Media Self(ie)

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Media, body image, and healthy habits

It is easy to hop on social media and compare yourself to the celebrities and peers you see online. Media consumers often encounter media that conflates their health and appearance. Yet, media consumption is nearly impossible to avoid; It is the cornerstone of modern culture and an increasingly integral element of how people perceive themselves and the world around them. Media is one of the most virulent sources for conveying social and cultural information about how people should look. Research demonstrates that exposure to media related to body image or appearances is consistently linked with body dissatisfaction (Monks et al., 2021). Media, particularly social media such as Instagram and Facebook, creates the potential for harmful social comparisons, often under the guise of health and wellness, by playing on an individual's susceptibility to social comparisons and peer recognition (Monks et al., 2021).

How does it get to us?

Body image ideals portrayed in the media can become a part of one's own belief system through a process of internalization, or the integration and acceptance of social norms, values, and ideas. By adopting an idealized perspective of the body, some women feel compelled to engage in vigilant monitoring of their own bodies, leading to appearance anxiety and body shame (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). Furthermore, in a study by Noll and Fredrickson (1998), two surveys of undergraduate women established the mediating role of body shame between internalized body image ideals and disordered eating.

Body image ideals in the media can be especially harmful because appearance norms tend to be communicated in tandem with prescriptive methods used to attain the ideal. These messages communicate to viewers that the current ideal body aesthetic is healthily attainable by following a certain workout or diet regimen. Moreover, it creates the impression that the current cultural representations of beauty are also the embodiment of health. In women's health magazines, phrases endorse the human body as an object, often drawing attention to specific body parts to be enhanced or desired. For example, "Sculpt killer curves," or "Great legs start here, 8 moves for lean calves" are a couple of excerpts from the cover of Women's Fitness magazine. These titles frame health and well-ness advice primarily as a matter of bodily appearance.

Celebrity and influencer culture

As opposed to traditional media, such as magazines or television, social media has a highly intimate nature which allows users to connect personally and interact directly with others. The rise of social media influencers has allowed fans to get a glimpse of celebrities' daily lives and strengthen their sense of personal connection to these individuals. Through social media, influencers share their daily struggles and advice, often building "holistic" health profiles inclusive of their diet and workout routines. Women with higher levels of celebrity worship are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their bodies after viewing influencer content on social media (Brown & Tiggemann, 2010).

"Fitspiration" is a recent trend and example of these influencer posts. Through fitspiration posts, users publish inspirational health and fitness messages alongside images constructing the thin, athletic, and ultra-fit body as an aesthetic ideal for which women should strive. Although the goal of these health posts may be to inspire individuals to reach their fitness and nutrition goals, fitspiration does not actually encourage exercise or healthy eating habits (Barron et al., 2021). Similar to the phrases presented in women's health magazines, these fitspiration posts emphasize appearance as the primary motivation to partake in "healthy" behaviors and therefore have the potential to adversely influence a viewer's body image.

Mechanisms to promote positive body image

Despite the risks of interacting with social media, it would be difficult and socially sacrificial for many individuals to give it up. Therefore, mechanisms for a healthy relationship with social media are a huge area of interest for researchers, legislators, and media consumers.

One of the most pertinent strategies suggested amongst research journals is using media literacy as a protective factor. Media literacy is the capacity of an individual to assess the credibility and think critically about media content. An example of a campaign aimed to increase media literacy towards artificial content is the "Instagram vs reality" movement. In this movement, users post two images of themselves side by side: an ideal Instagram version showcasing their best attributes, and a more realistic version. The logic behind the movement is that if women will be able to be dissuaded from comparing themselves to unrealistic and idealized images presented on Instagram, body satisfaction will be preserved. Studies showed that exposure to these paired ideal-real images, or even just real images alone, resulted in lower body dissatisfaction than viewing idealized images alone (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

Another one of the biggest strategies used by legislators is to mandate labels for modified images. However, modified images bearing a disclaimer do not actually result in a more positive outcome than an unlabelled image (Giorgianni et al., 2020). Therefore, despite being one of the most discussed strategies for mitigating the effects of media exposure, disclaimer labels do not make a significant difference.

As the media landscape continues to evolve, findings ways to maintain healthy relationships with media and body image continues to be a highly investigated topic.

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