

Body Image in the Media:
Does it Affect Women's Self- Esteem?

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Abstract

The average person is exposed to media almost every day whether it be models, fashion shows, makeup advertisements, and even weight loss advertisements. For some people this exposure can alter the way they think and feel about themselves. For example, weight loss ads have thin, athletic, and muscular models. When people are legitimately trying to lose weight, or get that perfect body they look to these advertisements for guidance. However, it's almost impossible to achieve the perfect body that is portrayed. The lack of success may lead to negative feelings. We hypothesized that women's self-esteem would be negatively affected by being exposed to certain body images portrayed by the media. In this study, there were a total number of 21 participants were randomly assigned into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. The control group was exposed to random images of objects seen every day such as a chair, dog, and house. The experimental group was exposed to images of thin beautiful women that displayed the ideal body image. Afterwards all participants completed a self-esteem scale. We conducted an independent samples *t*-test to compare the self-esteem of the two groups. Our results indicated our hypothesis was not supported; the means between the control and experimental groups were not significantly different. Although our study did not find evidence to support our hypothesis, future studies should continue investigating how media exposure to ideal thin ideals might affect women's self-esteem.

Body Image in the Media:

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In today's society and also the world we live in, there's not a day that goes by where we aren't exposed to some kind of media. Whether it is TV commercials, radio advertisements, or online product displays, we are surrounded by the influences of media. For example, ASPCA commercials show animals that are in bad shape or not healthy and play slow, downbeat, depressing music so that the program founders can get donations to support the program and keep it running. The commercials are meant to make people feel sad and have sympathy for the animals. There are also advertisements for clothing that are aimed (for the most part) to make people want to buy the clothing because it's stylish or fashionable. Nowadays the media leans toward the idea of an "ideal" woman as being beautiful and thin. With the number of such media influences all around us, it is likely that women might feel like they are not "ideal" or beautiful, and might also experience feelings of an unwanted body image and lower self- esteem.

There are many studies that discuss body image and how it is affected by the media. Dittmar (2009) states that, "...the mass media are seen as a particularly potent and pervasive source of influence, evidenced by a virtual explosion of studies on media exposure and body dissatisfaction" (p. 2). There are also studies that compare other psychological processes as well as self- esteem. Some of the psychological factors that were compared are self- actualization, body image, and vulnerability (Dittmar, 2009). Exposure to images such as these on a constant basis will cause women to constantly self- evaluate themselves based off the images that the media portrays. When women feel that they are unable to meet this standard of beauty, psychological processes can produce feelings of anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, and even lower confidence levels (Jung, 2006). Additionally, overall physical appearance has been

associated with social anxiety and with social attractiveness (Hart, Flora, Palyo, Fresco, Holle, & Heimberg, 2008). In other words people who have social anxiety may not feel that they are socially attractive or meet society's definition of ideal beauty.

We believe that with the amount of exposure to media that portrays the "ideal" woman and the fact that the models are ultra-thin will lead to a negative feeling of women's own body image and self-esteem. In the present study we hypothesized that women's self-esteem would be negatively affected by being exposed to certain body images portrayed by the media. For example, Jung (2006) found that images in the media that portray thin and attractive models may have a negative effect on college women's moods. Anecdotal evidence further suggests that some women try to achieve the ideal body image, and when they cannot they feel bad about themselves or they feel that they aren't beautiful or attractive. According to social comparison theory, individuals will self-evaluate in ways that affect their abilities and opinions in comparison to other individuals (Jung, 2009). This theory helps to explain why people who evaluate themselves harshly experience dissatisfaction and negative feelings.

Some women who may feel that they do not fit the standards of beauty can lead them to take drastic actions, such as eating disorders and self-shaming. In one study by Jung (2009) it was found that "college women who compared themselves to idealized media images had elevated standards of personal attractiveness and lower satisfaction with their own attractiveness" (p. 337). We feel that this is an important topic to cover because we believe that many women are affected. When women feel this dissatisfaction it comes with feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, depression, and even lower confidence levels (Jung, 2009). Not only is this a problem of physical appearance, but it's also a problem of psychological and social issues that develop from such negative media influences.

Method

Participants

We had a convenient sample of college men and women between the ages of 18 and 25 ($M = 19.71$, $SD = 1.76$). The participants were recruited from Angelo State University using Sona Systems where participants could volunteer for the study. There were a total of 21 participants who completed the study and answered all questions on the survey. Participants were a variety of ethnic backgrounds including: Native American or American Indian at 4.8%, Asian / Pacific Islander at 4.8%, Black or African American / not of Hispanic origin at 4.8%, White or Caucasian/ not of Hispanic origin at 33.3%, Hispanic or Latino at 47.6%, and Other at 4.8%. Participants received partial course credit towards their psychology courses at ASU.

Design and Procedure

For this study, we chose to use a between- subject design. We felt that this was the best approach so that participants would be less likely to guess our hypothesis, which might have affected their answers. Our study is a between subject's design because we manipulated our independent variable (the images shown to each group). Participants were only exposed to one level of the independent variable, and were randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group. Once all the data was collected we were able to compare results between the control and experimental group.

The stimuli we used for this study consisted of a variety of photo images. For our experimental group we used images that consisted of models that were considered "thin." We obtained our images using Google and made sure that they were labeled for reuse and not copyrighted. There were a total of 10 images for the experimental group, were in color, and contained the models full body. The images consisted of women who were of different

ethnicities and that were also in different clothing such as dresses, shorts and sports bra, and bikinis. The control group also consisted of 10 images in full color. However, the images for this group consisted of random items seen in everyday life such as a dog, a house, and a chair. The control group images were also obtained from Google using only images that were labeled for reuse and not copyrighted (see Appendix A for photo stimuli). We presented participants the images in a PowerPoint presentation. There were two separate PowerPoint presentations: one for the control group and one for the experimental group. Each PowerPoint had a title slide, the 10 images on separate slides, and a final slide for our resources to cite where we obtained our images. Each slide had a timer of 15 seconds before moving onto the next slide.

Our questionnaire was from an existing measure. One of the scales we used was the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) and the other scale we used was the Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS). The SAAS scale had 16 questions that used a 7- point Likert scale for each question using 1 = entirely disagree to 7 = entirely agree. The SAAS scale includes questions such as *“I get nervous when talking to people because of the way I look, I worry people will judge the way I look negatively, and I am concerned that people think I am not good looking”* (Hart et al., 2008, p. 53). The SAAS scale was the main scale that we used in order to look at our data. Our second scale, SMDS, is composed of 9 questions that also use a 7- point Likert scale ranging from 1 = entirely disagree to 7 = entirely agree. The SMDS scale included questions such as, *“I often feel bad when I could not use social media, I regularly have arguments with others because of my social media use, and I often use social media to escape from negative feelings”* (Eijnden et al., 2016, p. 483). The SMDS scale in our study was used as a filler scale so that our participants would be less likely to guess the nature of our study. We also had our participants fill out a demographics form, which included age, race, and gender.

Once the participants entered the study room the experimenter greeted them and thanked them for coming to the study. Once that was done and participants signed the consent form they were instructed that they would be watching a PowerPoint presentation that displayed several different images. After the PowerPoint presentation was completed, the experimenter handed out the questionnaires (see Appendix B) and instructed the participants to answer to the best of their abilities. Participants were also instructed to place their finished questionnaires in a manila folder to help ensure confidentiality of their responses. Finally, participants were provided with a debriefing form, and thanked for their time and for contributing to our study.

Results

Because we were only interested in whether women's self-esteem was affected after being exposed to media images displaying a thin female "ideal" body, we excluded the data from the one male participant who completed the study. Therefore, our results reflect only responses by female participants. To determine if women's self-esteem was in fact negatively affected by certain body images portrayed by the media, we analyzed our data using an independent samples *t*-test. For our *t*-tests we used self-esteem as our dependent variable and compared responses from our control group and our experimental group. To calculate the variable of self-esteem, we averaged the responses for the items on the SAAS scale. The first item on the questionnaire was reverse-coded so that larger numbers reflected higher self-esteem. The results of the *t*-tests indicated that there were no significant differences in responses between conditions. Participants who were exposed to the control images showed no significant difference in self-esteem ($M = 3.53, SD = 1.32$) than participants who were exposed to the experimental images ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.40$), $t(18) = .35, p = .730$. Therefore, our hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

Finding of this study suggest that women's self-esteem is not negatively affected by body images portrayed in the media, which is contrary to our hypothesis as well as other research findings (Jung, 2006). We found that showing the two groups different images did not alter how they felt about themselves. Although our study did not show that women's self-esteem was negatively affected, we do believe that it is still a major issue to study and is relevant in the real world. We believe that our hypothesis was not confirmed because of different reasons. For one, our procedure of exposing participants to images of ideally thin women was not enough of an effect for the participant to have a difference in how they felt about themselves. For instance, if we had participants interact face-to-face with ideally thin women and had them perform a task such as shopping for dress sizes, it could make salient different dress sizes of an ideally thin woman compared to the participant. By doing this we would possibly get different results. Although other studies investigating effects of media exposure on women (Frederick, Sandhu, Scott, & Akbari, 2016; Jung, 2006) our study specifically investigated and predicted negative effects on women's self-esteem after being exposed to media images; however, our hypothesis was not supported.

Determining whether media affects women's self-esteem is a topic for study that many people would be interested in knowing about further. Even though our study did not support our hypothesis, future researchers can learn from our methods and procedures on what to do differently. In terms of limitations, we could have incorporated different methods of exposure of ideally thin women to the participants, such as magazine covers, advertisements, commercials, or even video clips of model photoshoots. We believe that just a simple quick exposure to the "ideal" woman is not enough to affect the participant's answers to the questionnaire. We did have men and women sign up to participate in the study; however, only one man finished the

study. It would have been nice to have a larger portion of men involved in the study so that we would have a greater sample size to represent the population more accurately, and so that we could see if men differed from women in self-esteem due to exposure by images portrayed in the media. Another limitation was that our sample was almost 50% Hispanic. A greater amount of diversity would be appreciated in future studies so that there is an equal representation of the population as a whole.

Since the media is everywhere we go no matter what we are doing, many people of different ages, gender, ethnicity, and social status groups are exposed to it. This means that there are different variables that could potentially be measured and compared with self-esteem in future research. It would be interesting for future researchers to compare men versus women in different age groups. Research like this would be very interesting because there are many people of different age groups that may be more exposed to media than others and this may also affect their self-esteem. I would expect the older age groups to have less of an effect on self-esteem compared to younger age groups because we feel that the younger age groups are exposed to media more than other age groups.

Advertisements are aimed at getting people to buy their product(s) so they put ideally beautiful women in the advertisements so people will believe that if they buy this product they will achieve the near impossible goal of being “ideal”. We see this especially in weight loss commercials and make up advertisements. Even though our hypothesis was not supported, the issue of self-esteem and body image affected by media is still an issue that concerns many. Women turn to other methods to try and be the ideal woman. We see plenty of women of various ages with eating disorders such as bulimia, anorexia nervosa, and binge eating and some will say that they feel they aren't perfect or beautiful. This wide phenomenon is observable across the

globe in all types of ethnicities, nationalities, ages, and gender. Fortunately, media sources are moving towards including women of different nationalities, ethnicities, ages, and body types. With this movement slowly happening women feel more encouraged to not hide their bodies because of a negative self-esteem and to be proud of who they are and the way they are built.

References

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Appendix A

Control Group Photos



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/dog-pet-14644/>



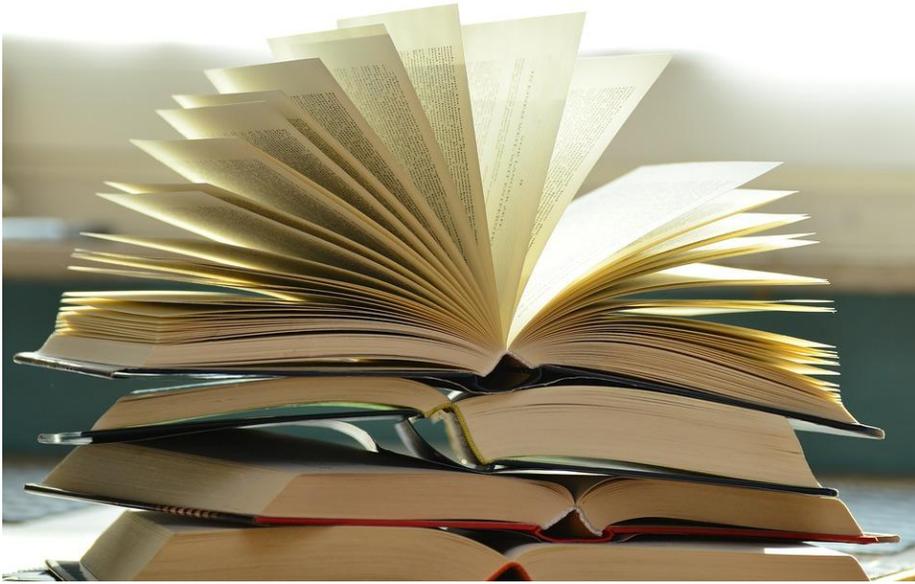
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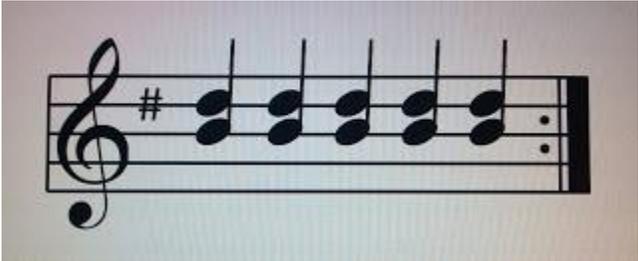
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/sea-beach-sand-sun-4684/>



<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=148375&picture=coffee-break>



<https://pixabay.com/en/books-book-pages-read-literature-1082942/>



<http://bestandworstever.blogspot.com/2012/11/best-visual-representation-of-busy-ever.html>



<http://www.freestockphotos.biz/stockphoto/17796>



<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=96419&picture=dumbbell>



<https://pixabay.com/en/paris-france-spring-beauty-738106/>



<https://pixabay.com/en/chair-wood-furniture-643246/>

Experimental Group Photos



<http://vs-angel.deviantart.com/art/Candice-Swanepoel-PNG-364467656>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/newyork/3090128910>



<https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swimsuit>



<http://fitnessgym.blogspot.com/2015/01/a-simple-guide-to-natural-weight-loss.html>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/62450073@N05/5685685928>



<https://pixabay.com/en/model-posing-black-young-woman-873675/>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/walterpro/7590210156>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/62450073@N05/5685685724>



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Model_in_green_dress_2.jpg



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/cnon/5831605149>

Appendix B

Self-Esteem Questionnaire

Instructions: Please circle the number response to answer the following statements below:

1. I feel comfortable with the way I appear to others.

●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Entirely Mostly Somewhat Neither Somewhat Mostly Entirely

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree nor Agree Agree Agree

Disagree

2. I feel nervous when having my picture taken.

●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Entirely Mostly Somewhat Neither Somewhat Mostly Entirely

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree nor Agree Agree Agree

Disagree

3. I get tense when it is obvious people are looking at me.

●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Entirely Mostly Somewhat Neither Somewhat Mostly Entirely

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree nor Agree Agree Agree

Disagree

4. I am concerned people would not like me because of the way that I look.

●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Entirely Mostly Somewhat Neither Somewhat Mostly Entirely

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree nor Agree Agree Agree

Disagree

5. I worry that others talk about flaws in my appearance when I am not around.

●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Entirely Mostly Somewhat Neither Somewhat Mostly Entirely

Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree nor Agree Agree Agree

Disagree

6. I am concerned people will find me unappealing because of my appearance.

●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●-----●

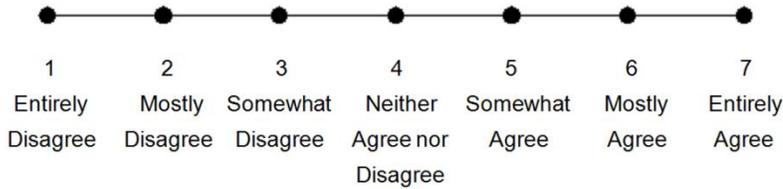
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Entirely Mostly Somewhat Neither Somewhat Mostly Entirely

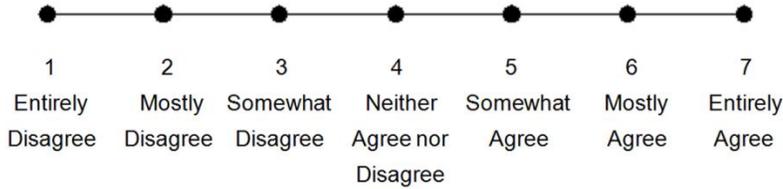
Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree nor Agree Agree Agree

Disagree

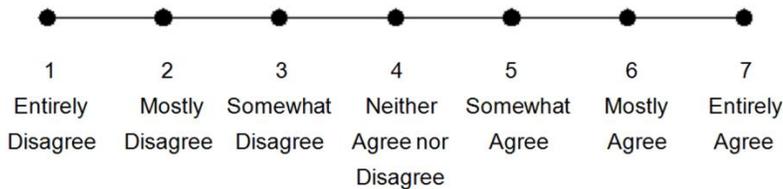
7. I am afraid that people find me unattractive.



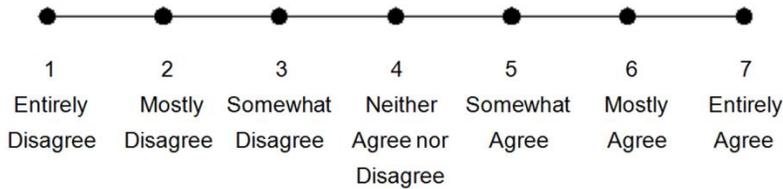
8. I worry that my appearance will make life more difficult for me.



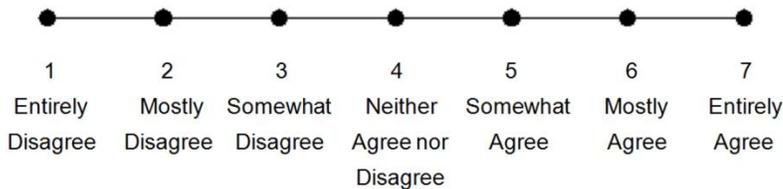
9. I am concerned that I have missed out on opportunities because of my appearance.



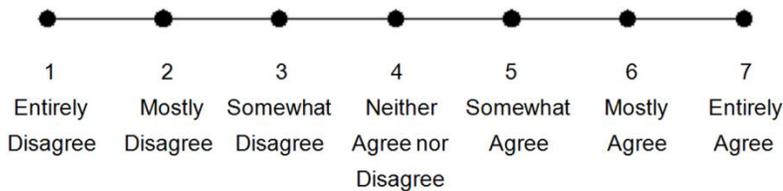
10. I get nervous when talking to people because of the way I look.



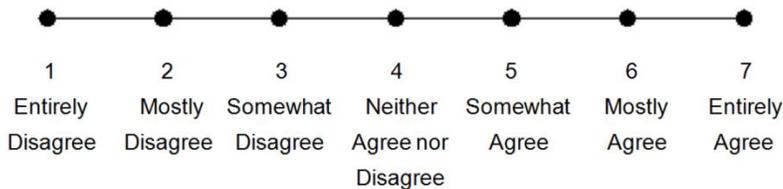
11. I feel anxious when other people say something about my appearance.



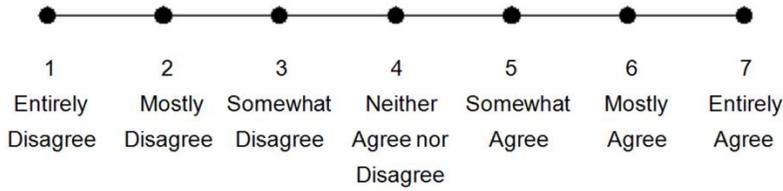
12. I am frequently afraid I would not meet others' standards of how I should look.



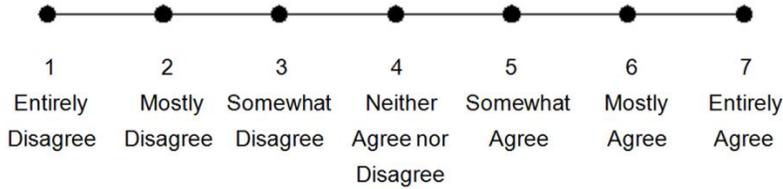
13. I worry people will judge the way I look negatively.



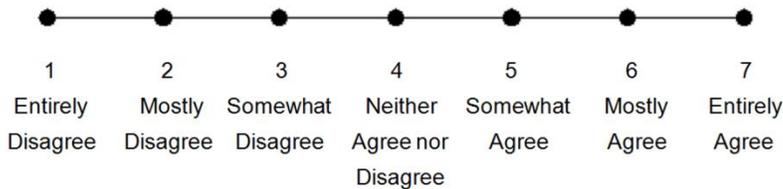
14. I am uncomfortable when I think others are noticing flaws in my appearance.



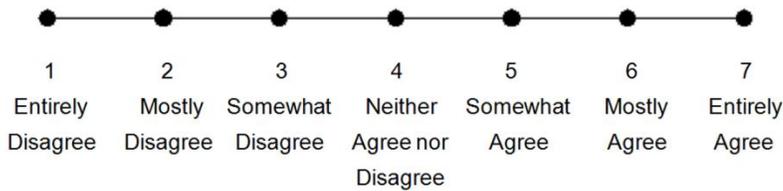
15. I worry that a romantic partner will/ would leave me because of my appearance.



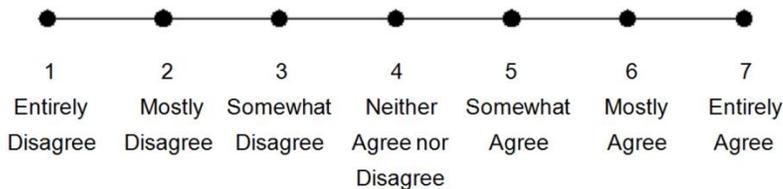
16. I am concerned that people think I am not good looking.



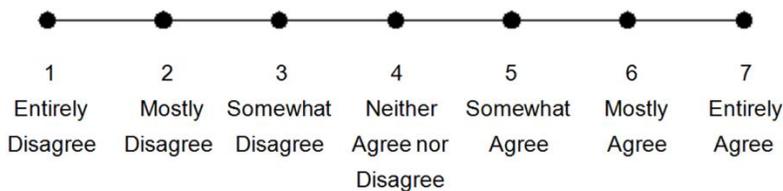
17. I regularly find that I can't think of anything else but the moment that I will be able to use social media again.



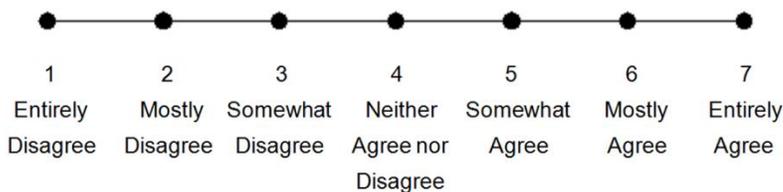
18. I regularly felt dissatisfied because I wanted to spend more time on social media.



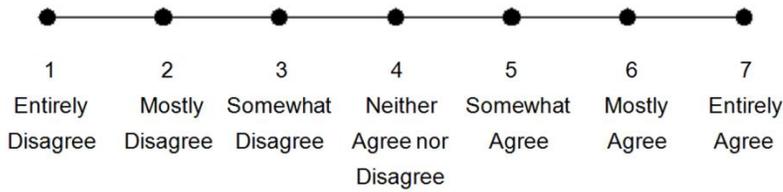
19. I often feel bad when I could not use social media.



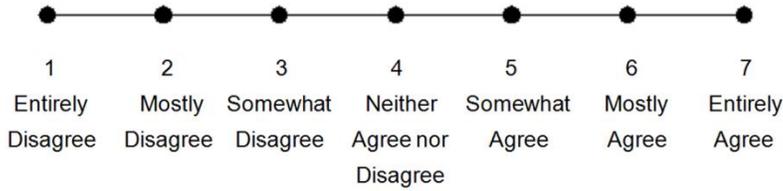
20. I try to spend less time on social media, but fail.



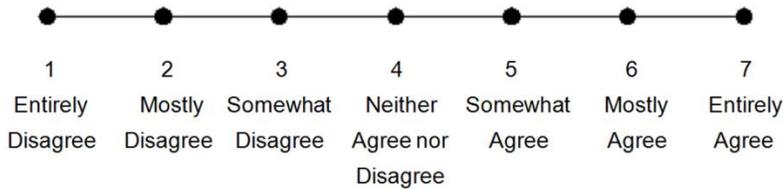
21. I regularly neglect other activities (e.g. hobbies, sport) because I wanted to use social media.



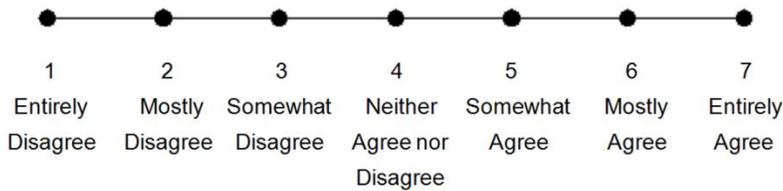
22. I regularly have arguments with others because of my social media use.



23. I regularly lie to my parents or friends about the amount of time I spend on social media.



24. I often use social media to escape from negative feelings.



25. I have had serious conflicts with my parents, brother(s) or sister (s) because of my social media use.

