



## Review article

# A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes



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## ABSTRACT

A large body of literature has demonstrated mass media effects on body image and disordered eating. More recently, research in this area has turned to 'new' forms of media, such as the Internet, and particularly Social Networking Sites (SNSs). A systematic search for peer-reviewed articles on SNS use and body image and eating disorders resulted in 20 studies meeting specific inclusion criteria. As a whole, these articles demonstrated that use of SNSs is associated with body image and disordered eating. Specific SNS activities, such as viewing and uploading photos and seeking negative feedback via status updates, were identified as particularly problematic. A small number of studies also addressed underlying processes and found that appearance-based social comparison mediated the relationship between SNS use and body image and eating concerns. Gender was not found to be a moderating factor. It was concluded that, although there is a good deal of correlational research supporting the maladaptive effect of SNS use on body image and disordered eating, more longitudinal and experimental studies are needed.

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## Introduction

Research on the psychological implications of using and being exposed to social networking sites (SNSs) is a relatively novel area of research that is gaining momentum. To date, both beneficial and problematic implications of SNS use have been identified. For example, SNS use has been related not only to greater social connectedness and wellbeing (Valkenberg & Peter, 2009), but also to increased loneliness (Nie & Hillygus, 2002). An emerging literature has investigated the influence of SNSs on body image and disordered eating. The present paper aims to systematically review the available research in this area.

Body image can be defined as a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their body (Grogan, 2008). Body dissatisfaction occurs when views of the body are negative and involves a perceived discrepancy between a person's assessment of their actual and ideal body (Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Grogan, 2008). Research in both Australia and the United States suggests that women and adolescent girls experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disturbed eating patterns than do their male counterparts (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Tiggemann, 2005). It is estimated that approximately 50% of adolescent girls report being unhappy with their bodies (Bearman, Presnell, & Martinez, 2006). This dissatisfaction can develop from as early as six years of age and research has shown that the issue exists amongst individuals of varying body shape and cultural background (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Grabe & Hyde, 2006). Further, it can lead to maladaptive consequences for both physical and mental health, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Dittmar, 2009; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

Body dissatisfaction is generally attributed to social factors, with the mass media considered the most influential and pervasive cause (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). Images of the 'ideal' body shape have infiltrated traditional mass media sources, such as woman's fashion magazines and television, for many years. These images have been found to promote unattainable beauty ideals of glamorous and often photo-shopped women who are generally young, tall, moderately breasted, and incredibly thin (Grabe et al., 2008; Tiggemann, 2011). The association between media exposure and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among women and girls has been supported by extensive correlational (for meta-analyses, see Grabe et al., 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009) and experimental research (for meta-analyses, see Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Want, 2009). A number of theories have attempted to explain the effect of the media on body image and eating behaviours, with two of the most commonly accepted frameworks being sociocultural and objectification theories.

According to sociocultural theory (Thompson et al., 1999; Tiggemann, 2011), the media present women with contemporary thin beauty ideals. Despite their impossibility, many women aspire to these ideals, but almost invariably fail to achieve them, resulting in body dissatisfaction (Ata et al., 2007; Keery, Van Den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Stice, 1994; Tiggemann, 2002). Further, the theory proposes that the media's portrayal of unrealistic beauty ideals encourages women to both internalize them and engage in appearance comparisons with them. Thus, internalization and appearance comparison are highlighted as possible mechanisms in the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction (Keery et al., 2004; Stice, 1994; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). In support, a number of studies have shown that appearance comparison mediates the effects of traditional media on body image concerns (see meta-analysis by Groesz et al., 2002).

Another framework for understanding the relationship between the media and body image and disordered eating is provided by

objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Essentially, objectification theory posits that in Western societies, the female body is socially constructed as an object to be looked at and evaluated, primarily on the basis of appearance. One example is the sexualized representation of women in visual media (both mainstream media and pornography). The pervasiveness and repeated occurrence of such sexual objectification leads to women and girls becoming acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective of their own bodies. That is, they come to perceive themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated based on their appearance, a process termed 'self-objectification' (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification is a form of self-consciousness characterized by habitual and constant monitoring of the body's external appearance. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that this constant body surveillance leads to increases in both shame and anxiety about the body, which in turn contribute to a number of mental health issues including disordered eating. Experimental evidence has demonstrated that exposure to sexualized fashion magazine images results in both state self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Krawczyk & Thompson, 2015).

Although traditional media are still widely consumed, other forms of 'new' media are being increasingly accessed, most notably the Internet. Since 1990, Internet usage has increased by approximately 50% each year (Internet Growth Statistics, 2014). In July 2014, it was estimated that the Internet was used by 40.4% of the world's population (Internet Users, 2015). Moreover, image-focused websites (e.g., fashion/beauty and entertainment/celebrity websites) are currently more popular among undergraduate women than are fashion magazines (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012). Recent studies demonstrate that, as in mainstream media, there exist many places on the Internet that perpetuate the stereotypical ideals of feminine beauty. For example, a content analysis of advertisements on websites aimed at adolescents found most figures in the advertisements were female, young, thin, and attractive (Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2011). In addition, studies of high school girls have found that Internet usage was related to greater internalization of thin ideal, appearance comparison, weight dissatisfaction, and drive for thinness (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Similarly, Bair et al. (2012) found that young adult women who used the Internet were more likely to experience disordered eating.

One area of Internet usage that has become increasingly popular is the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs). In January 2014, 74% of online adults were using SNSs (Social Networking Fact Sheets, 2015). These sites allow individuals to create public or private online profiles which they can then use to form relationships and interact with other users of the same website. Different from traditional mass media, a large proportion of SNSs are peer-generated, meaning that users are simultaneously information sources and receivers. In addition, compared to the passive consumption of traditional media forms, individuals actively decide how they participate on SNSs. For example, users have the ability to search for almost any other user or group they are interested in. They can also participate in a variety of activities, such as sharing photos, videos, and everyday information about their lives and making online comments about others' activities. Examples of SNSs include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and MySpace. Facebook is currently the most popular SNS with over 1.15 billion current users worldwide (Bullas, 2014). The present paper aims to systematically review the small but growing body of research that has investigated the influence of SNSs on body image. Specifically, it seeks to review studies investigating the general use of SNSs and their relationship to body image and disordered eating in unselected samples.

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