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INSTAGRAM IN THE PROCESS OF SHAPING ATTITUDES TOWARDS ONE'S OWN BODY

Summary

Instagram has a significant impact on shaping contemporary beauty standards and body image attitudes. This article aims to present a synthesis, through qualitative analysis, of selected quantitative studies that demonstrate the relationship between Instagram use and users' body image perception. These studies confirm such associations, with the phenomenon of Digital Body Dysmorphia being notably prominent. This involves a strong desire to resemble an edited image created with filters (Krasnova, H., Veltri, N. F., Eling, N., Buxmann, P., 2021, 390-396). Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) manifests as excessive preoccupation with appearance, often centered on perceived defects in specific features (Babiec 2023). Research indicates that women and young girls are particularly susceptible to decreased well-being due to comparisons with idealized body images seen on Instagram (Cohen, 2019, 104-107; Chae, 2017, 246-262; Tiggemann, M., Slater, A., 2014, 630-643). Men also experience reduced self-esteem and anxiety, comparing themselves to muscular, fit individuals featured on the platform (*Daniel, S., Bridges, S. K.*, 2010, 493–508; *Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., Slater, A.*, 2017, 1-14). Interest in cosmetic procedures as a means to alter one's appearance has been increasing. Instagram's promotion of beauty standards has also fueled the *body positivity* movement, which challenges unrealistic body ideals and strives to encourage the acceptance of imperfections and the diversity of body shapes (Bilska, N., Bylicka, A., 2020, 193-195).

Streszczenie

Instagram ma znaczący wpływ na kształtowanie współczesnych standardów piękna i postaw wobec ciała. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie syntezy wybranych badań ilościowych poprzez analizę jakościową, które wykazują związek między korzystaniem z Instagrama a postrzeganiem własnego ciała przez jego użytkowników. Badania te potwierdzają te związki, a zjawisko Cyfrowej Dysmorfii Ciała, czyli pragnienie przypominania wyretuszowanego obrazu stworzonego za pomocą filtrów, jest szczególnie widoczne (Krasnova, H., Veltri, N. F., Eling, N., Buxmann, P., 2021, 390-396). Zaburzenie dysmorficzne ciała (BDD) objawia się nadmiernym zamartwianiem wyglądem, często skupionym na konkretnych cechach postrzeganych jako wady (Babiec, 2023). Wyniki badań pokazują, że kobiety i młode dziewczyny są bardziej narażone na obniżenie samopoczucia w wyniku porównywania się do idealnych sylwetek widocznych na Instagramie (Cohen, 2019, 104-107; Chae, 2017, 246-262; Tiggemann, M., Slater, A., 2014, 630-643). Mężczyźni również doświadczają obniżonego poczucia własnej wartości oraz lęku, porównując się do muskularnych, wysportowanych mężczyzn publikujących zdjęcia (*Daniel, S., Bridges, S. K.*, 2010, 493–508; *Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., Slater, A.*, 2017, 1-14). Rośnie także zainteresowanie operacjami estetycznymi, jako sposobem na zmianę wyglądu. Popularność Instagrama, promującego określone standardy piękna, przyczyniła się do rozwoju ruchu *bodypositivity,* który sprzeciwia się nierealistycznym wzorcom wyglądu i dąży do promowania różnorodności ciała oraz akceptacji jego niedoskonałości (Bilska, N., Bylicka, A., 2020, 193-195).

Introduction

In recent years, we have observed a marked dominance of online media in social communication. Instagram, since its inception in 2010, quickly gained popularity and has become one of the most influential social media platforms. According to Digital Poland, at the beginning of 2024, Instagram had 11 million users in Poland. Its popularity stems from the simplicity and speed of content sharing (Bilska, Bylicka, 2022, 189). The platform is characterized primarily by its visual nature, distinguishing it from others such as Facebook or Twitter. Instagram users post photos and videos, often edited with filters and graphic applications, and engage in interactions through likes, comments, and shares. With the growing number of users, scientific research on Instagram covers a wide range of topics, from mental health (Bujarska & Koza, 2023, 71-76) to self-presentation strategies (Powierska, 2023, 16-29). Given that Instagram is predominantly image-based, it significantly influences body perception. Increasingly, studies show that exposure to idealized images can negatively affect well-being and self-esteem, particularly among young users (Krasnova et al., 2021, 390-396).

Instagram and Selected Theories and Models Regarding the Formation of Body Attitudes

The contemporary reality, in which media play a key role, significantly influences how individuals perceive their bodies and the overall concept of an ideal physique. Both traditional media (television, press, radio) and modern media (Internet, social media, and, to a large extent, Instagram) present and promote beauty standards that often become reference points for individual attitudes toward physical appearance. These standards create a scenario where individuals compare themselves to the promoted images, which can impact their self-esteem and behaviours related to pursuing specific ideals.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Western culture, where digital and traditional media continuously shape societal expectations regarding physical attractiveness.

Numerous studies indicate that both the intensity of exposure to media standards and the nature of the content presented can influence the formation of attitudes toward one's body. The effects of this can be both positive and negative, leading to increased self-confidence or, conversely, heightened vulnerability to body image disorders, anorexia, bulimia, or depression a condition characterized by obsessive worry over perceived physical flaws. Morrison (2016, p. 229) states that individuals with BDD „worry that there is something wrong with the shape or appearance of a part of their body – most often involving the breasts, genitals, hair, nose, or other facial features. Their beliefs about their body are not delusional." However, Digital Body Dysmorphia is associated with the idealized images created through filters and photo-editing applications, such as Instagram (Veale, D., Riley, S., 2001, pp. 109-115). These technological tools enable immediate modifications to appearance, resulting in a discrepancy between one's real appearance and the digitally constructed image. Consequently, individuals may feel uncomfortable with their authentic appearance, which is central to Digital Body Dysmorphia.

The causes of Digital Body Dysmorphia are complex and encompass various psychological, social, and technological factors. Primarily, social media promote a body image aligned with current beauty standards, fostering social pressure and increasing expectations regarding personal appearance (Perloff, R. M., 2014, pp. 363–377). Moreover, features offered by photo-editing apps allow for instant improvements in appearance, creating an illusion of perfection. These tools enable users to alter facial features, whiten teeth, smooth skin, and adjust body proportions, contributing to the formation of unrealistic standards that can lead to diminished self-esteem and detrimental outcomes (Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A., 2014, pp. 630-643).

As Morrison notes, *Although patients often request medical treatments (such as dermabrasion) or plastic surgery to correct their perceived defects, they are generally dissatisfied with the results. […] This preoccupation results in significant clinical distress, including lowered mood or suicidal thoughts and attempts. The appearance may vary, though it is generally poor* (2016, p. 229). Digital Body Dysmorphia can

lead to various psychological and social consequences, including anxiety disorders, depression, and eating disorders. Individuals affected by this condition often feel compelled to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, resulting in chronic dissatisfaction with their appearance and obsessive thoughts regarding physical looks. This phenomenon is particularly dangerous for young people who are in the stages of identity formation and are more susceptible to social influences (Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., Halliwell, E., 2015, pp. 38-45).

The long-term effects of Digital Body Dysmorphia may include avoiding social interactions and isolation due to fear of confronting the discrepancy between one's real appearance and their idealized online image. For some individuals, this issue may lead to excessive use of filters and photo-editing tools, further exacerbating the problem and creating a *digital loop* of low self-esteem and unrealistic standards (Choukas-Bradley, S., Nesi, J., Widman, L., Higgins, M. K., 2019, pp. 473-481).

Despite researchers emphasizing the negative effects of DBD, there has been an increase in the number of young individuals diagnosed with Body Dysmorphic Disorder due to the strong influence of social media (Raj, R. et al., 2022, pp. 3725-3735).

The Tripartite Influence Model

The theory behind the Tripartite Influence Model posits that individuals develop standards for their physical appearance based on the shaping power of three main sources: parents, peers, and media (Keery, van den Berg, Thompson, 2004, pp. 237-251). Each of these factors holds individual significance, but their combined influence forms a standard that the individual internalizes. This model helps explain how negative self-perception of physical appearance originates and intensifies, especially among adolescents.

Within this model, media are considered the most hazardous factor. In an era of widespread and easy access to media, increasingly younger children are exposed to content disseminated through magazines, television, the Internet, and cinema. Their impressionable minds absorb these portrayed ideals as normative. The image of the ideal male and female body, as depicted by the media,

becomes ingrained as not only socially desirable but also as the sole acceptable standard. This mechanism of internalization results in the consumer of media content adopting this value system as their own, aligning their self-perception with the ideals imposed by the media. Continuous comparisons to idols, models, actors, and other *screen personalities* lead individuals to recognize both real and imagined flaws in their own bodies. This upward comparison mechanism involves comparing oneself to someone perceived as more attractive, fostering increased dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Such dissatisfaction may result in behaviours like concealing the body under oversized clothing or developing eating disorders.

Individuals depicted in media consistently display flawless appearances. The media world is one of perfection, marked by joy and beauty, where entertainment is the primary aim. This utopian image entices viewers, making it an aspirational goal. Unfortunately, in pursuing beauty, individuals encounter many contradictions – on one side, they are bombarded by advertisements for gyms, workout programs, and diet recipes, while on the other, their beloved celebrities promote calorie-rich foods, encouraging indulgence (Czepczor, Kościcka, Brytek-Matera, 2016, p. 366). Simultaneously, influencers are advocating for extreme diets and rigorous physical efforts and others engaging in challenges to gain as much weight as possible in a week.

Platforms like Instagram distort the reality of how people are represented. Users frequently apply appearance-enhancing filters. Photos are staged, with those depicted meticulously curating their image and setting. Social media users often falsify not just their physical appearance but also aspects of their lives such as health, education, and wealth. Online, one can appear as whomever they wish, which opens the door to scams and fraudulent activities. The systematic removal of *ordinary* human representation from public life leads to the rejection of the natural and inevitable ageing process, the erosion of individuality and uniqueness in appearance, and ultimately creates uniform ranks of similarly dressed and made-up people. This can lead to a loss of personal identity and a sense of disorientation.

Social Comparison Theory

The Social Comparison Theory, previously discussed in the context of intermediary mechanisms in the Tripartite Influence Model, provides an essential explanation of the processes shaping attitudes toward one's body. Suls and Wheeler (2000) emphasize that this theory is often cited by researchers analyzing the impact of new media on users' self-esteem.

In 1954, Festinger introduced the Social Comparison Theory, positing that individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing them to those of others in their environment. According to Festinger (1954, p. 118), people have an inherent need to verify their own evaluations and beliefs by comparing them with others. This process helps them maintain a sense of control and rationality in decision-making (Festinger, 1954, p. 125). This theory also connects to attribution theories, which suggest that people aim to base their judgments on objective and widely accepted facts.

Since its inception, Festinger's concept has been expanded and developed further. Research has shown the active role individuals play in social comparison processes. Suls and Wheeler (2000) introduced two models associated with the Social Comparison Theory: the Proxy Model and the Triadic Model.

- The **Proxy Model** suggests that in situations where objective standards are lacking, an individual uses others as indicators to assess their own abilities (2000, pp. 19–20).
- The **Triadic Model** is based on three factors influencing social comparisons: similarity, relevance, and attainability (2000, pp. 21–23).

Festinger distinguished between two types of social comparisons: **upward comparison** and **downward comparison**. Upward comparison occurs when an individual compares themselves to people they classify as having higher social standing or being more significant or admired. Such comparisons can motivate self-improvement but can also lead to lower self-esteem (Festinger, 1954, p. 126). On the other hand, **downward comparison** happens when an individual compares themselves with people they perceive to be in a worse situation, which can enhance their well-being and raise self-esteem (Wills, 1981, p. 246).

The Role of Social Media

Modern social media platforms like Instagram have become environments facilitating effortless and constant social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 207). Instagram provides users with information about the appearance, activities, and emotions of others, enabling them to relate these contents to their own lives. The process of comparison through social media can have both positive and negative consequences. Users assess whether they are doing better or worse than those they compare. Feeling superior to others can increase self-confidence and evoke pride. However, studies indicate that social media most often negatively impacts users' well-being, making them feel inferior compared to others (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 210).

A survey conducted among adolescents and young adults revealed that most respondents who used social media believed that others were better than them and more successful (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 211). Social media has its particular characteristics—everything is presented through a distorted lens, emphasizing the successes of the person posting. This is driven by the business aspect of social media operations, particularly Instagram. For content creators to generate income, they must present themselves as flawless, continuously successful, and free of problems or imperfections. Users consuming such content are especially vulnerable to the mechanism of social comparison. Additionally, social media has made it possible for everyone seeking comparison to access information about the lives of a small group of the world's wealthiest individuals and global celebrities. This has only intensified the dissonance felt by *ordinary* people when evaluating their own lives through the lens of posts by multimillionaires.

Conclusion

Instagram, as an image-centric platform, has a significant impact on attitudes toward one's body, especially among young users for whom self-acceptance and body image can be particularly challenging. Viewing carefully curated photos depicting *ideal* bodies and fashion can evoke feelings of inadequacy among users, which is especially dangerous during adolescence

when identity and self-esteem are forming. Although Instagram promotes certain beauty standards, movements advocating for body positivity, such as #BodyPositivity and #SelfLove, have also emerged on the platform. These movements aim to foster body acceptance regardless of shape, size, or skin colour. Supporting these ideas can play a crucial role in building a positive self-image and encouraging the acceptance of personal imperfections.

Research suggests that content promoting body positivity can have a positive impact on users' self-esteem and help mitigate some negative effects associated with comparisons to idealized images (Cohen et al., 2019, pp. 104-107). Such posts often include inspiring quotes, personal stories of struggles with self-acceptance, and photos of people of various shapes and sizes, allowing users to see more realistic and diverse body representations. Nonetheless, in the face of the dominant visual culture, which relies on edited and filtered images, the positive messages of the body positivity movement may not be sufficient to counteract the influence of idealized beauty standards that still prevail in social media.

Despite the opportunities the platform provides for promoting a positive body image, excessive exposure to idealized images can lead to significant issues related to self-esteem and mental health. Various studies indicate that uncontrolled comparisons with other users, particularly regarding physical appearance, can contribute to the development of insecurities, eating disorders, and decreased life satisfaction. Therefore, it is crucial for users to be aware of the potential effects of using Instagram and to learn to approach the content they see more critically. Education on the impact of social media and the development of critical thinking skills among young people can help them better cope with the pressure exerted by social media culture.

Thus, further research and academic publications that thoroughly present both the positive and negative aspects of using social media platforms are essential. Such studies can support the creation of appropriate regulations and guidelines for platforms like Instagram and contribute to the development of preventive programs that enable young people to benefit from social media while minimizing its potential side effects.

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