

Social Media Use and Body Image:

Do they Correlate?

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The present study aims to examine the relationship between social media usage and perceived body image. As social media has become more prevalent in society, so too have its potential effects been examined closer. The culture of the United States today makes social media a near-necessity from a young age. Children are becoming exposed to models, influencers, and ideals from elementary school. With the rise in the usage of social media, questions about the effect it has on the general population have also slowly arisen. Is social media good or bad? Does social media hurt people's self-esteem or help it? How does social media change the way people think about themselves if it does at all? Because of social media's novelty, little research has been done to answer these questions. The present study wants to add to the literature surrounding social media usage and how it affects people and the way they view themselves. Specifically, the present study wants to examine the possible correlation between time spent on social media and perceived body image.

Past research has helped create a baseline of information on how social media influences people's self-esteem. In a 2022 study by Miljeteig & von Soest, it was found that as self-esteem was less stable, the use of social media increased. This use increases because "self-esteem serves as a motivational tool to increase social belongingness if an individual's social value is found to be too low (p. 2)." So, as someone's self-esteem decreases, they will tend to go to social media to increase their feelings of social belongingness. This study took an initial self-esteem measurement, then had participants respond to social media notifications over a few weeks. This study used a longitudinal design to examine how overall social media use predicted self-esteem and found that lower self-esteem predicted more social media use for women, but less social

media use for men. Further, increased social media use predicted lower self-esteem for women. People who had low stability concerning their self-esteem also tended to have higher social media usage. The researchers hypothesized that low self-esteem predicts increased social media use, social media use will predict lower current self-esteem, low self-esteem stability will predict increased social media use, that there would be a gender effect that would interact with social media use and self-esteem, and that the type of social media platform would also affect self-esteem predictions. All of these hypotheses were supported except for the one about the type of platform.

A study by Burrow & Rainone took the idea of self-esteem being related to social media use even further by examining the relationship between likes on a post and self-esteem (2016). Researchers conducted two experiments in this study, one correlational and one experimental. Researchers hypothesized that more likes on a post would increase self-esteem, and fewer likes would decrease self-esteem, with purpose in life acting as a buffer, meaning the more purpose someone felt they have in life, the less of an effect likes will have on their self-esteem. This hypothesis was supported in both the correlational portion of their study and the experimental portion. In the correlational study, they simply looked at how many likes someone got on a Facebook post and asked them about their subsequent self-esteem. In the experimental portion, they manipulated the number of likes someone got and measured the same thing.

A final research study in 2021 by Vandebosch et al. looked at the effects of social media on body image specifically. Researchers examined current trends related to different social media platforms, unique features related to social media, and “positive” social media content. This study did not manipulate variables but rather looked at current trends and their relationships to each other, and gave possible ideas for future research surrounding social media use. This

research found that platforms that rely more on images (for example, Instagram) are more dysfunctional regarding body image than platforms like Facebook which are more text-based.. They also found that of different kinds of positive content posted on social media (body positivity, fitspiration, etc.), only body positivity had a positive effect on body image. This research presents trends and ideas that the present research intends to build upon and collect more data for.

The present research intends to build on these previous studies and give more data to the literature surrounding body image and social media use. Because social media is a fairly new area of interest in research because of its new prevalence in society today, there is very little research involving its effects, both long and short-term. The present study hypothesizes a negative correlation between time spent on social media and body image, such that as time on social media each week increases, perceived body image will decrease. With past research in mind, this hypothesis is consistent with previous findings. Adding to the research literature surrounding social media use is crucial as it continues to play an instrumental role in people's everyday lives. This is because image-based social media, or any platform that involves interaction with others, lends itself to someone comparing themselves to the people they see online. With the rise of influencers projecting perfect lives and perfect bodies as well, without disclosing when photos are edited, people might look at themselves and ask why they don't look as perfect as the people they see online. Logically, as someone spends more time exposed to these ideas, the more they will ruminate on how they feel about their own bodies, therefore decreasing their body image and making them feel worse about themselves. People also tend to post the best parts of their lives, which creates an unrealistic standard people begin to compare themselves to, further promoting a negative view of self, and decreasing both body image and

self-esteem. There are many factors that play into how someone views themselves, and the present research intends to examine one of these factors in a correlational study.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 87.4% women and 12.6% men (N= 83 women, 12 men). Participants were 52.6% White/Caucasian, 34.7% Hispanic, 7.4% Black/African American, 4.2% Biracial, and 1.1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Ages of participants ranged from 17 to 53 (M= 20.0, SD= 4.33). Participants were recruited online via Angelo State SONA systems, where they were able to sign up for and complete the study.

### **Design**

This study is a correlational design because it compares the scores of two variables and no variables are manipulated. Scores for body image and time spent on social media each week were collected from the study, and those scores were compared against each other to see if there was a kind of correlation between the two, such that as one increased the other increased as well, or as one increased the other decreased. I predicted a negative correlation between time spent on social media based on past literature supporting the idea that increased time on social media decreases self-esteem and possibly positive body image (e.g., Burrow & Rainone, 2016; Vandebosch et al., 2021). There was no manipulation of variables or attempt to control extraneous variables, so all experimental and quasi-experimental strategies are ruled out as possibilities for this study.

### **Measures**

This study used a created survey to measure perceived body image and how much time participants usually spend on social media in a week. The body image survey consisted of 7

questions, and participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree to questions such as *I often feel bad about how I look after being on social media* and *I am unhappy with how I look*. This survey was reverse coded so that as the numbers on the Likert scale increased, the negative feelings about ones body increased as well. This was done so that all survey questions were coded in the same direction. The eighth question on the survey was also rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, but the answer options were related to the number of hours spent on social media in a week (1 = <1 hour/week, 2 = 2-3 hours, 3 = 4-5 hours, 4 = 6-7 hours, 5 = 8-9 hours, 6 = 10-11 hours, and 7 = more than 12 hours). Participants also completed a demographics questionnaire, listing their race, age, and sex. Demographics were collected to further explain the sample of participants and make results easier to understand by providing more information.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through Angelo State SONA systems, and they completed the survey online via Qualtrics survey software, which is a secure platform for collecting data online. After signing up to complete the survey and being redirected to Qualtrics, participants were presented with a consent form outlining the study they were to complete. After giving consent, they were presented with the survey questions about body image and social media use. Once that was completed, they filled out the demographics questionnaire and then were thanked for their time and given a debriefing form to read over. The debriefing form gave participants a little bit more information about the study they just completed and included references to similar research and contact information for the study's faculty advisor in the case they had any questions or concerns about the study.

## Results

I predicted that social media use and body image would be negatively correlated so that as time spent on social media increased, positive body image would decrease. To test this hypothesis, I used a Pearson correlation test to compare the scores between social media use and body image. Results showed a significant correlation between social media use ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ) and body image ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), Pearson's  $r(96) = .21$ ,  $p = .043$ , such that as social media use increased, positive body image decreased. These results support the original hypothesis of the study.

## Discussion

The main hypothesis of this study was that there would be a significant negative correlation between time spent on social media and body image, such that as time spent on social media increased, positive body image decreased. This hypothesis was based on past research literature surrounding image-based social media and its relationship to self-esteem and body image. The results of this study supported the hypothesis. This is consistent with past literature showing a correlation between social media usage and self-esteem, as well as a possible correlation regarding body image as well (e.g., Burrow & Rainone, 2016; Vandebosch et al., 2021). As there is not much research on social media and body image, this study could have large implications. It gives people the opportunity to re-evaluate how much time they spend using social media and how that may be affecting their perception of themselves in a negative way, while also giving researchers an inside look into the possible side effects of a concept that is still quite novel in today's world.

This study has a few possible limitations. First, with only 96 participants, the significant results might not hold very much external validity, reducing this study's ability to be generalized

to a larger population. Second, this study used a brand new measure for positive body image that has not been reviewed previously. If I were to conduct this study again without making it an experimental design, I would try to find a body image measure that has been used in peer-reviewed, published research to help increase the validity of the study. I would also try to collect data from more participants, and I would also consider adding a few more measures regarding self-esteem, mood, and/or stress to get a fuller picture of the state the participants are in when completing the study. By adding a few measures, I would be able to study more than just body image and social media use without adding much extra time or using more resources for my study. I also would consider changing the design of the study to an experimental design by measuring participants' perceived body image and then either showing them a mock social media site, similar to Instagram, or a more neutral mock website that does not have content related to body image. They would be able to scroll on and explore whatever site they are randomly assigned to, and then the different body image/stress/self-esteem measures would be taken and compared between groups to see if there are any immediate effects of social media use on perceived body image. This would create a between subjects study in which every participant is only shown one of two conditions (Instagram-esque or control). I think future research should continue to establish a strong relationship between negative body image and social media use so the general public can be made aware of the risks they are taking when they spend time on social media.

I think that research surrounding social media use will be vital to the future of mental and physical health. Since social media is fairly new and there is little research about its long-term effects, any and every study regarding how social media affects the way people think is valuable. The present study adds to the scientific literature by continuing to build on past research and



establish a relationship between social media use and body image. This is good because future researchers, therapists, and the general public need to know the possible risks and harms surrounding something that has quickly become extremely prevalent in society.

I have watched social media take hold of everyone in my life, young and old. Whether through text-based apps like Facebook and Twitter, or image-based apps like Instagram, every person is familiar with or has used a social media platform. With this increased use in such a short period (around 20-25 years), little is known about the long and short-term effects of spending time on these websites and apps. The present study aims to add to the current research literature by shedding light on the possible negative effects of social media use. I would use this study as a time of personal reflection, and I think all people should; it is a study that makes researchers and the public alike evaluate how they spend their time and how that might be affecting the way they think about themselves. It is somewhat scary to consider how largely social media use could be impacting the way we view ourselves and each other. The present study might have been small, but its implications on people's everyday lives and the way they spend their time have the potential to be quite large.

### References

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