

The effect of social media: a research study into how young women can be affected by negative body image

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This dissertation has been an unforgettable process which has been a lot of hard work. I chose to research something very close to my heart. The topic of social media should be taken a lot more seriously.

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Abstract

Across the globe, the topic of negative body image is a very serious subject which has a lot of stigma surrounding it. The use of social media is a contributing factor of the body image crisis and currently there isn't enough being done to prevent young women from suffering from serious mental health conditions. As a young woman, I know first-hand that the experience of social media can be a dark place for someone with body image difficulties. A reason for this is celebrities post images of themselves that have been highly photoshopped, edited and filtered. This give a false perception of the beauty standards which will forever be unachievable for most women. It was important to have participants for this study, because I can compare their experiences with each other and my own. From the research, it proves there is definitely need for social media apps to improve their misconduct polices so their users feel empowered instead of having a negative body image.

Chapter 1: Introduction

'Our feeds have become an overly-curated forum in which people post to seek approval from others by meeting societal standards of self-image' (Adkins 2018) this is a starting point for my research; in modern times there is a big weight of responsibility on young women to look a certain way online.



Figure 1. Victoria Secret models, modelling for the campaign 'The Perfect Body' (Adkins 2018).

Historically, feminist scholars and activists have offered critiques of sexualisation of women's bodies. The implications of this are clear to see; that women have always been sexualised for their bodies, whether that be in the media or in the workplace. They show that women's bodies are never about individual women but are often used to embody values like modernity, tradition, national identity etc. Thus, calls for autonomy and control for women is an important part of the feminist call for gender equality. In the recent years, emerging post-feminist perspectives have argued that society is past the point of needing feminism and that women have gained the same equal rights as men, which has been proven not to be true. This link with neoliberalism's focus on the emergence of women standing up for equal pay in the same jobs as men will help prevent capitalist ideas about women 'not being able' to do a 'man's job'. This raises important questions about future generations of women

wanting to work in discriminating jobs and how they will be challenged just for being a woman.

This links to sexualisation because women are starting to take back their sexualisation in the working world and the first point I will be making about post feminism; that women can choose to sexualise their bodies in the global economy and earn a living. This has created new forms of celebrity culture that young women today consume.

This research study will investigate the impact social media has on young women, with participants aging from 20 to 22. I am interested in exploring the ultimate aim of my research – to find out whether social media is a core reason young women suffer from negative body and self-esteem issues. Personally, I thought it was important to study this issue because the issue of body image is very close to my heart, having suffered from it myself. Whilst exploring the topic through literature and the interviews, it's clear to see that my experience is very similar to other women who have accessibility to these apps. The constant comparing to others lives can have such a negative strain on someone's mental health, making them feel as though they are not good enough or judged upon for not being able to live the same luxury lifestyle that influencers might have. This study will also dive into how the lives of influencers can also be a false narrative of their own and how they just show the 'best version' of their lives to compete in the battle of who has the best Instagram feed. It was important to research this topic because social media is available to everyone; it can be a fun, enjoyable place to chat to friends and post pictures, but it can also be a dark, dangerous space where mental health can be affected if too much time is spent on them. This study will look into apps such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook as a few examples, with an analysis on the positive and negative impacts they have on women.

I will start by exploring relevant literature highlighting the evolution of the feminist movement and its changing position of women's bodies. In Chapter 2, the literature review will give a full depth analysis on the research supporting my study. It will include feminist perspectives on the body and how feminism has changed over the years. In Chapter 3 I will be discussing my interview findings from my 6 participants and comparing their experience of social media to the sources from the literature

review. In Chapter 4 I will be writing about my methodology and explaining the strengths/weaknesses I had whilst writing my work. Finally, in chapter 5 I will be concluding this study by explaining the final findings and what I have found.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The concept that women have to fit society's standard of beauty and femininity isn't new; women have been subjective to the ideologies that men have made for decades. This narrative is also present in contemporary society with social media. Social media has a lot of issues surrounding the problem with mental health and young women; these issues have always been the centre for the connection with social media and societal issues such as body image. Apps such as Instagram are where body image difficulties circulate from. Young women are constantly comparing themselves to their favourite celebrity or their friends and this can become an obsession in their personal lives. This literature review will analyse the social media epidemic and focus on why social media can be a dangerous place for adolescent women.



Figure 2. Queen Elizabeth portrait (Pond 2015).

Women have been subject to finding the perfect standard of beauty for hundreds of years. A classic example is Queen Elizabeth and the societal beauty standards that were forced upon her hundreds of years ago. 'The ideal Elizabethan female had bright wide-set eyes, snow white skin, rosie cheeks, red lips and fair hair.

Pale skin was a sign of nobility, wealth and delicacy was sought after by many. In a time where sunscreen was unheard of, skin problems and pox was a common thing smooth, unblemished skin was a rarity' (Pond 2015). The extreme lengths these women went through is strange to learn about in the modern beauty world, but in the 1500's these ideals for beauty were damaging to their skin. Similar patterns are seen in modern day practises such as surgery to enhance certain parts of the body, Botox and filler for example.

'Adolescent girls are often found to be particularly vulnerable for being influenced by media images because of the psychosocial development that is characteristic for this phase' (Kleemans et al. 2016). Kleemans et al.'s has distinction in the comparison of models and peers to show how even at a young age, women will be constantly comparing their life to others. Kleemans et al. also show how 'exposure to manipulated Instagram photos indeed leads to lower body satisfaction in comparison to exposure to non-manipulated selfies from online peers' (ibid). This is important because it has been drawn on real evidence from participants that Instagram can be very damaging for mental health.

In this chapter I start by situating my research within the wider literature on gender and feminist movements throughout modern history; focusing on how it connects to the evolving notions of empowerment of women and their relationship with their body, including body image. This will then form the theoretical bases of my research findings where my respondents report similar notions of negative experiences whilst using social media.

I. Evolution of theoretical perspectives on the body

To consider how feminist movements have tried to subjectively stay away from being sexualised in the media and online, it is first important to grasp the concept that Francois Poullain de la Barre stated that "the mind has no sex" (Lennon 2019); this is a powerful statement, that any woman can understand what this means; 'for some early feminists this meant enthusiastically endorsing a dualism between mind and body, with bodily features regarded as contingent characteristics of the self, and the potentially rational minds as its core' (Lennon 2019).

The second wave feminism approach comes into play when discussing the context of gender and sex. 'Standardly sex was seen as fixed by biology, and gender, as the social meanings attached to such biology, seen as historically and socially variable, and open to change' (Lennon 2019)' which is a powerful notion. It was a wave of feminism that was extraordinary to society because it allowed women to be open about their sex and gender. It allows freedom for trans people to live life the way they have dreamt of, that your sex and gender doesn't define who you are as a woman, which is Beauvoir's point of 'becoming' a woman. 'It is in this context that Beauvoir's famous claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"' (ibid). Lennon also discusses the notion of how young women are treated through the use of compliments and through someone else's point of view; 'women live their bodies in such an objectified way, internalizing the gaze and producing their bodies as objects for others' (ibid).

Third wave feminism is a more recent approach, whilst tackling gender binaries more strictly, third wave feminism supports the gender differences with men and women and how women are exploited in society. 'The inclusion of specific groups (notably trans women and men) continues to be controversial amongst feminists' (Evans 2015). This relates to the key structures surrounding third wave feminism; activists focus on inclusion of all races in women and is also a starting point for a conversation amongst how men can be feminists too. Evans (2015) further says, "The third wave has been charged with being synonymous with neoliberal individualism, with feminists defending porn, prostitution and femininity on the grounds of their choice" - (ibid). This is because these institutions can help women with exploring their femininity and owning their sexuality, instead of being exploited by other people in these industries. It's also important to recognise that women are taking charge of their own money instead of being forced into these jobs which can then be seen as objectifying women. This is relevant to this study because third wave feminism takes a new approach to women's objectification. Evans also discusses how approaches to third wave feminism was different to the second wave, 'activists emphasise on speaking to women of colour, all self-identified women and inclusion of men and the greater use of online campaigning and networking' (ibid).

II. Post feminism and neoliberalism

Post feminism is the idea that feminism is over and there is no need to fight for equality as women have the same equal rights as men in society. This indicates that work done by women's rights activists has been acknowledged but forgotten about as there is no need to act on protests anymore, which is understandably false. 'The notion of a "postfeminist sensibility" denotes a contemporary gender discourse with a number of recurring features, including: understanding femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; a focus on self-regulation, self-surveillance, and self-improvement to enable transformation' (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz 2016); Postfeminism deflects the importance of what the term 'feminism' actually means. Postfeminism denotes the use of the word and the meaning of feminism, that equality should be met by all, but in society inequality is still a large issue that needs to be addressed. 'Postfeminist cultures centralization of an affluent elite certainly entails an empathic individualism, but this formulation tends to confuse self-interest with individuality and elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents' (Tasker and Negra 2007). Discussing postfeminism, Gill explains that society is far from being postfeminism; 'Postfeminism is as much a neoliberal sensibility as one defined by its relationship to feminism. It may be best thought of a distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism' (Gill 2017).

The relevance of postfeminism and neoliberalism is also revisited by Aslan and Gambetti explaining why they're connected; 'feminist economists have attempted to develop economic theories that seek solutions to inequalities that women face' (Aslan and Gambetti 2011). The authors explore the poor working conditions that women face around the world; and how postfeminism isn't relatable in society yet because there are many poorer countries that still use manual labour as a way of work. From a sociological perspective, it is clear to see that neoliberalism is anti-feminist and relevant for working conditions across the globe. As Gill explained, neoliberalism doesn't account for the hard labour from society in underpaid jobs and how the economy doesn't survive unless men are in power at all times. The trading market will win because the workers don't get paid enough and don't receive the equal rights they deserve for safe working conditions.

For Gill (2011) 'one of the defining contradictions of neoliberalism is that it is packaged as concerned with individual freedom, choice, democracy and personal responsibility. In reality, neoliberalism is a class based economic project that systemically strips assets from the poor (including welfare provisions) and concentrates wealth within a tiny global elite (individuals and corporations)' (Gill and Scharff 2011). This point relates to post feminism because it shows how democracy works in a society; without feminism there wouldn't be equal rights and demonstrations for recognition. Therefore, without neoliberalism there wouldn't be the profit market which society are best used to buy items that will benefit the market.

The 'stay at home mum' is also relevant when discussing neoliberalism; "Traditional' ideologies of maternity posit mothering as independent of economic labour and incompatible with neoliberal values' (Orgad and Benedictis 2015). This normative view of 'good parenting' as predicated on self-governance of certain gendered selves and interlinked with the economy is intimately connected to the intensifying entanglement of mothering and neoliberalism' (ibid).

III. Post-feminist digital cultures, body image and emotional labour

What is post feminist's digital culture? Social media can be a way of enhancing the powerful messages made by activists and feminist influencers; 'binaries between commercial or "mainstream" media and social media do not hold up in contemporary context, and much self-representation via social media complicates notions of greater freedom and empowerment in social media self-representation' (Dobson 2016). This relates to how social media can be used for good, to post images online that can be seen as uplifting and help women with their body image and confidence. Postfeminism can be seen as a way of disregarding feminism, it can be seen as all the hard work and efforts that have been made to be pointless, as feminism is something that has to strive, in order for women to gain full equal rights which hasn't been achieved yet.

Dobson (2016) makes some interesting points about how digital cultures can be used for women's body image and how it relates to a world where feminism is seen as empowering and not radical.

'The representation of women's desires is essential for the construction of female subject positions in representation, and the constitution of a more empowered and active feminine subjectivity' (ibid); this also relates to the point Dobson is trying to make about postfeminism and sexual objectification, that even though women are trying to move past the 'male gaze' and owning their sexuality, there is still an issue of women being the centre of desire in these contexts.

Discussing how neoliberalism and postfeminism are intertwined with social media, Catherine Archer explains how a postfeminist woman can live in a world without inequality and how this can relate to the usage of social media; 'dominant discourses are also intertwined with the rise of social media use by women, where a 'neoliberal moral framework' calls for the establishment, ongoing maintenance, monitoring and evaluation of a self-brand' (Archer 2019). Among others that can be done by manipulation of images or photo shopping, and through emotional labour. Both of these strategies are adopted by women to navigate social media – whether they are producing content or consuming it.



Figure 3. Kim Kardashian supposedly photoshopped with her daughter (Zoellner 2018).

To relate to the original point of this study, it's important to discuss how social media may affect women's body image whilst using social media.

From figure 2. it is clear to see Kim Kardashian's image is edited so that her features make her skin look brighter and smoother. This can be upsetting to see for a young girl because they may not realise the image has been edited and therefore realise that the beauty standards in this image are unreachable. From a feminist perspective, editing her image is considered dangerous as she is pressured to look a certain way. Post feminism would say it's her choice to make changes to their bodies because they are in control, meaning they can represent it the way they want.

'The patterned features of a postfeminist sensibility have been consistently identified, one of these characteristics is the prominence of the body, influenced by popular culture, women's beauty disciplines have intensified and become normative' (Camacho-Minano, Maclsaac and Rich 2019). The authors say that it's important to consider when discussing postfeminism and trying to achieve the 'perfect' body that will look good on a fitness account promoting health and fitness; 'influenced by popular culture, women's beauty disciplines have intensified and become normative, although arguably remain hidden within discourses that highlight choice, autonomy, agency, and empowerment' (ibid). This relates to how women are showing that they are proud to have healthy bodies and by posting on their social media, they can promote body positivity and spread the message using online apps.

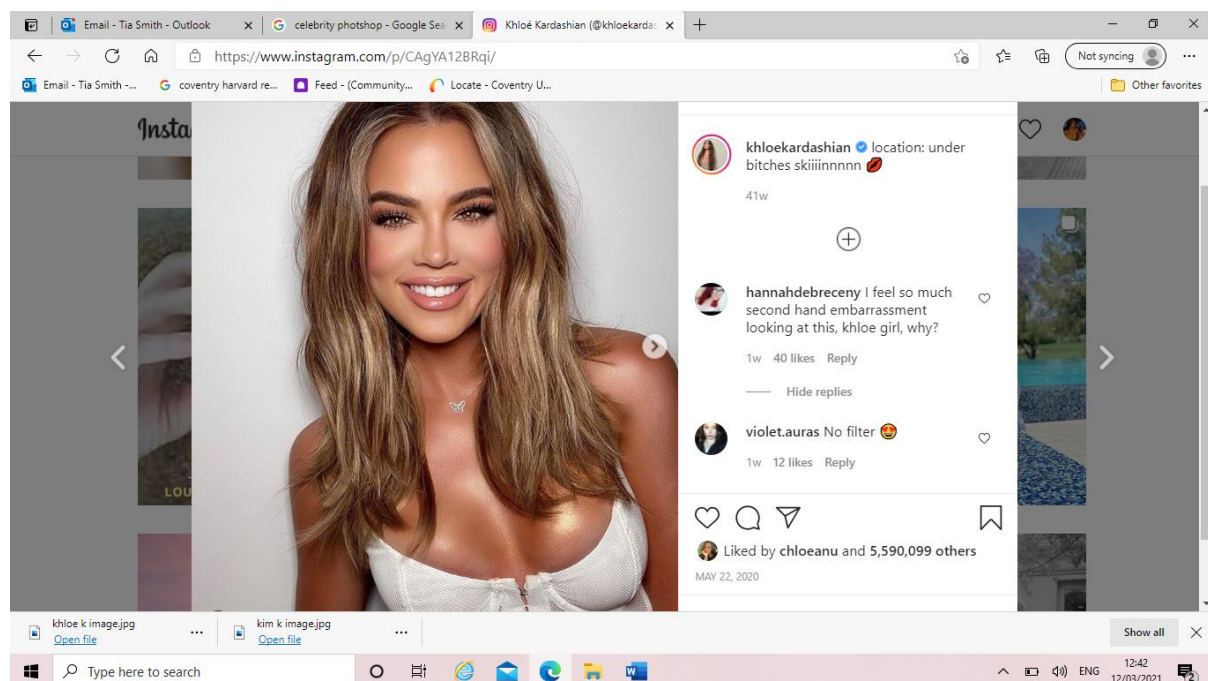


Figure 4. shows Khloe Kardashian on Instagram (Instagram 2021).

An example of how women are using social media apps as a way to promote themselves and 'improve their bodies' is the Kardashian family. From figure 3., it is clear to see that fans were not happy when Khloe Kardashian posted this picture; it shows that she has highly edited herself in this picture and photoshopped some of her features. They are known for their incredible figures and promoting body positivity whilst doing so, but there can be a point where it could be harming to a young woman's mental health seeing these images. 'Women are particularly subject to observation, scrutiny and regulation in our digital environments, reflecting the intensification of surveillance in postfeminist cultures' (Camacho-Minano, MacIsaac and Rich 2019).

Examples from celebrity culture including the Kardashian family or the depiction of their bodies online raises many issues. Sometimes these images have been proven to be edited which disregards the point of body positivity. This shows that social media is particularly a brutal place for women as their bodies and looks are constantly under scrutiny. This also shows that the body positivity message can't be accepted uncritically as it often works to reinforce unattainable body standards.

Photoshopped images are reversing the empowerment over women's bodies which is concerning as many young people will have access to these images and most likely compare themselves to them. A point from this can be made about Kim Kardashian's game she created' *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*. The Kim Kardashian game lets fans play as Kim and allows their imagination to become reality with modelling, fashion and a luxury lifestyle theme. 'One element of this is the focus not only on the play of masculinized games by women but also consideration of the games developed for female audiences' (Harvey 2018). Discussing why it's important to have feminists in games, Harvey explains that it's important that the story in a game shouldn't be stereotypical of a woman and that gendered relationships should be of a variety (ibid).

Stewart (2021), discusses how accounts that post celebrity before and after pictures of surgery can also be harmful. 'In one sense, before-and-after accounts are heinous: They perpetuate a cultural obsession with evaluating women's appearances, reduce women to their basic physical components, and practice textbook objectification' (Stewart 2019).

Even though these accounts allow users to stop comparing themselves because celebrities have a lot of money, they also allow the concept of 'with a little cash, you too can look this good' (ibid). Fans will also follow the Kardashian's lives through watching the show, which has a relation to celebrity culture as viewers think they are following 'their life' when it's just a version.

'These shows are extremely staged and are a representation of superficial accomplishments whilst also sending out an unacceptable and unrealistic portrayal of morals and social norms for the audience watching' (McMillan 2017). Younger viewers might not be able to comprehend the importance that just like social media, a show like this isn't 'real'.

'Research on the extremely thin media body ideal is founded on the assumption that media images of thin models and celebrities are thin and ideal, inasmuch as they are perfected through the use of appearance-enhancing devices like makeup, styling, lighting, and image editing, which is a uniquely effective tool for manufacturing idealness because it creates outcomes (e.g., removal of pores) that cannot be achieved through natural means' (Harrison and Hefner 2014). The example of removal of pores that Harrison and Hefner produced is relevant because pores are a natural part of a woman's body and the removal of them can be a damaging aspect to one's mental health because they will consider themselves 'not normal' as a result. The authors also discuss the concept that the 'ideal' woman's body is to be thin, as this is considered to be what society finds attractive; this relates to how society expect women to fit the norms at all times. 'The models' thinness is the chief visual element encouraging excessive dieting, perhaps with good reason: Thinness itself is considered by many to be an essential element of physical attractiveness' (ibid); these findings are worrying but relevant. Women are constantly made to believe on digital cultures to be independent and confident in your own body, yet the Kardashian family receive thousands of negative comments even based of their edited images. This then asks the question for researchers; what is considered to be the 'ideal' body for the media?

Emotional Labour

Emotional labour is the term given when an individual (usually a woman) has to put on a front and appear happy at all times. To apply this in modern society, flight attendants are an example of being subject to emotional labour. 'Flight attendants have to negotiate an ambiguous world of work where the most important part of their job, that is, safety, is subsumed within a less important but more publicly visible display of service, captured in the concept of emotional labour' (Williams 2003). Flight attendants must serve the passenger with respect even when they might be rude, the term 'the customer is always right' is applied in their training. They must present themselves immaculately on every shift and have a 'feminine' outlook to the customer in order to represent the airline. Emotional labour can be draining and have an impact on an individual's mental health, which can be applied to celebrities use of social media. The Kardashian family for example, always have to present themselves as contoured and fit, otherwise the media will scrutinise them for weight gain or looking ill without wearing makeup. This could be a reasoning as to why the Kardashian family feel pressurised to airbrush their pictures in fear of becoming subject to the media. 'Emotional labour is a double-edged sword and can have negative outcomes for both the actor and the target. For the target or perceiver of the emotional labour act, the emotion displayed can appear false and ungenuine' (Mann 1997).

'Social media provides new tools for women FA (fat acceptance) activists to use to renegotiate how fat and gender have been reframed within the rationale of neoliberal citizenship, and innovate on the popular FA notion of fat as a kind of body diversity, through discussions on body image, beauty, and health' (Afful and Ricciardelli 2015). This is a different perspective that hasn't been seen so far in this study. The authors are discussing a fat acceptance movement which differs to societal norms of an ideal body. This authors discuss the concepts that are needed for women to become confident in their own bodies; 'visibility refers to how fat women may experience being fat in relation to anti-fat discourses and contest these discourses through visual strategies' (ibid). It explains how the fat acceptance movement is an example of body positivity in curvy women and how they might pass on this message to other women who might be struggling with their identity.

Fat acceptance is allowing the mind to come to terms with the fact that an individual might be considered 'fat' to other people, but also accepting that that's who they are and being happy and confident that you are healthy with the body you live in; 'visibility was defined as any post dedicated to the structural and cultural marginalization of fat bodies that result from the perpetuation of the thin bodily ideal by the fashion and beauty industries' (ibid). This relates to this study because it focuses on women being empowered and not shut down by what society wants or expects from women; it means women taking charge of their bodies and femininity and having a social media account to spread positive messages to other younger users.

There are also some more serious movements to protect young users whilst using online platforms such as Instagram. These movements resist the accounts that post serious, harmful messages that can be detrimental to young women's mental health. One example of a resistance movement is how a 14 year old girl names Molly Russell committed suicide over viewing harmful cartoons promoting self-harm and suicide on social media; 'Molly had been looking at graphic content relating to suicide and self-harm before she died, her father discovered, prompting him to go public earlier this year and campaign against the platform's rules that allowed that material' (Hern 2019). The author goes on to explain that Instagram have extended their policy to make sure these kinds of images are removed and banned from Instagram to prevent this from happening again. This is an example of a resistance movement, but there is evidence that more needs to be done. Picardo et al. explains that the discussion of self-harm online can be very triggering for some people, with it being a very common attribute on social media; 'negative effects include triggering self-harming behaviours, their perpetuation via normalisation and validation, sharing of self-harm methods, and tips for concealment' (Picardo et al. 2020). Robinson et al. produced a study of how social media can also be the base of preventing suicidal content on social media sites, but are also aware of the dangers that social media already prohibits; 'articles that sensationalize suicide, contain explicit descriptions of means of suicide, or portray suicide as a legitimate solution to one's problems are believed to increase the risk of contagion, particularly among already vulnerable individuals' (Robinson et al. 2015).

IV. Concluding thoughts

Overall, the literature review reveals that postfeminism is not yet accepted by feminists and different societies across the globe need more equal rights. It has revealed the damaging prospects social media has in order to maintain societal issues of photoshopping and editing their images. Society's beauty standards are constantly changing, meaning it can be hard for women to look 'perfect' all the time. It has also revealed that neoliberalism causes tension because it removes the work that feminists have been fighting for over the years; digital cultures in modern society are constantly fighting to end the battle of women working for less in developing countries. The research has showed there is still a long way to go until women are happy with the society they live in and to have the same equality that men receive. It has also shown that social media causes the issue of body image to get worse, as examples such as the Kardashian family have presented new ways to make their followers feel insecure, instead of uplifting them.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study uses qualitative research, with the use of interviews through email due to COVID-19. However, there were a few limitations that I encountered whilst organising these interviews; these were minor issues, yet they slowed down the process which I would have liked to change. One problem was that it was difficult to get a response from each candidate with the time limit that I had mentally prepared for, as I wanted the interviews to be one of the first tasks that I had completed. Due to the current situation, I had to text/email my participants and asked for their permission for their data to be used in my findings, which wasn't a problem. The main dilemma I had was the time frame from me sending over the questions to receiving the answers, which was a few days. Personally, I wanted to have the interviews done in a day, but this unfortunately didn't end up happening. The reality is that the participants all have jobs and degrees of their own, meaning this put aside my work. If I was to do the study again, I would learn from this mistake and set up the interviews in person so I knew exactly when I would be receiving my data and I would come more prepared too.

Reflexive viewpoint

From a reflexive viewpoint, my own positioning was that I was very happy with the data collected, I agree, that social media can have a lot more negative than positive aspects. To be a feminist and research feminist work, it can be really interesting but also can be blind sighting at times; this is because the viewpoint of feminism is to have equal rights for women but globally, this cannot be achieved as seen in the literature review. The data I gathered was very helpful for my work. It shown the purpose of this study – that social media has a lot of effects on young women, most of these being negative. As a woman, it was interesting to see that the data reflected some of my own thoughts and ideas, which I agreed with too. It was disappointing to see that a lot of women still feel the need to compare themselves to others online and the effects it can have on their mental health. The study shows that these apps can have a negative impact on someone's private life, with the need to show every small detail of their day, otherwise in 'didn't happen'.

Apps such as Instagram has turned into a competition for who has the 'best life' even though this perspective of their life is a false reality. As a feminist, it wants me to change society and continue for support from these apps to help young women who have suffered from a mental illness as a result; 'methodologically, feminist research differs from traditional research. It actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between research and subject; it is politically motivated in that it seeks to change social inequality; and it begins with the standpoints and experiences of women' (Brayton, Ollivier and Robbins N.D). The implications of feminism in my research are important because feminism can help young women like the participants, to be confident in their own body and understand that body image should be uplifting instead of mentally detrimental I was also asking the questions with a feminist viewpoint of my own and centering woman's experiences around feminism

There are too many examples of women changing the way they look because they are constantly comparing their life to others. From a feminist perspective, it's also clear to see that women are far from earning the same equal rights as men, which can be seen in the literature review. It was interesting to also see the theme of participants hatred towards Instagram which is known to be one of the biggest social media apps used across the globe. It is clear to see that the study is very relevant in today's society and the results show this. I was very grateful to have participants who were open and honest about their negative experiences of social media because I know from my own experience, that it can sometimes be embarrassing to discuss; this is because some people might feel as though their life isn't as good as their friends or celebrities that they follow because of their lavish lifestyle. I knew that the topic of social media might be a sensitive one to discuss as it can cause a lot of mental health issues if used consistently which thankfully, none of the participants had experienced any serious emotional issues as a result from these apps.

The respondents are my friends. I met Tilly, Jasmine and Jodie through Coventry University. Catherine and Georgia are my friends through work, and Aria through school. I chose to interview 6 people because it gave me a good mix of opinions and viewpoints, they are all similar ages so their interests would be similar to mine too, which can be seen in the findings.

The answers I got from my University friends were very academic, which was helpful but answers such as Catherine's were what made my research interesting. There was diversity in the interviews as Catherine has a disability, which made her perspective a lot different to everyone else's.

The interviews took place over electronic email and text messages, this way my respondents had a while to think about what they were going to say before they gave me their response. I transcribed the data by sending over their responses and typing them down into my data analysis section.

Researched ethics

My participants names were hidden under pseudonyms to protect their real identity. On my own position, I needed to gain access to take part in this study through Coventry University's page. This gave me accessibility to complete the interviews with participant permission and for me to discuss their personal responses in my interviews. This enabled me to discuss with the participants that they can drop out of the interviews at any time and that I have access to their responses to my questions, which they all agreed to. I made sure to research exactly what it was I was going to say because it's important not to ask any personal questions that may cause harm. The questions were simple yet effective, and all my participants had a different response due to them all having completely different lifestyles. I chose not to ask any questions that could have a negative effect on their mental health, and chose to not ask questions that were based around any serious, emotional challenges that they might have faced whilst using social media apps. I tried to keep the theme upbeat and not too serious.

Limitations

A major limitation I faced was that my findings should've been more diverse. My participants were all white females and straight women. The main diversity in the participants was Catherine, who had a disability. Another limitation I came across was that my findings weren't racially diverse, meaning I didn't have different backgrounds and experiences. This would be something I would change if I was to do the research again. Some confusion that I encountered during the interviews was that I didn't want any participants to feel uncomfortable with the answers they wanted to give me.

This made me feel awkward and left wondering what the best way to approach the participants was. I found that it was best for me to approach them in a friendly manner and make sure they knew they could opt out at any time. A few answers I wasn't expecting too. The results were very helpful and relevant for the study. I also found myself relating to the respondent's answers, which was unexpected. Another complication was the topic of research, I found it difficult to research such a sensitive topic that is mental health, yet I made sure the reasoning was purposefully set out and reminded myself that the interviews I conducted could actually maybe help the participants talk about the struggles they face whilst using social media. On a technical note, there were a few other young women I wanted to interview for my research, but they eventually didn't respond with their permission to use their answers. This was quite frustrating because I was eager to interview the participants and I wanted to write up the findings so I could start my research, which is an issue when interviewing over electronic emails.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

In this chapter I will explore the findings from the interviews with a view to show that the use of social media has an overall opinion of negative attributes. The findings are structured around young women's experience of social media, with focuses on their positive and negative experiences from these apps. It will also include how they coped with these experiences and how their experience compares to the other individuals in these interviews.

The findings from the interviews were very interesting. A lot of the time, there was a reason behind each participant's negative experience of social media and there were a few patterns I picked up on whilst reading what people were saying. The interviews consisted of young women aged 20-22 to have a realistic and modern approach to analyse. This age group was interesting because I found that I related a lot to the findings. The findings were different in each interview, for example Catherine, aged 22 has a disability.

Patterns of usage

The first pattern that I found very interesting was the usage of social media; a lot of the participants found that they use Instagram the most. The only participant that didn't use Instagram was Josie, aged 20; this might be because they don't find it beneficial for their usage of online media. Relating to Instagram, a lot of the participants also said that Instagram was their least favourite app. This might have been because Instagram is pictures only where you can compare your life with other people's, and this can become overwhelming. 22-year-old graduated student Georgia, said during her interview:

"I would say, sometimes I feel insecure in my body image, as I don't look like people I see on my social media. I try to remind myself people post highlights and angles impact how people look in photos compared to real life. Because of this I try to follow people who don't make me insecure"

(Georgia, 22, interview dated 8th February 2021)

Georgia was very open about her usage of social media and her experience of it.

She was honest about suffering from body image difficulties and said that she finds herself comparing herself to other people. This can be related to the literature review as there is evidence of celebrities photoshopping their bodies to look a certain way, which will have negative impact on younger users as they will never be able to look like a photoshopped image, which will effectively have an impact on their mental health:

“Occasionally I feel overwhelmed and sometimes upset as I don’t have the things they have or share how different my life is in comparison. Social media should not be about comparing your life to someone else’s as we’re all different”

(Georgia 22, interview dated 8th February 2021)

This was interesting because I agree with this statement; social media feels as though everyone is competing for the “best life” when in reality no one’s life is perfect. This point can relate to the literature review because of the influencers and the impact they can have on young women; young women in this age group are subject to comparing themselves with their lifestyle and that of a celebrity. They might be wondering why they can’t afford this lifestyle when in reality the celebrity is being paid to promote a certain product.

This can be a damaging aspect of social media because it can be addictive in trying to show off your life with holidays, expensive gifts, and an overall luxury lifestyle. Another point I noticed was that only one participant only used Twitter. In my own opinion, I find Twitter to be one of the most emotionally draining apps. This might be because it can be very overwhelming at times, with different opinions being constantly thrown around, it can be hard to find where you stand with the users on Twitter. A reason for this might be because majority of accounts on Twitter are public, meaning anyone can view them. This means that any user can ‘retweet’ a tweet they find relatable. This then means that it will come up on the user’s followers’ timelines and so on. As a result, a constant clashing of opinions are created and users can feel as though their opinion doesn’t matter because they will never be heard, or agreed with. Catherine was the only one who used Twitter and mentioned:

“Twitter, I check daily and I use this mainly to see what’s going on in the world and what’s trending”

(Catherine, 22, interview dated 12th February 2021)

Twitter can also be the home to fake news. 'Fake news is a species of disinformation' (Gelfert 2019). Because Twitter is the home of so many different opinions, from left wing to right wing politics, it's easy for fake news such as political voting for an election to be spread like wildfire. Twitter can also be a place for trolling; in a research study exploring the link between trolling and feminism, Lopez et al. explained that 'tweets we pegged as trolling were often mocking, hostile, or disturbingly violent and aggressive in content. Such tweets were often directed to a specific Tweep or organization' (Lopez et al. 2016). Trolling can take place on any social media platform, but Twitter is mainly used to express one's opinion with mostly words instead of pictures in comparison to Instagram or Snapchat for example. Trolling can be another reason for young women to feel self-conscious about their body image, if a 'troll' has sent them a personal message or commented on their post, it might have a damaging effect on their mental health. Hills (N.D) discusses the impact trolling can have in relation to the popular reality TV programme, Love Island; 'There needs to be an increased social consciousness in this new digital age which considers the ramifications of abusive comments on mental health. Passing judgement on someone you don't know, just because they look a certain way, and spewing it all over social media is malicious and distressing for the person targeted' (Hills N.D)

Another app that was popular in the interviews was 'Tik Tok'. Tik Tok is a video sharing app that has a similar layout of Instagram, but the difference is that Tik Tok is videos and Instagram is mainly photos. 'TikTok is the leading destination for short-form mobile video. Our mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy' (Tik Tok website 2021). 5 participants said that they use Tik Tok as one of their main social media apps they use daily; 2 of these participants went on to say that it gives them the most positive usage out of their social media apps. Aria said that:

"Tik Tok is also positive as it puts me in a good mood watching funny videos or makeup tutorials"

(Aria, 20, interview dated 9th February 2021)

Jasmine also said:

“Tik Tok has the most positive engagement for me personally because I feel like I’m seeing real people do things that I like to do and feel like I’m in a community of people with similar views to me, thanks to the ‘for you page’”

(Jasmine, 22, interview dated 11th February 2021)

In my own experience, Tik Tok has been very positive for me, however, there has been a few negatives. Similar to Twitter, anyone can post their opinion onto their page on Tik Tok and similar to Twitter again, you have no control over what videos come up on your ‘for you page’. Understandably, Tik Tok suggests videos that you send to other people in your followers list and videos you like/save too, but sometimes there can be random videos that pop up that might be upsetting to view. Josie also suggested that they had a negative experience over something they couldn’t control seeing:

“Negative experiences would include instances where I can’t control what I see or who from and it may contain graphic images that are too late to un-see. I find these negatives because it reminds me that social media isn’t always used for positive outlets and reflects many people who exist in our society”

(Josie, 22, interview dated 17th February 2021)

This related to the literature review as there is an example of the young girl named Molly who committed suicide over harmful images idealising self-harm that she had no control over. Josie made a good point about the importance of being protected on social media and why it can be such a dangerous place for an adolescent to have access to these kind of accounts on Instagram.

An example of this could be a few months ago when I was scrolling through my feed, an unwanted video of animal abuse popped up, which really upset me and took me off guard. Because of my negative experience, I stayed away from the app for a few days as I didn’t want the same negativity showing on my timeline again. From this experience, I discovered that Tik Tok has an option to press ‘not interested’ if a similar video shows again, however I have pressed this many times and still had similar unwanted videos show up. Whilst saying this though, as Aria mentioned, Tik Tok is a space to share useful tip videos such as makeup hacks and tricks.

Tik Tok is also a space for educational videos such as information being spread about the *Black Lives Matter* movement and feminist movements too.

Tumblr was described by Jasmine to be their least favourite app; even though this app wasn't mentioned as much as Instagram and Tik Tok, it highlighted a key point about this study. Jasmine mentioned that:

“The website that used to impact me the most negatively was Tumblr, due to the constant reference to mental and physical health which took a toll on me. In recent years this has improved but I feel like it's still embedded in Instagram”

Tumblr can be seen as a similar app to Instagram, though not as popular. Tumblr is also an image sharing site where anyone can express their opinions on a subject. Tumblr is known to be a site of fan accounts for celebrities, music and films which can be beneficial for people who enjoy fan groups. Tumblr's website states: 'random blogs your friends send you, those are Tumblr blogs. We'll help you find and follow blogs like that, and we'll help other people find and follow yours' (Tumblr N.D). Tumblr can be quite a dark place, as it isn't as censored as other apps meaning some hashtags can be damaging to mental health; 'the majority of images tagged 'thinspiration' on Tumblr were of thin women adhering to culturally based beauty norms' (R. Wick and A. Harriger 2018).

Other apps that were mentioned were Facebook/messenger, Snapchat and Whatsapp. These weren't mentioned enough to be analytical about their negative and positive aspects, but Facebook was mentioned as a brief positive by Georgia for keeping in touch with family members:

“Facebook makes me feel positive as my friends post mostly positive things happening in their life”

Aria also said:

“I also use messenger to interact with my university group chats for advice regarding assessments”

So overall Facebook was a positive aspect because it allows users to 'stay in touch' with friends and family.

Self-representation on social media

The second theme that I picked up on was the self-representation that the participants felt they have to share on these apps. This focus on the self and choice is an important element of post feminism. There can be a division in opinion over how social media apps can have an effect on the self-representation of an individual, however, most of these are negative. As mentioned previously, Georgia explained that she thought social media shows the best part of someone, that the pictures that are posted is someone's best 'angle' and that images posted online aren't real life. This is a clear example of how social media is a negative space for many young women. Users are made to feel as though If their body doesn't look the same to their friends online, this means they are worthless and doubt themselves. When in fact, this isn't true. As mentioned in the literature review, celebrities like the Kardashian family are known to edit their images to make their features look sharper and enhance areas of the body, which is also a form of emotional labour.

Aria explained that even though social media can be informative, it is also:

“Deceptive in allowing perceptions of lives that are not linear to real life”

This reminded me of the point made by Harrison and Hefner (2014) in the literature review discussing the 'ideal body type' which discussed how women are photoshopped to look different to what they do in real life. This then creates a deception, similar to what Aria is saying in the interview; that women are presented differently when they have edited themselves to a point that would be unachievable in person.

This relates to the previous point about how social media users show their friends and followers the best side of their life and not the personal aspects that might be happening. This makes young women start to compare their lives with other people and start doubting their life choices; i.e. someone who goes on holiday a lot is seen as perhaps having a lot of money, so their peers might think that their life isn't as luxurious as theirs because they have made the wrong life choices. This is important because it relates to the consumption of social media, in the context of neoliberalism which is underpinned with the idea of consumption as a marker of good or meaningful life for young people.

Catherine was also very open about her negative experience of social media; it was especially worse when she was 18. Her comments also related to consumption of social media. She explained that:

“I did find myself constantly on social media and engrossed in watching other people's lives and I felt like I had to constantly show off mine. I feel like this was because I wanted to give people the impression, I was happier and ‘living my best life’ when in the real world I wasn’t”.

Tilly also shared her negative experience of social media:

“The things I saw on social media damaged my self-esteem, body image and overall happiness a lot easier”

(Tilly, 22, interview dated 18th February 2021)

It's apparent to see that there is a constant theme of self-doubt and comparing lives (consumption) to others; Tilly had a few other relatable points about how she would compare her life to others like Aria and Georgia:

“I think the idea that people in the same demographic i.e. age and status are buying houses, or travelling the world, while having luxury items and being so ‘happy’ can really have a negative toll on people's mental health. While they may not actually be happy, because they are portraying that their lives are ‘perfect’ it gives idealistic factors to it and can impact negatively on people's lives”

The last self-representation that I thought was quite interesting and unexpected was Catherine; she has a shortened left arm classed as a disability and was very open about it in her interview:

“It's always been about how people would view me and how I viewed myself for not being “normal” like everybody else who I would follow. This for me would be a major negative of using apps like Instagram and Snapchat, as I would follow people who I couldn't relate too.

I would also worry a lot about what boys and men thought as I didn't think anyone would want a girlfriend who had a disability”

(Catherine, interview dated 12th February 2021)

I thought this was interesting because it relates to how easy it is for someone to compare their lives to someone else on social media and how self-destructing it can be. To relate Catherine's point to a piece of literature, it is important to recognise society's perspective of how disabled people are viewed; 'many view disabilities as an undesirable tragedy that should be cured' (Hunsinger and M. Senft 2013). Catherine's point of view connects to the idea of digital cultures because she found a way to make her empower her own body, which relates to the discussion surrounding post feminism and how women should feel 'uplifted' in their own bodies. The research from this perspective was successful, because I have found a young women who has experienced the pessimistic side of social media, to then find a positive space to share her body which can then help others like Catherine to become confident in their own skin. Catherine was scared to show her followers on social media her arm and was trying to follow the established norms of beauty:

"I used to avoid posting any full body pictures and it would only be selfies, this meant that I could avoid people commenting or knowing about my arm.

I continued posting pictures but I started posting more body pictures but would hide my arm still"

She might have felt society would be shocked if they saw her arm, because of the prejudice that surrounds people with disabilities, and they are viewed as 'others'. However, this narrative has recently changed, with 'many users with disabilities and many advocates also see social media as bringing great changes for people with disabilities' (ibid). This then relates to how Catherine now feels confident in her own body:

"Once I felt confidence and happy in myself, I posted a full body picture with my arm, with received a ton of likes, this helped me feel "approved" and accepted by everyone"

Catherine's experience can relate to the topic of Fat Acceptance movements that is touched upon in the literature review. Catherine has reclaimed her identity by becoming confident in her own body which is what the feminist movements are aiming for in all women. It's important to realise that Catherine's experience is relevant because she could have a big impact on feminist movements such as the

Fat Acceptance movement but also on disability pages, which are becoming more popular with the awareness of social media.

This why social media users need to find their own narrative online; social media is problematic, but in some cases, it offers people a way of finding their community online, like Catherine. Identity is an important part of social media and what makes everyone different, Catherine is a prime example of this.

Coping strategies with gendered expectations and experiences

The third theme that I picked up on when doing the interviews was that majority of the users were challenging social media; by this, they were taking control of their social media experience and made sure that were they were looking at had a positive impact on their mental health. A reason why people suffer from mental health issues from using these apps is because they're so addictive and the individual can't come to terms with separating themselves from the apps; 'taking breaks from technology requires self-control and willpower. Research suggests that people who believe that self-control is dynamic and unlimited tend to set more resolutions and are more likely to achieve them' (Schoenebeck 2014).

From the interviews, it is clear to see that there is a negative outlook on the topic of social media. 100% of the participants who were interviewed admitted that they either limit the time spent on their phone or unfollowed an account that made them feel insecure or had a negative impact on their time spent online. The participants made points about how they have to remind themselves that social media is just a snippet of someone's real life. Jasmine said:

"Sometimes I have to take a break from Instagram to remind myself that pictures and narratives have been edited to fit a theme. Taking a small break off social media to explore entertainment and media helps keep my mental and physical health at a good level for returning to social media" (Jasmine 11 February 2021)

Tilly also made a similar point:

"I have learned that breaks are needed from these types of platforms because they can be very toxic places. I think learning to differentiate the real life in person connections and appreciate these more has helped me to deal with negative aspects. If my screen time is too high or my anxiety gets too high, I will temporarily

disable all my accounts but usually still try to go to them out of habit and boredom. After a few days the constant need to check them starts to decrease and it can feel like a weight taken off your shoulders”

This point that Tilly has made can be brought back to the theory of emotional labour; social media has an impact on this because the user must present themselves a certain way to their followers, as it isn't a societal norm to appear 'sad' in a social media post. This is relevant as everyone is posting the best version of themselves, not the bad days.

This displays that spending time on social media can have a negative impact on mental health and even though these apps have an addictive nature that makes users want to spend more time on them, it's important to spend time away from them to avoid becoming obsessed with appearance, lifestyle, etc. It's important because the issue of mental health is becoming very apparent with the relevance of social media; young women are impressionable to what they see online and this can be seen from the interviews.

Sometimes using social media can be the result of a habit that we must try and break out of; 'a social media habit might be opening Facebook minutes after closing it, or swiping the cell phone on, without any intended purpose' (Schoenebeck 2014). This is the result of how social media can take over an individual's life and become overwhelming seeing different lifestyles which are unrealistic.

Schoenebeck makes another important point about the terms 'quitters' and 'break takers' in their relevance to social media; 'quitters and break takers differ in their motivations and desired outcomes. Quitters seek to make long-term changes in behaviour, such as resolving to stop smoking permanently. Break takers seek short-term changes in behaviour, such as giving up chocolate for a period of time' (Schoenebeck 2014). Whilst perhaps quitting social media might be a bit extreme for some people, evidence from this study correlates with the fact that it's important to take a break from social media for not just mental health, but perception on reality too.

To relate the findings to gendered self-representation, Catherine made an interesting point about how she was worried how males would view her because of her disability, relating to the point of wanting to be 'desirable' for a male.

This can be understood in the context of how a lot of young women want to impress boys/men and posting on social media can help with this. Gaining attraction from a male can be viewed as empowering whilst another viewpoint can be seen as sexualising women for male validation. 'Social media is now inundated with blogs by young women in their late teens to early 20s, who self-consciously and aggressively describe themselves as radical feminists, while posting pictures of themselves in various states of dress or undress – or at times completely nude, or engaged in sexual and/or pornographic activity' (Murray 2015). One perspective is that this can be an example of women owning their identity in the world of social media and feeling empowered about their bodies, yet a different perspective is that it's self-consciously attracting the male gaze and perhaps unwanted attention from male accounts. In relation to resistance feminist movements, the purpose can sometimes be lost whilst trying to communicate; 'while the use of social media platforms for feminist activism has increased feminism's visibility, it has also facilitated increased access to movement ideas and individual women by feminist adversaries' (Megarry 2016).

In terms of gendered expectations, a lot of the participants found that their body image concerns were based off social media use. This can be because there are many influencers on social media flaunting their bodies in bikini pictures whilst on their story, they are eating unhealthy food; this then asks the question: how do young women enjoy social media whilst being empowered but to stop comparing themselves to others? One common issue with this is the term 'influencer' which a lot of young women aspire to become with the likes of social media. 'Contrary to celebrities or public figures who are well-known via traditional media, social media influencers are "regular people" who have become "online celebrities" by creating and posting content on social media. They generally have some expertise in specific areas, such as healthy living, travel, food, lifestyle, beauty, or fashion' (Lou and Yuan 2018) as mentioned in the literature review and the findings of the interviews, this lifestyle is unachievable for normal, working class individuals. This is why influencers are going down a dangerous path with promoting products that young followers will see, such as diet supplements and weight loss strategies.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, the data analysis shows that young women aged 20-22 experience very similar experiences of social media. It shows that Instagram was seen to be the worst app for these negative experiences, as it has negative impacts on users mental health because they are constantly comparing their body image/lives to other peoples, whether they know these people or not. The research has been beneficial for this study because it has been founded from real participants who have experienced these kinds of issues. The findings about the pattern usage was very interesting; it made it clear that apps such as Instagram and Tik Tok have qualities that make users want to keep coming back for more, in both negative and positive ways. Postfeminist ideas show that the self-representation on social media should be an empowering one that uplifts others, which this analysis has shown celebrities are failing to do. The photoshop references in the literature review also relate to the real-life experiences of the interviewees too and how body image is a real issue. The neoliberal ideas of consumption are also present whilst going through the findings that phone usage is one of the main areas of concern surrounding mental health in society. The importance of finding a community online is apparent which the analysis shows – this way users can find a voice and talk about problems on social media such as photoshopped and edited images.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

To conclude, the findings from this research study has been that the use of social media is proven to have a negative impact on a young woman's mental health. This can be seen from the literature review and the data analysis; that there is stigma surrounding comparing someone's own life to another. Celebrity culture is very dangerous from the examples given such as the Kardashian family. This study has shown sufficient evidence that apps such as Instagram can become addictive for a young woman and by using it frequently, a negative impact on their body image can occur. Feminist movements, however, provide an uplifting and empowering option to give social media a different perspective; that social media can be a space for finding a community of body positivity and making an end to photoshopped images. The research aimed to discover key problems that are currently in the social media world and how they negatively impact users, targeting the research mainly on young women. It can be identified through the study that there are a lot of issues with safeguarding young users against harmful images surrounding suicide and mental health. As a way forward, apps like Instagram need to address topics like photoshopping and editing to help protect women from comparing themselves to a false body. The removal of their filters would also be a good place to start, as these filters can blur out certain areas, we might not like about ourselves, when instead users should be embracing their own bodies instead of trying to change them.

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