Grogan, 1999).	Slimness popularity peaked in the 1960s when fashion model Twiggy became a role model for young women (Grogan, 1999). This ideal also included a flat-chested, boyish figure (Freedman, 1986).	Studies of portrayal of female body in media find that models became thinner and thinner (Grogan, 1999) e.g. Vogue and Playboy (Fallon, 1990).	Ideal is slim and physically fit/strong. For example Time magazine in August 1982 gave examples of the "New Ideal" to be Jane Fonda and Victoria Principal (Grogan, 1999).	Thread of standard of beauty of thinness became more marked than the 1980s (Grogan, 1999). Example: Kate Moss who had similar body shape to Twiggy (Grogan, 1999).	The rise of the "heroin chic" where fashion houses took very thin models and made them to look like heroin users with black eye makeup, blue lips and matted hair (Grogan, 1999). Zoe Fleischauer, model recovering from heroin addiction (Grogan, 1999), said in an interview that models are encouraged to look thin and exhausted (Schoemer, 1996:51).

Table 2: Frequency of Internet use

Frequency of Internet Use	Group A	Group B	Total
Never/almost never	0	0	0
Less than ½ hour per day	0	0	0
½-1 hour per day	0	0	0
1-2 hours per day	0	0	0
2-3 hours per day	2	4	6
More than 3 hours per day	11	9	20

Table 3: Frequency of Instagram use

How often do you use Instagram a day?	Group A	Group B	Total
Never/almost never	0	0	0
Less than 1 hour per week	0	0	0
Less than ½ hour per day	0	1	1
Between ½ hour and 1 hour per day	1	2	3
1-2 hours per day	6	5	11
More than 2 hours per day	6	5	11

Table 4: Frequency of posting personal appearance-focused photos on Instagram

How often do you post photos of yourself on Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
More often than once a month	5	3	8
On average, about once a month	4	3	7
Every few months	3	3	6
A few times a year	1	2	3
Almost never or never	0	1	1
I don't know	0	1	1

Table 5: Frequency of posting photos focused on nature/artwork/photography on Instagram

How often do you post photos focusing on nature/artwork/photography on Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
More often than once a month	5	5	10
On average, about once a month	3	3	6
Every few months	1	1	2
A few times a year	3	2	5
Almost never or never	1	2	3
I don't know	0	0	0

Table 6: Frequency of posting personal appearance-focused Reels on Instagram

How often do you post Reels of yourself on Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
More often than once a month	0	0	0
On average, about once a month	1	1	2
Every few months	0	1	1
A few times a year	1	4	5
Almost never or never	11	7	18
I don't know	0	0	0

Table 7: Frequency of posting Reels focusing on nature/artwork/photography on Instagram

How often do you post Reels focusing on nature/artwork/photography on Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
More often than once a month	0	1	1
On average, about once a month	1	1	2
Every few months	0	3	3
A few times a year	2	1	3
Almost never or never	10	7	17
I don't know	0	0	0

Table 8: Frequency of posting links to news/videos/ Web sites

How often do you post a link to a news story, video, Web site, etc. when visiting Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
Nearly every time I log on	0	0	0
Often	2	1	3
Once in a while	2	4	6
Rarely	4	3	7
Almost never	5	5	10
I don't know	0	0	0

Table 9: Frequency of viewing friends' photos of themselves when visiting Instagram

How often do you view friends' photos of themselves when visiting Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
Nearly every time I log on	3	3	6
Often	4	7	11
<u>Once in a while</u>	2	2	4
Rarely	3	1	4
Almost never	0	0	0
I don't know	1	0	1

Table 10: Frequency of viewing friends' links to news/videos/Web sites when visiting Instagram

How often do you view friends' links to news stories, videos, Web sites, etc. when visiting Instagram?	Group A	Group B	Total
Nearly every time I log on	2	2	4
Often	7	2	9
<u>Once in a while</u>	3	5	8
Rarely	0	3	3
Almost never	1	1	2
I don't know	0	0	0

Table 11: Results of Brief Mood Introspection Scale (Mayer, 1999)

Mood	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	37.2	35.7
Post-experiment	35.8	38.8
Overall mood question (pre-experiment)	60	57
Overall mood question (post-experiment)	39	73

Table 12: Results of Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

Self-Esteem	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	21.2	20.5
Post-experiment	19.7	21.3

Table 13: Results of Physical Appearance Perfectionism Scale (Yang and Stoeber, 2012)

Physical Appearance Perfectionism	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	30.7	30.1
Post-experiment	34.5	27.1

Table 14: Results of Body Attitudes Test (Probst et al., 1995)

Body Attitudes Test	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	43.9	41.5
Post-experiment	49.5	39.8

Table 15: Results of Body Image States Scale (Cash et al., 2002)

Body Image States	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	24.1	26.3
Post-experiment	22.2	29

Table 16: Results of Eating Attitudes Test (Garner, Bohr, and Garfinkel, 1982)

Eating Attitudes (EAT26)	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	15.9	11.7
Post-experiment	22.3	5.5

Table 17: Results of Disorder Inventory (Graner, Olmstead, and Polivy, 1983)

Eating Disorders (EDI)	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	58.3	50.6
Post-experiment	66.5	36.1

Table 18: Results of SCOFF Questionnaire (Morgan, Reid, & Lacey, 2000)

SCOFF Questionnaire	Group A (Average number of “yes” responses to first 5 questions)	Group B (Average number of “yes” responses to first 5 questions)
Pre-experiment	2.38	1.15
Post-experiment	2.54	1.54

Table 19: Results of Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Test (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004)

Social Cultural Attitudes Toward Appearance (Instagram Effects)	Group A (Average)	Group B (Average)
Pre-experiment	62.7	60.1
Post-experiment	70.1	64