Riley Scott

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Professor Lieber

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Diversity in the Media: The Effect of Social Media on Beauty Ideals

The concept of what is considered beautiful or pleasing in terms of feminine looks has been changing since the beginning of time, but the pressure to fulfill these beauty standards is unlike ever before. The prominence of social media in the 21st century has not only helped shape current beauty ideals and standards in today’s world but has been on the forefront of creating and maintaining them. The daily, or even hourly, habits of scrolling through pictures of celebrities, models, and pristine looking peers has created an intangible concept of what women are supposed to look like. Constant access to technology and social media is at an all-time high, which results in images consistently being engrained into every users’ brain. Consistent images of the perfect body or face. Social media was originally created as a tool to connect with people you don’t often see or to quickly send a message but now it has become a platform for people to flaunt themselves and for others to feel lesser because of this. The effects of social media on the younger generations are heavily negative and have proven to lead to insecurity, anxiety, eating disorders and even depression.

There was once a time when the only images we saw online or in magazines were of celebrities. In the 50s Marilyn Monroe was the image of beauty, a sex symbol all around the world and women strived to look like her. In the 60s Lesley Lawson, more commonly known as Twiggy, brought the lean, boxy body type into fashion. Naomi Campbell changed the look to slender, yet strong, in the 80s and then Kate Moss changed the “it” look right back to skinny in the 90s (Howard, 2018). Currently, the Kardashians have started a “beauty ideal” of intensely curvy with a miniscule waist, a body type rarely attainable without surgery. Both interviewees, Briana Suhr a 19-year-old student at Syracuse University and Charlie Maher, a 22-year-old senior at SU, emphasized a voluptuous behind and large breasts with a small waist when asked to describe the “ideal woman”- an image that we see all over media now. Viewers steadily strive for the most “it” body of their time but now the society cannot escape the image of the “it” body. As technology progresses celebrities’ bodies seem to become harder to strive for, but it has become common knowledge that these images use photo-editing technology. Although this knowledge helped some women, a few years back, realize that these bodies are not real, it did not end the issue. Now with the popularity of the smartphone, everyday people can download apps to edit their bodies and faces to achieve the “beauty ideal”. Apps like Snapchat, Facetune and Airbrush allow any common smartphone user to alter their bodies and post them on social media. By posting these pictures with a falsified smaller waist, or larger lips on social media and then getting support in the form of likes from their followers makes users feel that this is how they should look. Superficial. However, this is not the only issue- many other users are under the impression that this is what their peer really looks like, lessening their own self confidence and yearning, yet again, for unrealistic “beauty ideals” that their peers are seemingly attaining. This rapidly growing trend is quickly and dangerously blurring the lines between reality and fantasy.

This 21st century social media and photo-editing craze has led to a condition called Body-Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). In a study done but the JAMA Network, it states that, ““Body Dysmorphic Disorder is an excessive preoccupation with a perceived flaw in appearance, classified on the obsessive-compulsive spectrum” (Rajanala, 2018). Accessibility to filters has heightened this condition because it allows woman to see what they would look like with a smaller nose, larger eyes and lighter skin and it makes them feel that this is the way they should look. Social media has taken extreme tolls on many women’s self-esteem. Filters make woman feel their appearance is insufficient or lacking compared to others. Suhr stated, “Social media definitely makes me feel insecure. It is just continuously stunning girls. Instagram is just everyone’s best self and so you think people are living a magical life all the time.” (Briana Suhr, personal communication, September 25, 2018). When I asked a how many peers she thinks edits or alters their bodies before posting pictures she guessed “at least 50%, easily” and Maher stated that “girls here edit the crap out of their pictures, it’s insane.” (Charlie Maher, personal communication, September 26, 2018). This “insanity” that is happening is due to the pressure woman feel to compete and compare with others online to have the perfect curves that the Kardashians or Beyoncé “have”, and it has gone too far. Every time a woman uploads a picture that they edit it makes them feel that the original version of themselves would not suffice. Woman suffering from insecurities due to media go to great lengths to hide their imperfections that would have otherwise gone unnoticed without social media.

We are living in the age of technology and social media has taken over the lives of almost everyone. It has become an obsession for many and, more often than not, a way to validate one’s self-worth. It has led to many trying to strive for legitimately unattainable body and life goals and unfortunately led to increases eating disorders, lack of confidence and depression. As a future media professional, I feel it’s important to be aware of the power of media. The message needs to change, every body type and ethnicity should be displayed in media and there should not be one standard set of “beauty ideals" The increase of technology and ways to connect is not going to slow down and as a society we need to stop and be knowledgeable about the effects that is going to have on the young adults of today but more importantly the leaders of tomorrow.

References

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Appendix A

Briana Suhr, Bnsuhr@syr.edu

Briana Suhr is a sophomore from Brooklyn, NY. Briana differs from me because she is has a Hispanic heritage that she identifies strongly with. I thought it might be interesting to see if due to our different backgrounds if we strive for different body types or if we place emphasis on different beauty ideals.

Charlie Maher, cmmaher@syr.edu

Charlie Maher is a senior from Chicago, Illinois. Charlie differs from me because he is a male. I spend a lot of time observing my girl friends and I pick the “perfect” picture to post and I wanted to look deeper to see if social media had the same effects on males. I wanted to see how aware a male would be about how much editing women do or if they’re even aware of the negative effects social media has on a woman’s confidence.

Appendix B

Briana Suhr Interview Questions:

1.) Do you see your identity displayed in media?

2.) How would you describe the perfect woman & male?

3.) Do you think the beauty ideals today are attainable?

4.) Who do you wish you looked like, if anyone?

5.) What is the most important feature, in your opinion to be considered attractive

6.) Do you have any desire to attain the “beauty standard”?

7.) Does the media make you feel insecure, has your impression of yourself changed over time?

8.) What types of media do you spend your time on?

9.) Do you believe in altering your body with surgeries, etc.

10.) How long do you take to get ready?

11.) What is your beauty routine?

12.) What percent of social media do you think is edited

13.) Do you find yourself more attracted to people you find more similar to yourself?

14.) Where are you from, do you think where you are from puts pressure on your body standards

15.) Do you work out?

16.) How much money do you spend on beauty a month

17.) Do you feel more pressure from men or woman to feel attractive and do you think girls or guys put more pressure on image?

18.) Do you diet

19.) Do you follow fitness social media accounts?

20.) How do you feel about Snapchat filters?

22.) Has social media affected your relationship with food?

23.) How do you feel about social media overall?

Charlie Maher Interview Questions

1.) Do you think boys are more critical about the image of girls than girls are of boys?

2.) Do you expect or wish for girls to look like the models on social media?

3.) How much do you think one of those models weighs?

4.) Who is the most attractive celebrity, in your opinion? Who do most guys think is?

5.) How do you feel about the Kardashians?

6.) What’s your ideal girl?

7.) What is the most important feature, in your opinion to be considered an attractive girl?

8.) Do you think the media makes woman feel insecure? Does it make you feel insecure?

9.) What types of media do you spend time on?

10.) What percent of social media do you think is edited?

11.) Do you think girls look better with a snapchat filter?

12.) How much money do you spend on upkeep a month? How much do you think girls spend?

13.) How long does it take you to get ready?

14.) Do you believe in altering your body with surgeries, etc.

15.) Do you work out?

16.) Do you feel more pressure from men or woman to feel attractive?

17.) Do you compare your physical image to your peers and does how you feel about it effect your actions?

18.) Does the prevalence of social media upset you?

19.) How do you feel about social media overall?