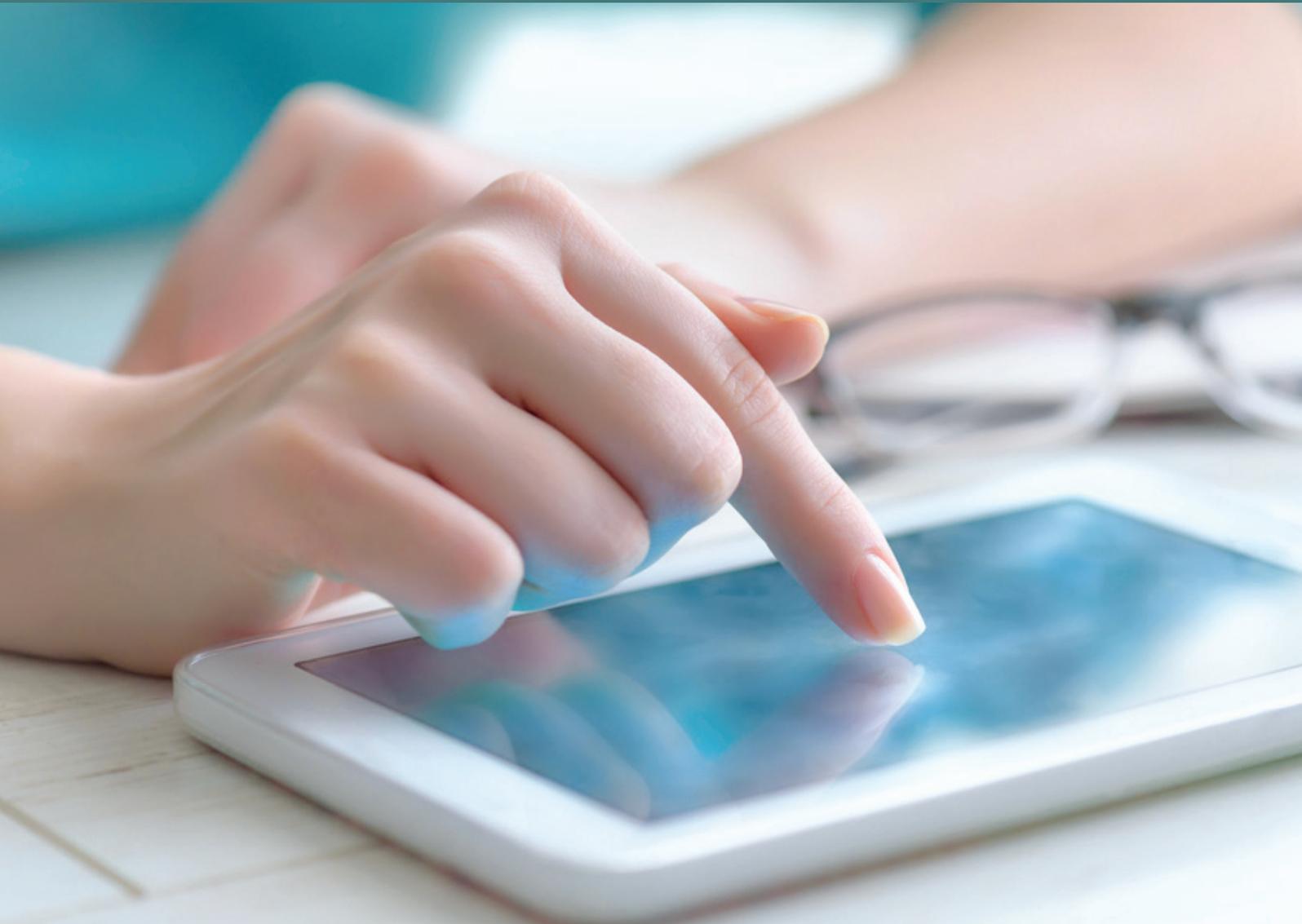


#HealthySocialMedia

A report on personal experiences of social media and strategies for building a positive relationship between social media use and body image.

Building Positive Body Image on Social Media – Spring 2019



Mental Health
Foundation
Scotland

Julie Cameron

Head of Programmes – Mental Health Foundation
Scotland (MHF Scotland)



University of
Strathclyde

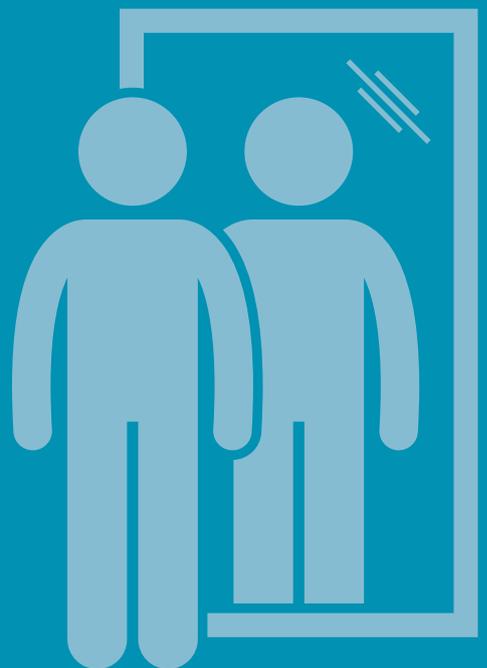
Dr Petya Eckler

Senior Lecturer in Journalism, Media &
Communication, University of Strathclyde

What is body image?

Body image covers people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours about their physical shape, size or appearance.

It goes beyond how people feel about themselves and often affects how they behave towards their bodies. People of healthy weight can also have poor body image.



Introduction



This report will present the social media experiences of young people and other stakeholders that attended an engage event in May 2019 at Strathclyde University. It offers their recommendations on how to maintain a healthy social media life in regards to body image.

Body image is an integral part of young people's identity and it can develop and change through life. Having body image concerns is quite common for all genders and is not necessarily a mental health problem; however, it can be a risk factor for various mental and physical health challenges.

Poor body image can be a trigger for disordered eating¹ and a risk factor for low self-esteem, depressive symptoms and obesity.² A global study of teenage girls showed that nine out of 10 UK girls with low body esteem said they avoided meeting friends and family or trying out for a team or club.³

A recent report by the Mental Health Foundation showed that poor body image can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, shame, upset and even thoughts of suicide among UK adults and teenagers.⁴

Body image forms under many personal and societal influences, including friends and family, the media, advertisers and our culture as a whole. Traditional mass media and social media play a big role in affecting body image concerns.



Social media and body image



Social media influences body image negatively and we need to find a solution for a healthy experience online.

For decades, the message from the mass media to young women has been that their bodies should be thin or thin with the right curves.⁵ Over the years, fashion models on the covers of magazines have slimmed down,⁶ while many people's waistlines have actually grown.⁷ Thus, the gap between real bodies and idealised bodies in the media has increased for both women and men. Despite this the mass media has continued to sell us unrealistic images and ideals which are impossible to achieve.

Social media has complicated things even further. Researchers have found that more time spent on social media

related to higher body dissatisfaction and disordered eating,⁸ more attention to the physical appearance of others and more comparisons.⁹ More recently, research has shown that Instagram use may negatively influence women's beliefs and concerns related to appearance.¹⁰ Instagram is of particular concern because of its visual nature and the potential for that to intensify effects on users.

While episodic studies are beginning to emerge on possible protective factors for social media use, the overall evidence has pointed to predominantly negative relationships between social media use and body image.





Positive body image: what is it?

Positive body image is not simply the absence of negative body image. It is its own multifaceted and holistic concept.¹¹ It includes appreciation of the features, functions and health of the body and body acceptance and love, even if one is not entirely satisfied with all aspects of their body. Seeing beauty in a broader way in oneself and others is also part of positive body image.

People with positive body image also regularly take care of their bodies in non-destructive ways to maintain their style and personality.

This is an expression of their self-love and inner positivity.

Finally, positive body image helps people to filter relevant information by accepting supportive information and rejecting information that may threaten it.¹²

This last part is especially important for a healthy social media experience because it would allow users to ignore or outright reject harmful body-related information they encounter online.

The event

This report presents the outcomes of a public event organised by University of Strathclyde and MHF-Scotland in Spring 2019, which included 50 people from 15 different organisations throughout Scotland, including pupils, teachers, social media influencers, mental health charities, youth charities, NHS, etc.

The aim of the event was to share personal experiences from social media interactions and to discuss strategies and possible solutions for building a positive relationship between social media use and body image.

Participants discussed how they present on and off-line, and how this may differ with face-to-face communication and how they feel when on social media. They also identified specific negative and positive behaviours on social media, and possible strategies for healthy social media use.



Social media experiences



On social media I am... face-to-face I am...

Participants discussed who they are on social media and who they are in face-to-face communication. Overall, their image on social media was described with more negative terms than positive ones. For example, participants described themselves on social media as “fake”, “brutal”, “exposed to hate”, “judgemental”, “critical of self”, “jealous”, and under “pressure to be liked”.

Other more nuanced descriptors included “filtered”, “guarded”, “self-aware” and “cautious”. Some positive descriptors of their social media persona did come through, such as “happy (too)”, “confident”, “invincible”, “ego/esteem boost”, “open for sharing emotions”.

Content management was mentioned, where users post at specific times of the day, which will give them exposure to the largest audiences. Participants’ face-to-face image was much more positive in comparison. They described themselves offline as “open”, “genuine”, “honest”, “less image conscious”, “more open – share more”, “trusting”, etc.

In general, in addition to the positive – negative frame of responses, a second dichotomy emerged between authenticity and deception, where people described themselves more often as authentic in the offline environment and talked more often about deception online.

When I am on social media, I feel and I behave...

Participants discussed their feelings and behaviours while on social media. Overall, negative descriptors twice outweighed positive ones, which corresponds to the research we noted earlier. A closer look at users’ experiences online reveals a more intriguing picture.

The most common experience was witnessing the “perfect” life or the “perfect” bodies of others on social media. This tendency for “only posting good days” or for sharing only “perfect pictures, exciting experiences” was related to feelings of anger and frustration for its lack of realism and unattainability, and was identified as an unhelpful online behaviour by many.

This desire for presenting an ideal self online is closely related to content management. Many users shared practices of deleting photos, which do not garner enough likes or attract a negative comment, pressure to produce content and maintain a certain image, awareness of the differences between platforms and audiences. These practices are similar to work by marketers and advertisers and have been discussed by researchers as containing the characteristics of work rather than play.¹³



This “perfect” and competitive atmosphere also triggered judgement and criticism, participants said.

They shared feeling “judged”, “judgemental”, “aware of criticism”, “unkind” and “very self-critical”.

Certain gender differences were also highlighted, with comments such as “girls are more critical” and “girls are worse than boys about each other”.

Other common themes were those of comparisons and pressure. Comparing to others in terms of photos or just life overall was a common experience. And this constant comparison could be linked to feelings of pressure. This was described as “life pressure/expectation”, “pressure to conform”, intensified competition on social media, and “struggle to keep up to date”.

However, not all experiences are negative. Many comments related to issues of community and connectedness: “part of a community of support”, “positives in social media too – grassroots”, “connected”, “accessible”, and “can reduce isolation”.

Overall, when asked which behaviours online they can identify as not helpful, the posting of only positive, perfect or unattainable photos and content was mentioned most often. Other unhelpful behaviours, already discussed earlier, included being judgemental, unkind or hurtful, and comparing oneself to others.

Positive behaviours and proposed strategies

Finally, participants shared their positive behaviours and existing strategies they use to maintain a healthy social media life and a positive body image.

1) Limit time spent online and in apps

The number one strategy for maintaining a healthy social media life offered by participants was to limit time spent online/in apps. This could be supported by growing more conscious of how much time one spends there and by turning off notifications. Paying more attention to offline interactions and relationships, such as family nights, could be another incentive for keeping away from social media.

2) Educate yourself and others

The second most popular strategy was education. Participants proposed educating parents on how young people use social media and young people themselves about the impact of social media, how it works, and how it differs from reality in relation to body image and beyond. Also how apps are purposefully created to be addictive and to keep us there and to continue coming back was felt to be important for people to know.

3) Talk openly and honestly about what happens on social media

Social media often presents a one-sided view of life. Simply talking openly about how we behave on social media and why can shed light on these discrepancies. This can foster critical thinking about reasons for being on social media, the meaning we transfer on likes and other online gestures, and how we can minimize the negative influences on body image.



4) Manage your online content for a positive experience

Content management was discussed earlier in terms of users working to maximise exposure and the harvesting of likes on social media. But content management strategies, albeit different ones, can also be used in a protective manner. Participants proposed creating boundaries online in terms of the content you are exposed to and deleting harmful/triggering content and “toxic people or pages”.

Users can curate for themselves content and an overall environment which is protective, supportive, and enhances their experiences. This proposed strategy also directly relates to positive body image, which itself can serve as a protective filter when processing information.

5) Be self-aware: think of how you respond to certain content and how that may affect you and others

This related to being aware of how some posts and content make you feel. What type of content or people trigger negative reactions in you? What are those negative responses? Why do you think you are experiencing them? What can you do about it?

6) Allow and encourage young people to lead the discussion on this issue

Finally, young people’s role as leaders on this issue was highlighted repeatedly, as they are the heaviest users of social media and the main targets of its influences. Schools or youth services could be where these conversations take place, as well as in the media and other public spaces.

Below are additional suggestions shared by participants.

Blocking posts and unfollowing negative influences	Including diverse and dissenting voices, causes, people w/ different bodies	Seeking out what makes you feel positive or uplifted
Being more mindful of what you’re looking at and the time you’re wasting	Realising you have a choice	Realising social media’s role – it doesn’t have to take over your life
Being mindful of other people’s negative habits	Promoting + sharing positive ideas: body image, equality, etc. for wider recognition	Using closed forums to share “real” experiences and celebrate positives
Challenging things	Putting the phone down/ reducing time online or setting a limit	Considering your content and the viewers consuming that content

References



1. Cooley, E., & Toray, T. (2001). Body image and personality predictors of eating disorder symptoms during the college years. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 30(1), 28-36.
2. 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.
3. 2017 Dove Global Girls Beauty and Confidence Report.
4. Mental Health Foundation, 2019. *Body image report – executive summary*. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/body-image-report/exec-summary>
5. Vandenbosch, L., Vervloessem, D., & Eggermont, S. (2013). "I Might Get Your Heart Racing in My Skin-Tight Jeans": Sexualization on Music Entertainment Television. *Communication Studies*, 64(2), 178-194.
6. Sypeck, M. F., Gray, J. J., & Ahrens, A. H. (2004). No longer just a pretty face: Fashion magazines' depictions of ideal female beauty from 1959 to 1999. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 36(3), 342-347.
7. Obesity indicators 2018 – 30 October 2018. Scottish Government. www.gov.scot/publications/obesity-indicators/
8. Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2013). NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 46(6), 630-633.; Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2015). Negative comparisons about one's appearance mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns. *Body Image*, 12, 82-88.
9. Eckler, P., Kalyango, Y., & Paasch, E. (2017). Facebook use and negative body image among U.S. college women. *Women & Health*, 57(2), 249-267.
10. Fardouly, J., Willburger, B. K., & Vartanian, L. R. (2018). Instagram use and young women's body image concerns and self-objectification: Testing mediational pathways. *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1380-1395.
11. Tylka, T. L., & Wood-Barcalow, N. L. (2015). What is and what is not positive body image? Conceptual foundations and construct definition. *Body Image*, 14, 118-129.
12. Ibid.
13. Anderson, S., Hamilton, K., & Tonner, A. (2016). Social labour: exploring work in consumption. *Marketing Theory*, 16(3), 383-400.



Mental Health
Foundation
Scotland



Mental Health Foundation Scotland
30 George Square
Glasgow G2 1EG



0141 572 0125



scotlandoffice@mentalhealth.org.uk



@MHFScot



mentalhealth.org.uk



Registered with
FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR