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Solving Problems Through Research Essay

My research question for the semester is: how does social media affect body image perception of teenage girls? Sites such as Facebook and Instagram are causing negative effects specifically on various body behaviors of female adolescents. In their research study, Feltman and Szymanski affirm, “The test of mediation using bootstrapping analyses revealed that both internalization of cultural standards of beauty (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect=.91,SE=.32,95%CI[.408,1.73],β=.04) and engaging in upward appearance comparison (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = 1.74, SE = .44, 95% CI [.956, 2.69], β = .08) mediated the Instagram usage and self-objectification links” (318). This is a problem because there are teenage girls everywhere who base their worth on thin ideals of ‘acceptable’ beauty that are displayed all over social media.

After researching, I find recurring themes as to how social media affects body image of adolescent girls. The theme of self-objectification plays a large role because girls judge and overanalyze their bodies as they spend more time on media sites. According to Feltman and Szymanski, “Thus, it seems plausible that the links between Instagram use and self-objectification and body surveillance may be mediated by engagement in social comparison” (313). Self-objectification leads to young girls seeing their bodies as inhumane objects that must correlate with whatever body type and behavior that social media deems best at the time. In their articles, Manago et al. and Brown and Bobkowski state female adolescents may feel shamed into self-objectification on social media after seeing social body ideals that make them feel inadequate. Combined with other elements, self-objectification factors in with the specific behaviors of teenage girls that result in negative body image.

Another theme within my topic is peer pressure. Teenage girls compare themselves to pictures of their friends and celebrities on sites like Instagram, and this can fuel their individual body shame. In turn, they use their friends for internal comparison rather than develop emotional connections. Ferguson et al. find, “…body dissatisfaction will increase among women when competition is heightened…our results suggest that social media may become an additional realm in which peer competition may occur” (11). Peer pressure adds to social media’s influence on body image because teenage girls constantly make themselves feel externally inferior to their friends when they post pictures on different media sites. The articles by Brown and Bobkowski, Manago et al., and Perloff all mention how social media causes teenage girls to invest a massive effort into their profiles, so they may impress others and gain approval of their appearance.

The theme of eating disorders seems to be the largest negative effect that social media has on body image of teenage girls. Since the media tends to strictly portray beauty with images of thin women, girls who don’t have that body type feel that they must starve themselves to achieve this idealistic status of external beauty. Brown and Bobkowski state, “Studies designed to articulate the mechanisms involved in the effects of media exposure to thin and muscular body ideals on disordered eating behavior point to a kind of vicious cycle especially for young media users” (103). While girls may see conditions like anorexia and bulimia as a quick weight loss method to achieve the dream body, they are really harming themselves. In articles by Perloff and Ferguson et al., unhealthy dietary habits come from body dissatisfaction of young girls who constantly compare themselves to cultural beauty standards found on media sites. Even though teenage bodies change so often during puberty, girls are taking it upon themselves to manipulate their physicality in an unhealthy manner due to persistent thin ideals.

The second theme of social media effects is unhealthy sexual behavior that often results from self-objectification. Mixing this with peer pressure leads to girls sexualizing their social media appearance which can cross over into their real lives whether they intend to or not. Perloff says, “As a result of traditional gender role socialization processes, girls and women learn to self-objectify, internalizing societal emphases on attending to outward appearance rather than inner qualities” (364). For instance, some girls may engage in sexual activity at a younger age compared to their parents to seek social acceptance of their physical appearance. Others could possibly attract unwanted attention on social media after putting a sexualized emphasis on their profiles. Brown and Bobkowski proclaim, “…some online behaviors appear to be associated with an increased likelihood of receiving online sexual solicitations from strangers” (102). Since their goal is social body acceptance, teenage girls think they must divulge into sexual behaviors before their mentalities have enough time to mature.

One research limitation I see is lack of racial diversity in study samples. Adriana M. Manago et al. admits, “The lack of diversity also prevents us from exploring how different cultural values and meanings influence how young people participate in Facebook…” (11). Another limitation involves not factoring like pre-existing mental illness or sexual abuse that could greatly affect individual perspectives on body image. Feltman and Szymanski suggest, “Future studies may wish to employ experimental designs or incorporate personal access to participants’ social media pages in order to obtain less subjective information” (322). The final limitation I notice is the changing variations of the types of media that are focused on for research. The articles by Manago et al. and Feltman and Szymanski focus on sites like Instagram and Facebook. Meanwhile the others discuss social media in a generalized manner, along with magazines and television. These limitations prevent this research problem from being analyzed in a personalized, broad way.

The articles give various solutions for helping teenage girls with their body image affected by social media. One idea is to spread body positivity campaigns on social media to change how girls view the overall idea of body image. Perloff declares, “If communications suggested that thinness is not a universally shared ideal and that a growing number of women are rejecting this belief, then young women might feel less social pressure to adopt ultra-thin ideals” (373). Teenage girls could see videos of their favorite celebrities discussing body image issues, and then they would know that everyone has difficulty with their self-worth at some point in their lives. Media campaigns have the power to steer young women away from bad body habits such as eating disorders; this could potentially encourage young girls to get treatment for their dietary conditions. Campaigns could also influence unhealthy sexual behavior by persuading girls to change their views on their own self-objectification. For instance, “It is possible that feminist beliefs provide women with the tools necessary to identify and challenge their internalized messages about beauty…” (Feltman and Szymanski, 322). The more girls see body positive messages in their social media feeds, the more likely they will be influenced by their meaning.

Another solution involves girls doing beneficial activities away from social media. Participating in calm recreation like yoga could help girls clear their minds and develop body positive habits. For instance, “…clinicians/educators may wish to encourage clients/students to engage in daily mindfulness practices, specifically those that increase self-compassion…” (Feltman and Szymanski, 323). Schools could host events where girls could express their favorite and least favorite qualities of themselves. These activities would help with unhealthy sexual behavior since girls could have a healthy outlet to focus on versus always editing their media profiles into a sexualized way to gain online peer approval. The articles by Manago et al. and Perloff also suggest activities focused on body positivity lead to less body surveillance. This helps with eating disorders because girls will participate to promote who they are as individuals instead of internally despising themselves when they go on social media. Individuals gain different perspectives when hearing views other than their own, and relaxing activities could give teenage girls possible therapeutic benefits that increase love of self and decrease the negativity of peer competition.

The last solution for this issue could have female adolescents learn about media literacy. Girls would be taught the proper way to approach media, and they would have a better understanding of how the system works. In fact, “…youth will be more intelligent and critical media consumers and less susceptible to unhealthy outcomes if they understand that media are constructed and sell values as well as products” (Brown and Bobkowski, 107). With a realistic lense, girls would be able to see through media scams of false advertising. They could even begin questioning images on how much photoshop is done to them on photos in their feed which could result in a more realistic approach to their body image. The articles by Manago et al., Perloff, and Feltman and Szymanski also note that when young girls use social media properly, the likelihood of negative body image effects decreases.

My research question for the semester is: how does social media affect body image perception of teenage girls? The idea of thin being in on media displays can cause girls to resort to unhealthy behaviors involving their dietary and sexual habits. These negative effects can come from placing an objectified importance on outer appearance or feeling pressure from others to conform to a certain physicality. If research limitations of racial diversity and individual factors were broadened while the types of media focused on were narrowed down, social media effects on female adolescent body image would be seen from a more specific angle. Though, there are solutions that involve peaceful peer interaction and supportive messages from social media that show girls that all people struggle with their appearance at times. In conclusion, the problem of social media’s effects on body image perception of teenage girls has considerable factors that continue to alter future research, and while some progressive solutions exist, there are specified factors that must be accounted for in future in order to investigate deeper into this issue.

Works Cited

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