

What is the effect of social media on body image?

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It is estimated that Facebook had nearly 1.3 billion users in 2013. That translates to 1/6 of the world population. In North America, just under half of the population is on Facebook and 71% of adults who are online are on Facebook. A 2010 study revealed that teens spend more than 7 ½ hours per day online, and much of that time is spent on social media sites like Facebook. Social media has become ingrained into our way of life. But what is the emotional cost of our immersion into this relatively new form of media? Specifically, how does social media, like Facebook, impact how we feel about our bodies?

In a study by Fardouly and Vartanian (2015), researchers examined the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns in a group of 227 female university students. The researchers hypothesized that greater usage of Facebook would be associated with greater body image dissatisfaction. They also thought that upward appearance comparisons (comparing your appearance with someone whom you believe to be more attractive than yourself) might help explain this relationship. Participants completed a series of questionnaires online, which included questions about Facebook usage, appearance comparisons on Facebook, and body image concerns.

Results indicate that more Facebook usage was associated with more body dissatisfaction and greater drive for thinness. These body image concerns were positively associated with Facebook appearance comparisons. In fact, the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns was accounted for by appearance comparisons. In other words, appearance comparisons seem to be the key factor in explaining why Facebook usage is associated with body image dissatisfaction. Most often, participants reported comparing their appearance with distant peers on Facebook, followed by close friends and celebrities, and least often with family members. Participants rated their body most negatively when comparing to female celebrities, followed by close friends and distant peers (which did not differ from one another), and least negatively when comparing to female family members.

The authors conclude that women who spend more time on Facebook may experience greater body image concerns because they compare their appearance with others more often on Facebook. Comparisons to peers may have special significance because they are the most relevant comparison group for most Facebook users. On Facebook, people tend to present idealized versions of themselves and it may be hard for women to accurately gauge how realistic these images are, especially for distant peers and celebrities who they may seldom come into in-person contact with. Since this study is simply observing a relationship between Facebook usage, appearance comparisons, and body image dissatisfaction, it is impossible to know if Facebook usage causes body image concerns or if women

who are more concerned with their body tend to spend more time on Facebook. For example, Facebook may attract female users who are already highly concerned about their body. This study emphasizes the need for further research examining the effect of social media--a pervasive aspect of our culture-- on body image.

Reference: Fardouly, J & Vartanian L (2015). Negative comparisons about one's appearance mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns. *Body Image* 12: 82-88.