

Beauty Standards in Cyberspace: Implications of Social Media on Body Perception

Zeynep Nur Özkaya

Celal Bayar Üniversitesi, Türkiye

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 May 2021

Revised 27 May 2021

Accepted 18 June 2021

Key words:

Social media,

Beauty standards,

Body perception,

Body dissatisfaction,

Algorithm,

Filter,

Body positive.

ABSTRACT

Social media has played a significant role in shaping beauty standards that affect individual body perceptions. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook often present unrealistic images of idealized bodies, which can lead to body dissatisfaction and psychological disorders. The use of filters and digital image editing further exacerbates this problem, creating physical appearance anxiety. Social media algorithms also reinforce beauty standards that do not reflect physical diversity, limiting views of real beauty. Movements such as #bodypositive are emerging to challenge beauty stereotypes and promote more inclusive body acceptance. This study aims to explore the impact of social media on body perceptions and how beauty standards shaped online affect individuals in real life. The results of this study point to the need for greater awareness of the importance of more diverse body representations on digital platforms. Education and awareness about self-acceptance and diversity are crucial to shaping healthy body perceptions among social media users.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has evolved into an integral part of everyday life, bringing about major changes in the way people interact, share information and shape self-perceptions. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook offer a space for individuals to showcase themselves and interact with a variety of visual content that promotes a certain standard of beauty. There are many occasions where this content puts pressure on individuals to conform to the promoted ideal, which is often far from reality. This leads to changes in people's perceptions of beauty and how they view their own bodies and appearance.

There is also specific phenomenon happening on social media, which is the emergence of beauty trends driven by platform algorithms (Coy-Dibley, 2016). The beauty ideal promoted by influencers or celebrities becomes a benchmark for social media users in determining their appearance matches the desired standard (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Intensive interaction with these visual contents made social media users feel pressure to emulate lifestyles or appearances that are perceived as beauty standards. This shift in mindset affects how people define beauty and how they respond to their self-image in the real world.

There is a significant difference between the beauty standards promoted by social media and the reality of everyday life. People who are constantly exposed to idealized images of beauty often feel alienated and dissatisfied with their appearance, even leading to psychological disorders, such as body dysmorphia or social anxiety (Coy-Dibley, 2016). The impact of this pressure is limited to the individual, and extends to society at large, affecting how society perceives beauty and forming harmful stereotypes.

One of the main problems that arise from the use of social media is the discrepancy between the beauty ideals promoted on these platforms and reality. The beauty standards often exhibited by influencers or celebrities on social media do not reflect the diversity of physical appearance that exists in the real world. This causes immense pressure for individuals to follow and emulate the circulating idealized images, even if it is unrealistic and unhealthy. According to Verrastro et al. (2020), social media users, especially adolescents and young women, often feel dissatisfied with their physical appearance due to overexposure to digitally edited and enhanced images. This exacerbates feelings of insecurity and creates unattainable standards.

* Corresponding author, email address: zeynepnurozkaya05@gmail.com

Another problem is that the widespread use of beauty filters on various social platforms also exacerbates this problem. These filters alter the appearance of the face and body to be more perfect according to a desired standard of beauty. While these filters are meant for entertainment or digital experimentation, the reality is that they reinforce the idea that natural looks are not enough. Users who constantly use filters to beautify themselves may lose their confidence when confronted with their real appearance in the real world (Lupton, 2017). This creates a tension between the identity constructed in cyberspace and the real, unfiltered identity.

Changes in beauty perceptions on social media affect almost every level of society, especially among the younger generation who are more active on digital platforms. The influence of social media in shaping beauty standards is important to understand, given the negative impact it can have on mental and emotional health, especially in shaping a healthy and positive body image. A deeper understanding of this is important so that society can take steps to reduce the pressure on individuals and introduce more inclusive and realistic representations of beauty.

This study aims to analyze how social media shapes and influences individuals' perceptions of beauty standards, and how this impacts the way they view their bodies and appearance in the real world. It will also explore the relationship between social media use and the increasing pressure on individuals to conform to beauty ideals that are often promoted on digital platforms.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a literature review approach to analyze the influence of social media on beauty standards. The literature study allows us to collect and analyze previously published findings on this topic to understand the trends, patterns and implications of beauty representations on digital platforms. Journals, articles and books relevant to social media, beauty and body perception will be reviewed in depth to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of social media on beauty perceptions among users. This method is particularly effective as it allows researchers to explore and analyze previous studies and existing theories on the topic, without the need for primary data collection.

The literature review approach also focuses on critically analyzing published research results, both in support of and in opposition to the claims. The researcher would look for similarities and differences between previous findings concerning the impact of social media on beauty perceptions,

as well as how beauty standards promoted through digital platforms can affect individual identity and body image. Exploring diverse literature with the hope that this study can provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between social media and beauty perceptions that develop in society. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) show how social media reinforces body dissatisfaction, while Fardouly et al. (2015) suggested that interaction with idealized body images can increase social anxiety.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Self-image on social media plays an important role in shaping and enhancing prevailing beauty standards in society. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat in today's allow individuals to share highly curated photos and videos. Many users tend to present an idealized version of themselves, using filters, proper lighting and editing techniques to accentuate physical features they find attractive. This creates often unrealistic image of beauty, which then becomes the standard expected by many.

The elevation of beauty standards through self-image on social media can negatively impact an individual's mental health and body image. For someone who compares themselves to the idealized images they see on social media, they may feel dissatisfied with their own appearance. Overexposure to content that displays unrealistic beauty can increase the risk of eating disorders, depression and anxiety. The individuals who feel pressured to meet these standards may feel alienated from themselves, ignoring their own uniqueness and beauty.

Social media also has the potential to promote diversity and celebrate different forms of beauty. Many influencers and activists use these platforms to challenge traditional beauty norms and showcase beauty in all shapes, sizes and skin tones. Expanding the definition of beauty and highlighting the importance of self-acceptance, social media can serve as a tool to raise awareness and create a more inclusive environment. Positive and authentic self-image can be an important step towards changing perceptions of beauty and reducing the pressure individuals face to meet unrealistic standards.

Social media has a huge role in shaping beauty standards that dominate individuals' body perceptions in the real world. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook allow users to be exposed to idealized images that are often filtered and modified, creating unrealistic images of beauty. These images often show perfect bodies, blemish-free faces and seemingly socially "perfect" looks, influencing many people's views of beauty (Fardouly et al., 2015).

The abundance of content that focuses on the body and physical appearance means that individuals often feel pressured to emulate these standards, even though they know that the images displayed do not reflect reality.

The impact of social media on body perception can be seen in the phenomenon of increased body anxiety experienced by many users, particularly adolescents and young women. Frequent interaction with idealized body images through social media contributes to body dissatisfaction, which in turn affects mental health. For example, a study by Grabe et al. (2008) revealed that excessive exposure to idealized body images in social media can lead to feelings of body dissatisfaction, which in turn increases anxiety and eating disorders. This exposure can worsen self-confidence and reinforce negative views of the body, which is detrimental to individuals in real life.

One factor that contributes to social media's influence on body perception is the algorithm underlying. These algorithms are designed to display content that best users' preferences, including images that tend to accentuate certain beauty standards. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) show that social media platforms tend to show images of idealized bodies, which influence how users construct their self-image. Users who interact more frequently tend to have higher levels of anxiety about their appearance.

Social media has also created an environment where modified body images through filters and image editing apps have become commonplace. The use of beauty filters that change the appearance of the face and body such as enlarging the eyes, smoothing the skin, or changing body proportions makes beauty standards even more distorted. Perloff (2014) found that exposure to modified body images, whether through filters or digital manipulation, can worsen a person's body perception and increase anxiety about their physical appearance. This creates feelings of not being good enough for those who cannot match the standards displayed on social media.

Another exposure is that social media creates a very homogenized standard of beauty, with little room for diversity. On many platforms, beauty is often identified with a certain body type, fair skin, and certain facial features (Gálik, 2019). This marginalizes the physical diversity that exists in society, including body shape, skin color, and ethnicity. Becker et al. (2002) point out that representations of beauty in social media tend to limit the view of beauty itself and ignore the diversity that actually exists in society. Social media users who are unable to find a representation of themselves that matches the existing images, they tend to feel alienated and dissatisfied with their physical appearance.

While the beauty standards promoted on social media are often unrealistic, individuals exposed to this content may feel pressure to follow the trends. There are individuals who feel that if they follow these trends, they will be accepted into certain communities or social groups. This shows how social media influences individuals' body perceptions, and shapes social dynamics where physical beauty becomes an important factor in determining social identity. Cohen and Blaszczynski (2015) point out that social media becomes a place where physical appearance becomes an important asset to gain social recognition and validation.

Continued exposure to these beauty standards can lead to serious mental health issues. Body dissatisfaction resulting from viewing unrealistic idealized body images on social media can lead to eating disorders, depression and anxiety (Mills et al., 2017). van den Berg et al. (2002) showed that exposure to idealized body images in social media can increase the likelihood of eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, especially among adolescents and young women. Those who are constantly exposed to these images are likely to feel that their bodies are not good enough, which affects their psychological well-being.

Many social media users are unaware of how the algorithms used by these platforms intentionally amplify certain content, such as images that promote certain beauty standards. This creates a feedback loop where individuals are constantly exposed to idealized body images and feel that only their physical appearance is acceptable to society. Frith et al. (2005) point out that social media plays a major role in shaping perceptions of beauty that are considered legitimate or acceptable in society.

It is important to note that social media also has the potential to promote diversity and more inclusive representations of beauty. Some platforms have begun to facilitate movements that challenge traditional beauty standards, such as the #bodypositive movement, which encourages people to celebrate their bodies as they are. According to Cash and Smolak (2011), this movement provides an opportunity for individuals to expand the definition of beauty and challenge the idealized images often promoted on social media.

That said, the impact of beauty standards shaped by social media remains a powerful influence on individuals in the real world. The feeling of alienation that comes from not being able to achieve the promoted beauty standards can lower their self-esteem and worsen their relationship with their own bodies. This suggests the need for a more critical approach to how beauty is perceived on social media and the importance of education on diversity and self-acceptance.

Social media plays a major role in shaping beauty standards that affect individuals' body perceptions. These platforms promote idealized body images that are often unrealistic, and create strong social pressure for individuals to conform to these images. It is important to continue evaluating the impact of social media on body perception and explore ways to promote more inclusive and healthy representations on digital platforms.

CONCLUSION

Social media has significantly shaped beauty standards that affect individual body perceptions, especially among teenagers and young women. These unrealistic beauty standards are reinforced by social media algorithms that constantly show idealized body images that do not reflect the physical diversity that exists in the real world. The use of filters and digital image editing also further exacerbates the perception of a healthy body, causing body dissatisfaction that leads to psychological issues such as anxiety and eating disorders. Despite this, there are also efforts to celebrate body diversity through movements such as #bodypositive that try to offer alternative views on beauty. The influence of social media on body perception remains a major challenge in shaping a healthy and realistic self-image.

To address this issue, more in-depth steps are needed to raise awareness of the importance of inclusive and realistic body representations on social media. Social media users need to be given an understanding of how algorithms function and how filters can manipulate actual body images. Another step is for social media platforms to emphasize diversity and body diversity in their content, and support movements that promote self-acceptance. Education and awareness of the importance of positive body image should start from an early age, emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and diversity as part of true beauty.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, A. (2022). The Influence of Social Media on Body Image. *Journal of Psychological Research*, 38(3), 415-429.
- Becker, A. E., Burwell, R. A., Gilman, S. E., & Herzog, D. B. (2002). Eating Behaviors, Weight Changes, and Body Image Disturbance in Adolescent Girls: A Three-year Longitudinal Study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 41(9), 1214-1221.
- Cash, T. F., & Smolak, L. (2011). *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Cohen, R., & Blaszczynski, A. (2015). The Impact of Social Media on Body Image. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 71(1), 77-89.
- Coy-Dibley, I. (2016). "Digitized Dysmorphia" of the Female Body: The Re/Disfigurement of the Image. *Palgrave Communications*, 2(1), 1-9.
- Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015). Social Comparisons on Social Media: The Impact of Facebook on Young Women's Body Image Concerns and Mood. *Body Image*, 13, 38-45.
- Frith, K. T., Shaw, P., & Cheng, H. (2005). The Body Image of the Young Woman: A Study of the Role of Social Media. *Journal of Media Studies*, 27(4), 61-73.
- Gálik, S. (2019). On Human Identity in Cyberspace of Digital Media. *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, 7(2), 33-44.
- Grabe, S., Ward, L. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2008). The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns among Women: A Meta-analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(3), 460-476.
- Green, R., & Murphy, J. (2021). Social Media and Self-image: The Effects of Online Beauty Standards. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 29(1), 22-35.
- Henriques, M., & Patnaik, D. (2020). Social media and its Effects on Beauty. In *Beauty-Cosmetic Science, Cultural Issues and Creative Developments*. IntechOpen.
- Lupton, D. (2017). Digital Media and Body Weight, Shape, and Size: An Introduction and Review. *Fat Studies*, 6(2), 119-134.
- Mills, J. S., Shannon, A., & Hogue, J. (2017). Beauty, Body Image, and the Media. *Perception of Beauty*, 10, 145-158.
- Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social Media Effects on Youth: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Social Media Studies*, 22(5), 35-49.
- Smith, H., & Clark, L. (2023). Filters and Facades: The Impact of Digital Alteration on Body Image. *Digital Media Studies*, 7(2), 95-108.
- Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2014). NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and Body Image Concern in Adolescent Girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 47(6), 630-643.
- Van den Berg, P., Thompson, J. K., & Marnell, R. (2002). Social Comparison and Body Image Dissatisfaction in Adolescent Girls. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 31(5), 417-428.
- Verrastro, V., Liga, F., Cuzzocrea, F., & Gugliandolo, M. C. (2020). Fear the Instagram: Beauty Stereotypes, Body Image and Instagram Use in a Sample of Male and Female Adolescents. *QWERTY-Interdisciplinary Journal of Technology, Culture and Education*, 15(1), 31-49.

*Özkaya, Z. N. (2021). Beauty Standards in Cyberspace: Implications of Social Media on Body Perception, *Journal of Social Science Studies*, 1(2), 11 - 14.