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# The Psychosocial Impact of Instagram on Female Body Image: Literature Review and Proposal

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**Abstract:** Instagram is one of the most popular photo-sharing social networking platforms used by the younger population. However, research exploring the socio-psychological impact of this platform on younger populations is scarce. It is particularly important to assess how Instagram affects perceptions of body image in female populations who make up the majority of Instagram users. Accordingly, this study will seek to explore the impact engagement with Instagram has on female body image through qualitative semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with young female individuals aged eleven to twenty-five years over a period of three months. The findings from the interviews will be analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework and disseminated to schools, university teachers, education researchers, health care professionals and social media platforms. We believe the findings from this study will help protect young female populations from experiencing negative impact on their body image via Instagram.

**Keywords:** Mental health; Psychosocial processes; Social Media; Instagram; Body Image; Qualitative research.

## Background

In the past decade there has been a surge in the use of social media platforms amongst young individuals. Statistics show that up to 89% of 18 to 29-year-olds have access to a social networking site (Rodgers, 2016). Instagram, a visual-based platform, is one of the most popular networking sites to date (Amaral, 2015), with over 70% of the Instagram users within the age range of 12 to 24 years (Huang & Su, 2018). Although Instagram has a neutral gender-bias format, it is reported that 68% of Instagram users are female while 32% are male (Business Insider, 2014).

Research shows that body image is one of the greatest challenges that young people face in employment and education (Mental Health Foundation, 2019). Rodgers (2016) expresses the positive correlation identified between the use of social networking sites and body image concerns; however, the first-hand experience of the youth using Instagram regarding their body image remains to be explored.

It is important to identify the effects that social media platforms such as Instagram have on young individuals and prevent any detrimental effects this may have on an individual's development. The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1950) presents the eight stages of 'conflicts' throughout an individual's lifespan that promotes psychosocial development. The fifth stage within the theory addresses the personal conflicts: 'identity' and 'role confusion' which often arise between the ages of twelve to eighteen years. During the fifth stage, individuals start to become confused about their identity and thus experience a range of different feelings towards their physical appearance (Erikson, 1950). This conflict can be linked to the experience of self-confidence and issues around body image in young individuals. Further research based on child development and body image issues could reduce the possible implications surrounding body image in later life. This is especially pertinent in our times: Mental Health Foundation (2016) have identified a surge in mental health difficulties amongst children and young people. Despite the broad research regarding mental health challenges in youth, the data gathered has been proven to be poor and/or inaccurate, resulting in most findings being extensively criticised (Mental Health Foundation, 2016).

In the lead author's current work setting, therapeutic interventions such as one-to-one counselling and group therapy are provided to children and young people who are experiencing low to moderate mental health difficulties such as anxiety, low mood, obsessive compulsive disorder and depression. From the lead author's professional practice, it is evident that social media contributes to young people's mental health challenges associated with body image. This can be backed up by the research carried out by Perloff (2014) who states that minimal research has been carried out on social media's effects on young female body image; however, the heavy usage and dependence of social media can in fact affect a young female's

perceptions of their body image. Similarly, Status of Mind (2017) published a report based on social media and its effects on children and young people's wellbeing. The report identified that Instagram was ranked as the most negative social networking site in relation to body image and mental wellbeing; however, further empirical evidence is still needed to support this claim. This proposal will explore the psychosocial impact of engaging with Instagram among female youth, with a particular focus on how social media affects body image perceptions. The authors will specifically target young female Instagram users (ages eleven-twenty-five), looking into how the platform either positively or negatively affect their body image.

### Literature Review

Using the PEO (Population, Exposure and Outcome) framework tool (Butler et al., 2016) (Table 1), the following research question was generated: *'What is the psychosocial impact of social media's representation of the female body?'*

**Table 1: Population, Exposure and Outcome tool for research question.**

Population	Exposure	Outcome
Young female participants between the ages of 11-25 years using social media platforms i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat etc.	Body dissatisfaction and other mental health difficulties.	<p>- To outline if there is evidence to prove that social media's representation has caused any possible effects on female body image.</p> <p>- Whether the use of social media can be used positively.</p>

Relevant literature was sourced using three electronic databases: Google Scholar, Library Plus and Behavioural Sciences Collection. The databases were screened using the following terms relating to the question topic: 'Social media's effects AND young females', 'female body image AND social media', 'young females using social media', 'perceived body image from social media AND body dissatisfaction' and 'downfalls of social media AND social media or mental health'. The search combination of: 'Downfalls of social media AND social media or mental health' did not

retrieve many results relevant to the specific research topic i.e. female body image.

Relevant literature was identified using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Patino and Ferreira (2018) identified that forming an inclusion and exclusion table is fundamental when carrying out high-quality research. Duplicate papers and irrelevant papers based on the title and abstract were removed.

Six papers consisting of one 'moderate' quantitative, two 'high' quantitative, one 'moderate' qualitative, one 'high' descriptive article and one 'high' systematic review were included to support the aim of the research question. Although the papers were considered to be of moderate-high quality, some factors impacted the quality of evidence such as a need for further research in one paper and unfair sampling in another paper i.e., the lack of diversity amongst recruited participants which resulted in publication bias. While the results identified a gap in research undertaken in qualitative research, all six papers provided some evidence in relation to social media's impact on female body image with some discussion based around mental health difficulties. For example, Kleemans et al. (2018) online experiment explored the effects of manipulated Instagram images on adolescent females. Their findings showed that the exposure can in fact impact an individual's body image and lower body satisfaction. Similarly, Sherlock and Wagstaff (2019) found that a heavy usage of the Instagram platform can be associated with low self-esteem which showed a statistical median of 59.91 and body image disturbance showing a median of 16.91. Due to the lack of research surrounding the impact of social media on female body image, minimal evidence was sourced thus supporting the need for further investigation.

It is evident that many social networking sites like Instagram have been largely under researched in comparison to the Facebook platform which was founded before Instagram and has already had research conducted in relation to female body image and its impact (Fardouly et al., 2015). Therefore, the reason for targeting the specific platform is due to the prevalent rise and popularity in usage amongst young individuals, especially as the platform is regarded as an image-based only networking site (Amaral, 2015). Moreover, this proposal will aim to identify the influence of the Instagram platform on young female's body image within the lead author's current setting, by focusing on the individual's experiences and feelings linked to the use of Instagram. This research will hopefully lead to the construction of future guidance to support the appropriate use of social networking sites and safeguard the mental wellbeing of young individuals. The proposed research will aim to gather new knowledge and findings which will hopefully be worthy of conducting further research.

The research proposal aims to:

- Examine how and why young female individuals use the Instagram platform.

- Identify the positive and negative effects Instagram has on young female body image.
- Investigate how young female individuals could be supported further when using the Instagram platform.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Evidence shows that little qualitative and quantitative research has previously been conducted on social media's impact on female body image. When considering the different types of methods used for this chosen area, qualitative research is generally favoured due to the sensitive nature of both social media use and young females' body image (McCrae et al., 2017). Qualitative research seeks to examine and understand human behaviour mainly through the use of observations (Jackson et al., 2007).

Quantitative research, on the other hand, focuses on gathering data using numerical figures (Apuke, 2017). Although quantitative methods can be used to conduct research surrounding this field, Rahman (2017) states that the method is generally not used to provide a profound, detailed understanding of the results and its effects. Blaikie (2007, quoted in Rahman, 2017, p. 106) is also critical of the tendency to dismiss participants' own interpretations of their actions in quantitative research.

Consequently, the proposal will focus on carrying out an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) on semi-structured one-to-one interviews for young female individuals between the ages of eleven to twenty-five years old. The IPA framework is a qualitative approach, developed by psychologist Jonathan Smith (1996). It seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of an individual's lived experiences and perspectives (Alase, 2017). IPA focuses on 'phenomenology', which refers to a thorough exploration of personal lived experiences; 'hermeneutics', which enable the researcher to make sense of the participants experience; and 'idiography', which analyses each individual case intensely (Noon, 2018). By referring to the IPA framework, the authors will form a thorough analysis of how each individual makes sense of their own personal events in relation to using Instagram, and will look for emerging themes through the collated data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The IPA framework was selected based on the proposal question focusing directly on the individual and their subjective experiences (social media engagement and body image perceptions).

The use of semi-structured interviews is common within the health sector. Semi-structured interview commonly consists of open-ended questions which allows the interviewee to maintain a flexible discussion with the individual (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) also emphasise the fact that semi-structured interviews can help to build a rapport between the interviewee and participant, whilst exploring the individual's experience and feelings further. Other techniques such as structured interviews focus on a specific set of closed-ended questions which restrict the capacity for further scope; this would be less suitable for the study

in question (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Focus groups are also useful for carrying out qualitative research and were initially considered; however, this was deemed inappropriate due to the sensitivity around the topic of body image. Focus groups could potentially result in individuals feeling uncomfortable and choosing not to speak openly about their experiences amongst others (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Although semi-structured interviews are the selected method for the proposal, it is crucial to consider the possible limitations of using the method. Adams (2015) indicates that the process of semi-structured interviews can often become time consuming, due to the time spent on collating feedback and answers from participants and gathering masses of information. Other difficulties could potentially arise, such as the participant not willing to engage due to the interviewee not listening effectively or probing insensitive questions. It is therefore crucial for the interviewee to adopt a reassuring, non-judgemental approach (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

### **Data Collection**

The one-to-one semi-structured interviews will take place in a counselling setting for children and young people, in a quiet room with minimal disruptions, and will take place over a period of three months. The interview will last around 60-90 minutes, and consist of three open-ended questions followed by sub-questions to probe the participants and is displayed in **Appendix A**. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed as this is essential when carrying out an IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Audio recording can support with the data analysis process; however, it is important to acknowledge that the use of audio recording could potentially have an impact on the interview as participants may be more reluctant to express their views when recorded (Al-Yateem, 2012).

During the sampling process, it is often recommended that a smaller sample group is selected for IPA due to the time-consuming nature of the study (Noon, 2018). Purposive sampling using the homogenous method will be applied during the recruitment stage. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) state that purposive sampling is a non-randomisation technique that allows researchers to select participants who are able to provide sufficient information from their experiences relevant to the chosen area of research.

The specific homogenous method looks into individuals who share the same or comparable characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016). An inclusion and exclusion criteria table will also support the sampling process of aiming to recruit ten to twelve female individuals. Although the inclusion/exclusion criteria (Table 2) will be used to recruit individuals, the researcher will ensure to avoid personal bias during the selection process, i.e., recruiting friends or colleagues. This will be achieved by asking young female clients accessing support within the work setting to participate.

**Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria table for purposive sampling.**

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Participants who use the Instagram platform</li> <li>-Participants between the ages of eleven to twenty-five years</li> <li>-Participants who have experienced any positive or negative effects from Instagram</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Participants who do not use the social networking platform Instagram</li> <li>-Participants who are currently expressing any suicidal ideation or self-harm behaviours</li> <li>-Participants who do not meet the age criteria threshold</li> </ul>

### Data Analysis

As the research focuses on using the IPA framework, it is imperative to explore the content findings comprehensively and understand the meanings behind the data as much as possible (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To analyse the data effectively, it would be applicable to read over the transcript and listen to the audio recording frequently to become familiar with the findings. Whilst this is being completed, the researcher will write notes and draw upon significant insights from each participant's experience relating to the psychosocial influences Instagram has on young female body image using a data coding procedure. This can be achieved by highlighting words or phrases which have been used repeatedly by participants (Alase, 2017). The notes and data will then be analysed in-depth to draw upon emerging themes which can be grouped together appropriately. However, this can also pose as a challenge for the researcher, if each individual response differs immensely, resulting in potential data being withdrawn (Noon, 2018).

All participants will be required to complete a feedback form based on their involvement from the interview: this will be included as part of the data analysis. Once all the data and findings have been effectively collated, a detailed report will be produced which informs the reader of the individual's participation and how it relates to the specific phenomenon, e.g., the positive and negative influences Instagram has on their body image (Alase, 2017).

### Quality Assurance

It is imperative for quality assurance to take place throughout the research procedure. It has been stated by researchers that the quality assurance guidelines within the health sector have been limited for qualitative research although extensively acknowledged guidelines exist for quantitative research (Reynolds et al., 2011). The CASP qualitative checklist tool will be used to assess the quality of the research (Critical

Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). According to the Cochrane systematic review the research process must be rigorous and trustworthy therefore, the core elements of ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’, ‘confirmability’ and ‘reflexivity’ adapted from Lincon and Guba’s (1985) criteria would need to be implemented as part of the quality assurance process (Hannes, 2011).

Credibility will be measured by critically analysing whether any personal or sampling biases could impact the data found, it would also be important to gather feedback from the participants ensuring the research aims and objectives have been met suitably (Noble & Smith, 2015). Transferability will provide a full descriptive account of the research undertaken which can be passed on to other settings and researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). When assessing dependability and confirmability, it is crucial to keep an audit trail of the findings including the participants evaluation, data analysis and interpretation, this can also enable the researcher to discuss these findings with other researchers to review (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). However, Morse (2002, quoted in Hannes, 2011, p. 4) explains that ‘the core element of confirmability, may not be applicable to phenomenology research as the researcher’s experience becomes part of the data’. In addition, reflexivity allows the researcher to critically reflect upon their role as a researcher, which can be accomplished by keeping a reflexive journal of the whole research process (Forero et al., 2018).

### **Consent and Ethical Considerations**

A written informed consent form will be required from each participant taking part in the study. Each participant will also be provided with a participant information sheet specifying the nature of the research and how it will be conducted. Health Authority Research (2018) state that children and young people should be able to give consent on their own accord, depending on their capacity to understand the research process effectively. It is essential for the researcher to ensure the child/young person has a clear understanding of what is involved within the study. Although consent can be reliant on an individual’s capacity, consent from parent/carers will still be required for individuals under the age of sixteen due to the sensitivity around the study topic and to minimise any potential objections or complaints from parent/carers.

The research will be voluntary, and all participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Due to the nature of the study, participants will need to be informed of the work settings safeguarding procedure. The consent form will outline that, if any safeguarding concerns arise within the interview, i.e., any disclosures that may put an individual at risk to themselves or others, this will need to be reported to a designated safeguarding officer and parent/carer if under the age of sixteen. The study will aim to preserve the participant’s privacy and autonomy. This will be achieved by protecting participant’s information from unauthorised



disclosure or access (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2018). All research information will be kept confidential and stored away in a lockable cabinet within the work setting. Personal data and research findings will then be destroyed appropriately once the research is complete.

### **Dissemination and Conclusion**

Disseminating research allows the researcher to share their findings amongst targeted stakeholders and a wider audience through a range of channels (Wilson et al., 2010). The process will allow the researcher to promote awareness surrounding the chosen topic, in this case promoting further recognition on the effects Instagram has on female body image is crucial due to the minimal research already undertaken on this topic. Disseminating research also gives a chance for the researcher to receive feedback on their study which could be useful for future research (Edwards, 2015). Dissemination for this proposal will be mostly beneficial to young individuals who use social networking platforms and education establishments such as schools, university teachers and education researchers. Health care professionals i.e., psychiatrists, wellbeing practitioners and counsellors who work within the mental health sector for children and young people will also be informed of the findings. This will be constructed via a thirty-minute PowerPoint presentation for stakeholders and professionals as well as a detailed blog for the wider community available through social networking platforms. It is proposed to raise knowledge, awareness and propose forthcoming plans on the influences Instagram has on young female's body image.

To conclude, the aim of this report is to carry out a literature review to identify a gap on the effects of young female body image using social media platforms which was identified and completed effectively as well as exploring the positive and negative influences Instagram has on young female's body image. It is acknowledged that the research process could potentially face possible limitations and major setbacks, for example, the recruitment of participants and scheduling interviews, gathering of consent and following general data protection regulations robustly, analysing data and findings within a specific time limit and possible data implications such as ensuring findings and themes relate to the research aims and objectives successfully (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). In regard to the possible limitations of time constraints and analysing data, a longitudinal study may be more beneficial for this type of research rather than conducting the research over a three-month period. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that the findings and new knowledge gathered over a period of time from participants, will be helpful to the targeted audience and sufficient to investigate and improve the wellbeing of young female individuals who use social media networking platforms.

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