LIKED, FAVORITED, AND FILTERED: EXAMINING FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS’ BODY IMAGE IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

By

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To Mom. You are everything to me.
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By

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The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how college women conceptualize their personal body image in relation to various sociocultural factors such as peers, family, mass media, and social media including Facebook and Instagram. Other aspects, such as their body satisfaction, level of lean/thinness internalization, level of toned/fitness internalization, and other factors were measured as well to provide a holistic view of how college women think about their bodies. Focus group and survey methodology were used to explore these aspects, and results show that respondents receive body image-related cues from peers, family, Instagram, Facebook, and mass media. The relationship between body satisfaction, lean/thinness internalization, toned/fitness internalization and social media use were also examined, as well as how respondents engage in profile curation and body image-related impression management on their Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Guided by sociocultural theory of body image, overall, the findings from the survey indicated that social media including Facebook and Instagram do not have as profound of an effect on college women as popular press articles may suggest.
Furthermore, the relationship that college women have with mass and social media are complicated, as mass media have fallen out of favor with women in this age group. Theoretical and practical implications for educators, parents and psychologists are provided in light of the changing media landscape and changing body image trends among females in this age group.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Women’s body image and social media use is an emerging topic of research. For decades, researchers investigated the role that mass media, such as television and women’s magazines, played in female body image in the United States and globally. These studies used a variety of methods ranging from content analyses (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999; Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003; Smolak, 2004), meta-analyses (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Grabe, 2008; Holmstrom, 2004), surveys (Cash & Henry, 1995; Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004; Lowery et al., 2005), and experiments (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012; Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006), as well as qualitative approaches like focus groups (Goodman, 2002; Parker et al., 1995; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000), and in-depth interviews (Greenleaf, 2002; Paquette & Raine, 2004; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). Findings and information gleaned from studies like these were translated to practice in which interventions were created to address the growing social problem of body dissatisfaction and negative media influence among adolescent and college-age females (Coughlin & Kalodner, 2006; Nicolino, Martz, & Curtin, 2001; O’Dea & Abraham, 2000; Richardson & Paxton, 2010).

Today, mass media may not be the outlet of choice for young female media consumers, but researchers have not yet provided a comprehensive view of the role that social media play in female body image (Perloff, 2014a; Perloff 2014b; Turner, 2014). It is crucial to understand this relationship because emphasis on physical appearance and pressure to conform to normative ideals of feminine beauty are still
extremely salient and enduring aspects of being a woman in Western societies like the United States (Grogan, 2008; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Increasingly, these pressures are also spreading to other cultures worldwide, such as Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries (Al-Adawi, Dorvlo, Burke, Moosa, & Al-Bahlani, 2002; Gunewardene, Huon, & Zheng, 2001; Huon, Mingyi, Oliver, & Xiao, 2002). With the widespread use of social media, online self-presentation becomes increasingly important—and controllable—for users.

Research shows that women are more dissatisfied with their bodies than men (Dunn, Lewis, & Patrick, 2010; Kostanski & Gullone, 1998). Furthermore, women equate body satisfaction with their self-esteem (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002). In particular, college-age women are an especially vulnerable age group when it comes to their personal body image, as the rate of body dissatisfaction among college-age women has been reported at 50% (Bearman, Presnell, & Martinez, 2006), and as high as 80% (Heatherton, Nichols, Mahamed, & Keel, 1995; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). Given these considerations, the purpose of this study is to collect a rich array of data about how college-age women feel about their body image and their use of social media through a mixed-methods approach: Focus groups and a survey. The goals of the study are to answer the following questions: What roles do sociocultural pressures play in the lives of college-age females? From where are they getting cues about normative physical appearance and body image: Peers, family, mass media, or popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram? Does a relationship exist between social media use and sociocultural attitudes about appearance? How are college-age females presenting themselves on their social media sites and managing their online personas?
And finally, how important are “Likes,” and do they view them as a form of social validation?

In addition to answering these questions, this study builds on existing theories that have not been updated to reflect current changes in media use. The sociocultural model of female body image includes a triad of influences that can affect the way a woman feels about her body: her peers, family, and mass media (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Fallon, 1990; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). However, given the current statistics on media consumption in this demographic, they are not consuming mass media such as television and print at the same rate they were in previous decades (Matsa, Sasseen, & Mitchell, 2012).

Millennials age 18 to 34 spend 67 hours per week on media consumption—9.5 hours per day (Experian Marketing Services, 2015). Of the 67 hours per week spent on media consumption, 35 of those hours are spent consuming digital media. In fact, they are the first generation to spend the majority of the time allocated to media consumption on digital devices such as smart phones, tablets, laptops and more (Experian Marketing Services, 2015). In addition, millennials are increasingly using social media platforms to meet almost all of their media-related needs: for news and information seeking, socialization, entertainment, the need to connect with others, and to obtain information about current cultural and societal trends (Lenhart, 2015). In the era of mass media, young women received messages about normative beauty and trends from women’s magazines—and the “deliverers” of these messages were celebrities and models (Grogan, 2008; Sypeck, Gray, & Aherns, 2004). Now, they receive these messages from social media, and the deliverers are their own peers (Klein, 2013).
Social media have heightened young women’s awareness of how they present themselves online, as “Likes,” followers and friends become more important than ever. Posting selfies and other types of photos to their social media accounts give their peers (and others) clues about who they are. According to many female users, the number of “Likes” they receive directly influences their level of self-esteem (Wickel, 2015). Receiving “Likes” can boost their ego and make them feel better about the way they look. Some of the more extreme users will even pay for followers who will “Like” their photos and other social media content, while others will delete a photo if it doesn’t receive a certain amount of “Likes” shortly after they post it online (Madden et al., 2015).

Though there is a breadth of research about female body image and mass media, the literature on the topic of female body image and social media is sparse but developing. Because this is an emergent area of study, there is a wealth of opportunity for researchers to expand current theoretical perspectives and applications to encompass the current landscape of social media use among this gender and age group. A primary goal of this study is to engage in theory building and expand existing theories to include female body image and social media use.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Female Body Image in Western Society

In Western society, there is perhaps no greater preoccupation—and at times, an obsession—with physical appearance. The media give many messages concerning acceptable and normative physical appearance, especially for young females (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). For women, the pressure to conform to a certain look is emphasized by cultural forces such as the media, peers, friends and family (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2014; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997).

In addition to these cultural forces, individuals use a host of factors to assess their own appearance in order to discern how they “measure up” to others, whether they are individuals in close proximity such as peers, or unknown individuals such as famous figures in advertisements (Shields & Heinecken, 2002). Perhaps this desire partly explains the mechanisms behind large industries promoting weight loss, fitness, beauty enhancement products, and cosmetic procedures (Wilson, 2005). Media have capitalized on the alteration of physical appearance with shows like The Biggest Loser, What Not to Wear, The Swan, and most recently, Botched (Berry, McLeod, Pankratow, & Walker, 2013; Sender & Sullivan, 2008; Ryle, 2012; Wilson, 2005). All of these mediated elements work in tandem to contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction and negative affect in women who feel they do not meet cultural standards of normative beauty, including but not limited to thinness (Stice & Thompson, 2001).

As a general concept, “body image refers to the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance”
Body image is also deeply personal—transcending the opinions of others, and involving “our own internal view of how we look” (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 3). Closely related to body image, body esteem is the “self-evaluation of one’s body or appearance” (Mendelson, B.K., Mendelson, M.J., & White, 2001), especially in relation to characteristics such as sexual attractiveness, weight concern, and physical condition (Franzoi & Shields, 2010). In a study of 250 adolescents asked about eating attitudes, self-esteem, reasons for engaging in exercise, and ideal versus current body, “only girls associated body dissatisfaction with the concept of self-esteem” (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002, p. 581).

Body image should be conceptualized holistically and on a continuum with “levels of disturbance ranging from none to extreme and most people falling near the middle of the range, experiencing moderate concern, distress, or dissatisfaction” (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 7). For some people, being exposed to messages about ideal weight and appearance does not cause them to adopt maladaptive behaviors such as excessive exercise behaviors or disordered eating patterns (Jung & Lennon, 2003). They are thought to be more resilient to these messages, but for some, the effects can cause insecurity, body image disturbance and eating disorders.

Body image problems plague females because women are socialized from a young age to believe that thin is virtuous (Grogan, 2008), and fat is “abhorrent” (Richardson, 2010, p. 75). Societally imposed beauty standards and the preoccupation with thinness may lead to body dissatisfaction among many young women who are also media consumers (Thompson et al., 1999). In fact, body dissatisfaction has become so normalized and commonplace in Western society that it has become “normative
discontent,” a term created by Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore (1985, p. 267) to refer to the “widespread dysphoria that women have regarding their appearance,” especially relating to weight and thinness (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 6). Indeed, this dissatisfaction begins early: girls as young as six years old are concerned with their body shape and weight (National Eating Disorders Association, n.d.), and girls as young as five years old are aware of dieting, and associate it with behaviors such as food restriction, weight loss, and thinness (National Eating Disorder Information Centre, 2014). In extreme cases, body dissatisfaction is a significant contributor to the development of illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia (Stice, 2002).

Indeed, good looks are a powerful form of social currency in Western society. Attractive individuals are more successful in the workforce when it comes to obtaining jobs and receiving promotions, and they can earn 3 or 4 percent more, on average, than their less-attractive counterparts (Hamermesh, 2011). The social benefits reaped by attractive individuals are a result of the physical attractiveness stereotype, or “the tendency to attribute positive characteristics to people perceived as attractive” (Fudman, 2010). Attractive people are perceived as more trustworthy and persuasive (Chaiken, 1979), intelligent (Alicke, Smith, & Klotz, 1986), moral (Tsukiura & Cabeza, 2011), and wield more social influence (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). In addition, someone’s level of physical attractiveness may provide implicit clues about their level of social status and occupational success (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). A meta-analysis of studies about the attractiveness stereotype shows that there are also some negative effects associated with being attractive—namely, being seen as vain or egotistical—but
generally, there is strong empirical support for the physical attractiveness stereotype (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991).

Exposure to attractive people may heighten body dissatisfaction for vulnerable individuals (Posavac, H., Posavac, S., & Posavac, E., 1998), and large-scale surveys indicate that the number of men and women who express dissatisfaction with their bodies has been growing over the last four decades (Cash, 2002; Gray & Ginsberg, 2007; Heinberg, Wood, & Thompson, 1996). Some popular publications have conducted their own surveys to tap into the minds of Americans and assess their level of body dissatisfaction. For example, Psychology Today conducted a series of surveys starting in 1972 to assess men and women’s attitudes about their bodies. Results from 1972 showed that 25% of women and 15% of men reported that they were dissatisfied with their bodies (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973). In the next wave of data collection, which occurred in 1985, 38% of women and 34% of men expressed dissatisfaction (Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1986). Most recently, the survey was conducted in 1997 with approximately 4,500 male and female participants from every state in the United States as well as countries like South Africa, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, and Peru. Survey results indicate there is “more discontent with the shape of our bodies than ever before” (Garner, 1997). Participants were mostly Caucasian females in early to mid-thirties with a college education. Fifty-six percent of women expressed dissatisfaction with their overall physical appearance, citing “problem areas” like their abdomens, body weight, hips, and muscle tone specifically (Garner, 1997).

Women’s magazine Glamour also conducted similar studies, beginning in 1984 (Dreisbach, 2014). At that time, 41% of women said they were unhappy with their
bodies. Most recently, the survey was conducted in 2014 with 1,000 women ranging in age from 18 to 40 (Dreisbach, 2014). Women in this survey are unhappier with their bodies than in 1984, and 80% agree that “looking in the mirror makes them feel bad” (Dreisbach, 2014). Despite some progressive strides toward greater body image acceptance (i.e., increased visibility of “diverse” celebrity bodies such as Beyoncé Knowles, Mindy Kaling, Rebel Wilson, Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, and more) and ramped-up social media activism for calling out reductive advertising practices (i.e., Target and Old Navy’s respective thigh gap Photoshop debacles), 54% of 18 to 40-year-old women polled in the study by Glamour express dissatisfaction with their bodies (Dreisbach, 2014). Although it may be true that as a society, thinness is less emphasized than before and media are being more inclusionary of “diverse” bodies, women’s level of body positivity and satisfaction is not necessarily reflective of these changes. For many, thinness is no longer the goal, but what is deemed “the new athleticism” or being “toned,” “fit,” and generally appearing aesthetically “in shape” are the new female corporeal aspirations (Santas, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Among college-age females in particular, body image is a highly salient aspect of their self-concept, and women in this age group are particularly susceptible to a host of mediated and interpersonal influences. Studies show many college women want to lose weight and participate in dieting and other weight loss behaviors (National Eating Disorders Association, 2013). Some research has indicated two-thirds of female college students as “having an undiagnosed mild or emerging eating problem” (Gnagey & Broekhuizen, 2012; Ackard, Croll, & Kearney-Cooke, 2002). In addition, about 60% of college-aged women engage in dieting or bingeing; 69% use methods such as diet pills,
diuretics, fasting or purging to augment weight loss and weight control (Gnagey & Broekhuizen, 2012).

In the present study, the Appearance Evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990) was used to evaluate level of baseline body satisfaction. The Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ) was created and validated in 1990 by Brown, Cash, and Mikulka to measure people’s attitudes about their personal body image, and provides “a multidimensional, attitudinal assessment of body image and weight-related variables” (p. 137). The questionnaire was tested among a random stratified sample that was drawn from a national survey that included almost 30,000 respondents. From the larger collection of respondents, 1,064 females and 988 males (age 15 to 87) were randomly selected by age and sex in a manner proportionately distributed to the U.S. population. The MBSRQ contains 54 items with response options on a five-point Likert-type scale: definitely disagree to definitely agree. Respondents’ attitudes toward three aspects are measured: physical appearance, physical fitness, and health. Of the larger scale, a subscale was of interest to the researcher and included in the present study: the Appearance Evaluation subscale. This seven-item subscale demonstrates very good internal consistency with an alpha value of .88 in both female and male samples. The purpose of including this subscale is to obtain a baseline measurement for the respondent’s level of body satisfaction. It will be administered before the respondent is exposed to questions about personal body image and media use, to avoid any possible priming effects.
Sociocultural Perspective on Body Image

The sociocultural perspective on body image is a theoretical view that focuses on three main elements that influence how a person feels about his or her body: peers, family, and media. It is this combination of social relationships and media influences that have the potential to powerfully and profoundly impact body image, as “media-promulgated messages are absorbed by other socializing agents, especially parents and peers, they are transmitted and reinforced in everyday social interactions” (Cash, 2005, p. 440). Indeed, all of these elements work in tandem to create a schema about what is normatively attractive, acceptable, and aspirational. Examining each of the three sociocultural forces (peers, parents, and media) help researchers understand how they affect women.

Interpersonal influences like peers can play a powerful role in communicating norms about attractiveness. Adolescents and young adults get many cues about what is trendy and socially acceptable from their friends and peers, including body image-related messages, such as dieting and exercise behaviors (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2005), and through “fat talk,” teasing, and appearance-related comments and criticisms (Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, van den Berg, & Eisenberg, 2008; Menzel, Schaefer, Burke, Mayhew, Brannick, & Thompson, 2010). A study conducted by van den Berg and colleagues (2007) with boys and girls in seventh grade and tenth grade found that body comparison with media images was positively related to body dissatisfaction, which is consistent with previous findings (Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Jones, 2004; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2002; van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Parent dieting environment and friend dieting were also assessed. For
females, self-comparison with media images and body dissatisfaction were correlated, and this comparison process played a modest mediating part in self-esteem, depressive mood, friend dieting, BMI (body mass index), and exposure to magazine articles that discuss weight loss (van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Paxton, Eisenberg, and Neumark-Sztainer (2006) conducted a longitudinal study with adolescent girls and boys over a five-year period. They found that individuals who had friends that were dieting significantly predicted higher body dissatisfaction, and use of unhealthy/extreme weight control behaviors such as bingeing, fasting, and self-induced vomiting, which shows how powerful friends can be to adolescents.

Family also plays an important role in the way women view their bodies. Women may receive negative feedback not just from peers, but from parents, and pressures to conform to a certain physical appearance may manifest in the form of “critical comments regarding weight, encouragement to diet, and exposure to media containing thin ideal images” (Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessler, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003, p. 230). For women, their mothers have a strong influence on their attitudes and behaviors about appearance (Moreno & Thelen, 1993; Mukai, 1996; Thompson et al., 1999). Having a mother who was a frequent dieter can affect how a young daughter feels about food (Thompson et al., 1999), and previous research has shown that mothers’ food choices affect their children’s weight (Birch & Fisher, 2000; Faith et al., 2003). In addition, parents may directly or indirectly model eating behaviors and practices as well as attitudes toward their own body image, shape, and diet, which may in turn influence their children (Thompson et al., 1999). However, previous studies on mother-daughter eating behaviors have yielded conflicting results, because most of the studies are
correlational in nature (Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Robinson-O’Brien, 2008; Sanftner, Crowther, Crawford, & Watts, 1996).

Of the three main influences associated with the sociocultural perspective on body image, the model emphasizes the importance of the mass media in disseminating messages about what is attractive and beautiful, and therefore aspirational for women (Thompson et al., 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). Media present images of ideal thinness as well as ideal fitness that can influence a woman’s self-concept, and women may internalize these media images and beauty standards. Internalization refers to a person’s level of “psychological buy-in” (Krayer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Exposure to and internalization of such standards of beauty and attractiveness starts early, as body image concerns and internalization among young girls in Western society can begin as young as age three (Dittmar et al., 2006). In turn, internalization of these ideals can lead to body dissatisfaction, which is a predictor of disordered eating and eating disorders (Smolak & Thompson, 2009).

The current sociocultural model focuses exclusively on mass media such as women’s magazines, television, advertisements, films, and music videos—yet women are primarily using social media to meet their needs including obtaining news, making friends, keeping in touch with contacts, and learning about social events (Raacke, & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Social and interactive media are of particular interest to the current college-aged group, many of whom can be considered “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), and the average college student has hundreds of social media friends (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). A study examining uses and gratifications of Facebook use among college students found that participants spent about three hours per day
communicating with or observing friends on the social networking site (Raacke, & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

**Sociocultural Attitudes towards Appearance Questionnaire**

In order to test the power of sociocultural influences on respondents in this study, the latest version of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ) will be used. Heinberg, Thompson, and Stormer created the original questionnaire in 1995 to measure “women’s recognition and acceptance of societally sanctioned standards of appearance” (p. 81). The validation process took place in three studies. The first study was conducted with a sample of 194 female undergraduates at a large southeastern university, ranging in age from 17 to 35. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale with anchoring options ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. The second study was done for further assessment of the scale’s psychometric status by using factor analysis in order to cross-validate results from the first study. The sample consisted of 150 undergraduate females ranging in age from 17 to 36 at the same university. The third and final study tested convergence between the questionnaire and existing measures of eating dysfunction and eating disturbance using a sample of 162 undergraduate females age 17 to 30. The questionnaire was validated on a sample of undergraduate females ranging in age from 17 to 35 from the same large southeastern university.

In its next phase, the revised version of this questionnaire, SATAQ-R, was created and validated by Cusmano and Thompson in 1997. This version examined three sociocultural aspects and their influence on appearance: media exposure, awareness of societal ideals, and internalization of sociocultural messages. These aspects were related to measures for body image disturbance, eating dysfunction, and
overall self-esteem in a sample of college females, 75% of whom were White, 7% were Black, 10% were Hispanic, 7% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1% defined themselves as “other” (Cusmano & Thompson, 1997). The researchers drew their inspiration from a seminal study conducted in 1980 by Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson in which they assessed *Playboy* magazine centerfolds and data from the Miss America beauty pageant contestants to track how the ideal female body changed over time. After collecting centerfold models’ weight and bust and hip measurements over a time period of two decades, 1959 to 1978, they found that the weight of the average centerfold was significantly less than that of the average female for the same time year (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980). In this version of the SATAQ-R, they not only measured thinness internalization, but added scales assessing athletic influence as well (Cusmano & Thompson, 1997).

The next version was the SATAQ-3, and like its predecessors, this questionnaire contained “measures designed to assess societal and interpersonal aspects of appearance ideals” (Schaefer et al., 2014, p. 54). It was validated using two independent samples of college women, and one smaller comparison sample that was being treated for eating disorders in an in-patient hospital (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Using factor analysis, the researchers identified two internalization factors: one relating to a “generic media influence related to TV, magazines, and movies,” and another factor showed the internalization of athletic figures (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Results from this study emphasized the importance of media as a causal risk factor, which confirmed findings from previous studies (Thompson & Stice, 2001). The researchers highlighted
the “importance of dimensions of a media influence that assess the role of information gleaned from the media as well as direct pressures generated from the media regarding meeting appearance standards” (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004, p. 302). The revised version of the SATAQ-3, called the SATAQ-3R, contained more questions about social comparisons with “movie stars” and other famous people. The scale was validated with two independent samples of college women, and had an internal consistency alpha of .95 (Thompson et al., 2000).

In order to evaluate various aspects associated with internalization of cultural norms about attractiveness and ideal body image, the SATAQ-4 was included as part of the survey instrument. The SATAQ-4 questionnaire is the fourth version of the original SATAQ and in its most recent form was tested and validated on multiple diverse, large samples. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis was used to validate the 22-item scale on a sample of 859 women. The scale contained five factors: Thin/low body fat internalization, muscular/athletic internalization, family pressures, peer pressures, and media pressures (Schafer et al., 2015). The SATAQ-4 was further validated in geographically diverse and independent samples of U.S. females: on the east coast, west coast, and in the Midwest. Another replication study validated the questionnaire in an international sample of women, and the final study validated the SATAQ-4 in a sample of U.S. college males (Schaefer et al., 2014). After various factor analyses, the initial 51-item questionnaire was reduced to its current form, 22 items, with response choices on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from definitely disagree to definitely agree (Schaefer et al., 2014). For all samples including U.S. females, Cronbach’s alpha for the subscales was .82 or higher.
Although this questionnaire has undergone multiple revisions and is now in its fourth edition (SATAQ-4), there are some issues with the measure. Firstly, though the sample sizes with which the survey was tested are large and in some cases, come from non-Western populations, they are not truly random samples. In fact, many are comprised of students enrolled in psychology courses or other convenient avenues from which to draw participants, such as an online psychology participant pool. As such, there is no way to ascertain the complete sampling frame or the representativeness of the sample with which the questionnaire was tested. For example, despite the fact that shared cultural meaning surrounding normative beauty ideals may permeate global boundaries, women enrolled at a four-year university in the southeastern United States undoubtedly differ from populations in England and Italy (Schaefer et al., 2012).

In some studies in which the goal is to “validate” the SATAQ-4 in various populations, the questionnaire was given to all “undergraduate” women, some of whom range in age from 18 to their mid-30s and above (Llorente, Gleaves, Warren, Pérez-de-Eulate, & Rakhkovskaya, 2014; Schaefer et al., 2012; 2014). Despite the fact that these studies exhibit high levels of internal consistency in different samples, current body image literature shows unique differences between the self-concept of 18-year-old college freshmen and “middle-aged” women between 35 and 50 years old (Sarwer, Whitaker, Wadden, & Pertshuk, 1997; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010). Thus, it is not prudent to assume similarities in the way these women conceptualize their body image without explicitly recognizing the individual differences in body image among different age groups.
Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, some aspects of the questionnaire are not as relevant to women in current society as they could be. Namely, the questionnaire includes a section that measures influence of “media,” a vague term that includes television, movies, magazines, billboards, advertisements, and “the Internet” (Schaefer et al., 2014). This definition of media is problematic because some aspects, such as “the Internet” are vague, and some have become largely irrelevant for this age group (such as billboards). Additionally, the definition does not fully capture the current media landscape, as women in this age group are not consuming mass media in the same way as their older counterparts did. The possible influence of social media is also notably absent. Thus, the present study seeks to address these issues by testing the influence of social media such as Facebook and Instagram.

**Tripartite Model**

Closely related to the sociocultural perspective on body image is the tripartite model, developed by Thompson and colleagues (1999). The tripartite model and the sociocultural model establish the concept that people receive cues from social agents such as their peers, family and the media to conform to normative physical ideals, which for women is thinness and for men is muscularity (Thompson et al., 1999). Like the sociocultural perspective of body image, the tripartite model posits that three influences affect body image and can lead to eating dysfunction: parents, peers, and media, but develops the theoretical model further. “This model is composed of three primary sources of influence (peers, parents, media) that are hypothesized to exert their effect on body image and eating disturbance via two primary mechanisms—appearance comparison and internalization of the thin-ideal” (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004, p. 238). Validation of this model was supported in samples of both adult and
adolescent females (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; van den Berg, Thompson, Brandon, & Coover, 2002).

A 43-item questionnaire to test the tripartite influence of peers, parents, and mass media was developed and tested by Keery and colleagues (2004) on a sample of 325 middle school girls. Factor analysis showed that these factors were distinct, and reliability analysis showed they were internally consistent, with high alpha values for peers (.89), parents (.88), and media (.86) (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). In the questionnaire, more specific measures relating to the three sociocultural factors—parents, peers, media—were tested. For example, peer and parental influence included measures for teasing, modeling of dieting/body image concerns, and thinness investment (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). Mass media influence included measures for a girl’s level of interest in TV shows and magazines featuring topics like dieting, fashion, and exercise, and perceived media pressure to lose weight. Mediating variables included internalization and appearance comparison. Findings showed that “internalization and appearance comparison fully mediated the relationship between parental influence and body dissatisfaction” (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004, p. 244). These two variables also partially mediate relationships between peer influence and body dissatisfaction, and between media influence and body dissatisfaction. In a study in which the tripartite model was tested with college females age 18 to 22, appearance comparison was a mediator between peer, family and media influences (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, Coover, 2002). Another study sought to build upon the previous study by testing the tripartite model among a sample of 391 middle-school girls ranging from 10 to 15 years old, the majority of whom were White
(Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Structural equation modeling revealed that the present study replicated Keery, van den Berg, and Thompson’s (2004) findings, and this study posited that peer and media influences are more salient and powerful than parental influences (Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

**Thin is In**

Historically, the thin ideal has existed as a mediated social construct in Western societies since well before the widespread popularity and accessibility of print and electronic media (Thompson et al., 1999). Notions of ideal beauty were communicated through art, literature and music. In the past, historical “figures of art were romanticized as unattainable, but today’s media blurs the boundaries between glorified fiction and reality” (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 93). Today, “popular media images have caused women to feel that they must conform to societal pressures and embody society’s ultra-thin ideal of femininity” (Pollack, 2003, p. 248). In its current state, the thin ideal still exists as an ultra-slim construct, a body type typical in high-fashion modeling.

The harmful (mostly short-term) effects of thin ideal imagery have been well documented in empirical studies (Fitzsimmons-Craft, Harnet, Koehler, Danzi, Riddell, & Bardone-Cone, 2011; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, H.D., & Posavac, S.S., 2004). In experiments, exposure to thin ideal imagery can produce feelings of state anxiety (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, H.D., & Posavac, S.S., 2004), as well as increase body dissatisfaction (Rodin et al., 1985) and lower self-esteem levels in female subjects (Irving, 1990). Indeed, these studies are susceptible to laboratory effect, so any effects are short-term in nature (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008), and researchers cannot assume that these feelings continue to affect participants after the experiment is over. In addition, “they [body image experiments] also include a level of artificiality that limits
their external validity” (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008, p. 461). However, individuals who most aspire to be thin are most negatively affected by images depicting the thin ideal (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004).

Thinness has been viewed as “virtuous” (Grogan, 2008) and a physical quality that women should aspire to achieve, and media have played a part in supporting this narrative over the last few decades. However, in spite of this, qualitative research with females shows that the ideal body type is not necessarily ultra-thin. Focus group discussions conducted with two groups of female university students showed that the ideal body is thin (but not too thin), and curves are an important aspect of the ideal. Participants endorsed “normal” weight, but their consensus on normal weight was somewhat distorted, as what the participants deemed “normal weight” is still considered underweight. In addition, the participants thought that the body most favored by heterosexual men was thin but curvy (Ahern, Bennett, Kelly, & Hetherington, 2011). Current standards of beauty not only necessitate thinness, but absence of fat. Indeed, the majority of women exposed to images of ideal thinness will not develop eating disorders, but pressures to conform may be internalized by women who are taught through socialization processes that fat is unattractive (Goodman, 2002).

Not only is thinness endorsed by the fashion and entertainment industries, it is also associated with personality qualities such as self-discipline, strength, beauty, and success (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Studies have found that a woman’s weight could greatly impact her earnings. In a study by Judge & Cable (2010), regression models were used to determine the relationship between income and weight, and results
showed that women at average weight are penalized through decreased salary when compared to a woman whose weight is below average (Judge & Cable, 2010).

Internalization of mediated and modeled ideals refers to the level of psychological “buy in” of a particular standard of what is considered socially acceptable and desirable (Kray et al., 2008; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Females are keenly aware of mediated ideals, but sometimes feel that these images have greater power to influence others, but not them (Kray et al., 2008), suggesting the possibility of a third-person effect. However, exposure to and internalization of such standards of beauty and attractiveness starts early, as body image concerns and internalization among young girls in Western society can begin as young as age three (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006).

For decades, thinness was the idealized body shape for women. From Gibson girls of the ‘20s to runway models of the ‘90s, thin was in (Mazur, 1986). However, due to society’s shifting definition of “ideal” female beauty (promoted by the media), fitness is the new focus, as opposed to thinness that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s (Grogan, 2008; Vernon, 2001). In addition to the focus on aesthetic fitness, the “ideal” female body shape also includes curves, which is a profound shift from previous years—especially the 1990s, which was the era of the ultra-thin, “heroin chic” models such as Kate Moss and Jaime King (Arnold, 1999), and later, the highly-recognizable supermodels such as Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell and Linda Evangelista (Colacello, 2008).

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the fashion industry became embroiled in controversy when media began calling out designers, advertisers and magazine
editorial staff for portraying models so thin that they appeared to be “anorexic” (Grogan, 2008, p. 130). In April 2015, France banned these “excessively thin” and often sickly-looking models from the runway (Picy, 2015). In addition to the ban on ultra-thin models, photographs that have been altered or retouched for commercial purposes must bear a disclaimer stating they have been manipulated (Picy, 2015). Bans like this have also occurred in countries like Israel, Italy, and Spain (Stampler, 2015). Consequently, companies that use a model who has a BMI of 18 or below could be subject to a fine of up to 75,000 euros and up to six months of jail time (Stampler, 2015).

**Shifting Standards: From the Thin Ideal to the Fit Ideal**

Thin-ideal ideation and internalization can be conceptualized as not just a desire to be thin and lean, but also as a fear of fat. In a series of focus groups comprised of Latina and White undergraduates, the “ideal body” was not only defined as slim and toned, but lacked flab and cellulite (Goodman, 2002). Most women in the focus groups bought into the socialized ideal of normative thinness, and “most of their behaviors followed the mediated ideal. Most Anglo women and many Latina women dieted and exercised to become ‘healthier,’ but their definition of health included removing unwanted flab and toning their bodies, consistent with the dominant ideology” (Goodman, 2002, p. 722).

Another study examined motivations for women’s weight loss: to adhere to cultural norms and appear thin, or out of fear of becoming fat? (Dalley & Buunk, 2009). Female respondents completed a questionnaire that assessed how they perceive overweight and thin prototypes. The researchers also collected information about respondents’ dieting habits and their demographic data. Women categorized as frequent dieters perceived themselves as more similar to the overweight prototype,
possessed a greater dislike and fear-evoking expectancy for the prototype. A limitation of the study was their recruitment method, as the researchers found participants from a local health club. It can be assumed that these women are already predisposed to prioritize their health and fitness—a more generalizable sample comprised of women who have varying investments in their physical appearance and efforts to lose weight would make the results more representative.

Twenty years after publishing her 1991 best-selling book, *The Beauty Myth*, author Naomi Wolf sees a shift in cultural norms about the ideal body, weight, and what is considered conventionally beautiful: “There is also a new skepticism among women of all ages about the role of the old gatekeepers of the beauty myth” (Wolf, 2011). As cultural norms move from the thin ideal to strength and fitness, “the rhetoric today is focused on being as healthy as possible, whatever one’s size, rather than attaining an artificially low body weight” (Wolf, 2011). Despite these steps toward improvement, the thin ideal is still extremely salient. For example, in 2007, celebrity figures such as Mary-Kate and Ashley Olson and Paris Hilton dominated media headlines and were featured in entertainment media content, often looking very thin (Tauber & Smolowe, 2004). A goal of this study is to examine how salient thinness and fitness are among current college-age women (and to what degree they’ve internalized these norms) when looking at the social media content of their peers. Not only is fat portrayed as unfavorable, but women also have a “fear of fat” that may drive them to engage in extreme diets, exercise regimes and disordered eating patterns (Woud, Anschutz, Van Strien, & Becker, 2011). Previous research has shown athletic internalization to be less harmful
than thin-ideal internalization, predicting change in compulsive exercise, but not in body dissatisfaction or dieting (Homan, 2010).

The cultural emphasis on feminine thinness and fitness help support lucrative industries built around diet foods, exercise equipment, cosmetic procedures and products meant to improve appearance are enduring aspects of how females are judged by others (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006; Kilbourne, 1994). As society’s definition and promotion of a corporeal ideal shifts from ultra-thin to ultra-fit, these same pressures may drive women to change their appearance through exercise, extreme sports, and dieting.

Research suggests that for this age group, appearing fit is more important and desirable than actual athletic ability—i.e., the aesthetic aspect of the fit ideal trumps the performance aspect. There are scores of blog posts and online articles that discuss this debate in detail—for example, personal trainers blog about how “looking fit” is an idea “made up by the media” (Greene, 2014).

The media has [sic: have] done such a good job of perpetuating how someone should look, to be considered in shape and fit. Unfortunately what the media fails [sic: fail] to mention is the hours of sacrifice and hard work that those people have put in to look that certain way. From the hardcore diet regimes, exercising religiously and having their lives centered around achieving that look. It isn’t always healthy, a lot of those people are dehydrated, have zero carbohydrates in their bodies and are fairly weak when those pictures are taken. People don’t ever think about those things and not to mention the now infamous use of Photoshop, makeup and other editing tools to make people look even better. Once again some people can have that look and be very healthy individuals overall, there are always extremes.

It is this “aesthetic fitness,” perhaps fueled in part by media influences and social media “fitness” celebrities, which college-age women strive to attain. A study by Wright and colleagues (2006) investigated how young people make sense of the public health
discourse centered on fitness, health, and the body. For males, health and fitness signified the ability to do strenuous physical work. For women, the concept of health was more layered—it was associated with eating and exercise habits that support an “appropriate” looking body (Wright, O’Flynn, & Macdonald, 2006, p. 707). Focus group interviews with two separate groups, female athletes and women who exercise, showed that most of the women expressed their desire for an “unrealistic ideal body,” one that was toned with very little body fat (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001). For females who exercised, they focused on being toned, but would avoid certain types of physical activity so they wouldn’t become too muscular, which they associated with looking more masculine. For the female athletes, how they viewed their bodies depended largely on the context—i.e., there was a tension between ability as an athlete or appearing feminine (Krane et al., 2001).

A study by Homan and colleagues (2012) examined the effect of viewing images of very fit women on a sample of college women. They found that the body shape that caused the most dissatisfaction was a female body that was not only normatively thin, but also fit. Viewing an image of a woman of normal weight, but who was fit, did not produce levels of dissatisfaction as high as viewing the ultra-fit, ultra-thin image (Homan et al., 2012). This suggests that the most threatening body shape takes the thin ideal that historically dominated runways and advertisements for decades, and combines it with the “new athleticism” featuring toned bodies with a little bit of (but not too much) muscle definition (Santas, 2015).

Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) conducted an experiment in which they exposed undergraduate women to either a set of Instagram photos of fitspiration, or a
control set of images of travel. Though the women who received the condition with the fitspiration images did report higher levels of body dissatisfaction, they also cited these images as motivational, as in the images motivated them to eat healthier and engage in physical exercise. But despite the photos being interpreted as motivational in nature, Tiggemann and Zaccardo believe the overall takeaway from their study was negative. They believe that social media provide more opportunities (and more easily accessible opportunities) to engage in social comparisons with peers, a view shared by Perloff (2014a). Social comparison theory says that comparisons with people we perceive to be “on the same level” as us, or with whom we share similar attributes, are more salient comparison targets (Festinger, 1954). Indeed, women in my focus groups agreed—they felt worse about themselves and their bodies when engaging in upward social comparisons with peers they felt they were on par with.

The aforementioned survey conducted by Glamour in 2014 supports this assertion. When women age 18-40 were shown an image of a celebrity in a bikini in which her face/head was not visible and told it was an average woman, they felt worse about themselves. In other words, when women know they’re looking at a celebrity, they may still engage in upward comparisons, but cognitively, knowing it’s not realistic or attainable for them may comfort them when engaging in such comparisons. Women in my focus group mentioned this, too. They know celebrities have “glam squads,” teams of stylists, hair dressers and makeup artists, trainers, nutritionists, nannies and other assistance to help them look their best or to give them more time to tend to their appearance. On the flip side, if it was a neighbor, classmate, sorority sister, friend or even a random stranger, they said they’d feel worse about themselves because they
A Feminist View of Female Body Image

Body image problems plague females because women are socialized from a young age to believe that thin is virtuous (Grogan, 2008), and fat is “abhorrent” (Richardson, 2010, p. 75). Feminist scholar Susan Bordo refers to this socialization process as the “tyranny of slenderness,” which is “far from gender-neutral,” as 90 percent of those with an eating disorder are women between the ages of 12 and 25 (Bordo, 2003, p. 154). Many of these women take to social media platforms, particularly microblogging sites such as Twitter and Tumblr to chronicle their experiences (Karimipour, 2014; 2015).

In addition, Bordo discussed the American cultural obsession with normative thinness as a “fixation of our bodies as arenas of control” (2003, p. 141). In general, feminist theory is an appropriate lens through which to examine body image issues because it recognizes the “cultural values that place slenderness on the highest pedestal of female accomplishment” (Krusky, 2002). Feminist theory also takes into account the societal and cultural pressure on females to adhere to a normative standard of beauty that involves a body that is not only slim, but also lacks body fat (Bordo, 2003; Levitt, 2011; Shapiro, Newcomb, & Loeb, 2010). Salience of the thin ideal represents a
“dominant ritual of hegemonic femininity” in a society in which the “‘ideal’ American female citizen is defined in terms of white, heterosexual or subordinate femininity” (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006, p. 257). Concepts of hegemonic femininity inform body image by providing clear messages and role models for adhering to appearance-based, socially acceptable norms (Leavy, Gnong, & Ross, 2009); for example, wearing makeup (Dellinger & Williams, 1997), and having long hair (Koppelman, 1996).

Body image problems and cultural norms impact all groups—even groups historically thought of as “protected by their alternative cultural values,” such as African American women, lesbians, and Latinas (Bergerson & Senn, 1998; Bordo, 2003, xix). Body image problems are not limited to what Bordo refers to as the “anorexic paradigm,” which is a narrowly defined view of body image problems—categorized as pathological, a “social problem,” or framed as a white, upper-middle class concern (Bordo, 2013, p. 268).

Some research has shown that feminist beliefs may function as protective element against negative body image (Peterson, Tantleff-Dunn, & Bedwell, 2006; Myers & Crowther, 2007; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tovée, 2007). One study exposed 297 college-aged female participants to a feminist or psychoeducational intervention, and included a control group. Ultimately, 160 participants completed both parts of the study, and the majority described themselves as European American, followed by African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and other. Participants were asked whether they considered themselves a feminist (indicated by yes or no), and level of feminism was measured on a five-point Likert scale. The second phase of the study involved
participants listening to a 15-minute audiotape of a feminism-focused body image intervention, sociocultural/psychoeducational intervention, or no exposure. After statistical tests were conducted, results indicated that participants exposed to the feminist intervention were more likely to self-identify as feminists after listening to the 15-minute audiotape, in addition to increasing the participant’s satisfaction with her physical appearance (Peterson, Tantleff-Dunn, & Bedwell, 2006).

In another study involving 250 college-aged females, researchers used scores on various scales and questionnaires including the Family and Friends Scale, Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire, and Feminist Perspectives Scale. Using regression analysis and structural equation modeling, they found that higher levels of feminist beliefs might serve as a protective factor against negative body image (Myers & Crowther, 2007). However, some studies have found feminist self-identification to have minimal effect on body image, but holding traditional views and values about gender norms and relationships has been linked with greater internalization of the beauty ideal (Cash et al., 1997; Swami et al., 2007).

Related to unrealistic standards of attractiveness, the beauty myth is the notion that young girls and women are expected to embody societally accepted norms of beauty, in which thinness plays an essential role. The beauty myth can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century (Stephens, Hill, & Hanson, 1994), but expectations associated with the beauty myth persist in today’s society. As such, internalization of societal expectations and norms can cause females to place extreme value on appearance, and at a young age, “a girl learns that a main function of her body is to attract others” (Stephens, Hill, & Hanson, 1994, p. 144).
Social Media Use among Young Women

According to the Pew Research Center, Facebook remains by far the most popular social media platform (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2014). Although its overall growth has slowed, users remain actively engaged and 70% log in to the site on a daily basis, with 45% of users logging in multiple times in one day (Duggan et al., 2014). Approximately 58% of the entire adult population has a Facebook account (Duggan et al., 2014). Seventy-seven percent of all Internet users that use Facebook are women, and they are more likely to use the site when compared to men (Duggan et al., 2014). Facebook shows no signs of slowing down as a historic “milestone” was reached in late August 2015 (Lee, 2015). Facebook gained its billionth user in October 2012 and has about 1.5 billion users who log in at least once per month (Lee, 2015). But on Monday, August 24, 2015, company founder Mark Zuckerberg reported the site had one billion users log on in a single day (Lee, 2015). Put another way, “1 in 7 people on Earth used Facebook to connect with their friends and family,” he wrote in a public post on his Facebook page (Weise, 2015).

Facebook may be the most popular social media, but other platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter and Snapchat continue to attract more users as well. In the 2014 Pew Research report, 53% of young adults who use the Internet use Instagram, and half of all Instagram users use the site on a daily basis (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2014). Instagram is a photo-sharing social media platform that allows users to crop, filter, edit, upload and share their photos with their friends and followers. Founders Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom launched Instagram in 2010 (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2011). After a year and a half, Instagram had 30 million iPhone users—and just 18 months later, in spring 2012, Facebook purchased Instagram for $1
billion (Swisher, 2013). Less than one month before the fifth anniversary of its launch, Instagram hit 400 million users in September 2015 (Laurent, 2015), putting it ahead of Twitter in number of users (Chaykowski, 2015).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, females comprise a sizable portion of Pinterest users with 42% of online women on the site, as compared to 13% of online men (Duggan et al., 2014). According to its website, Pinterest is “a visual bookmarking tool that helps you discover and save creative ideas” (Pinterest, 2015). The site launched in 2010 and registered more than 7 million unique users in December 2012 (Falls, 2012). Women use the social media platform to share all things lifestyle-related, such as recipes, workout routines, decorating tips, “do it yourself” ideas, wedding, baby nursery and party planning, to name a few (Chocano, 2012). Since Pinterest is a multi-purpose social media platform not exclusively focused on promoting aspects of the user’s personality, appearance and daily life, it is being excluded from the current study.

In terms of users, Twitter tends to skew younger and more educated (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013). Of all online adults, 23% are on Twitter, a statistically significant increase from 18% in 2013 (Duggan et al., 2014). Forty-five percent of Twitter news consumers are between the ages of 18 and 29, and about 40% of Twitter news consumers have at least a bachelor’s degree (Duggan et al., 2014). Because of Twitter’s reputation as a professional social media platform, or one in which people engage in conversations about brands, services, celebrities, conferences and other professional events, it was excluded from the present study (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Himelboim, 2014).

In addition to being the most connected generation, Millennials in the United States are the most mobile generation, using smartphones—particularly iPhones—to
connect with friends, brands, and news content (comScore, 2015). Furthermore, they have the highest smartphone penetration, ranking at about 90%, and mobile handily outpaces desktop use in this demographic at 88.6% (comScore, 2015). Given this demographic’s preference for digital communication, particularly on social media platforms, popular visually-oriented social media Facebook and Instagram were chosen for inclusion in the present study.

**Social Media Effects on Female Body Image**

In order to advance the emerging area of social media and body image, Perloff (2014a) proposed a transactional model in which he outlines possible variables, mediators and moderators that can be used to empirically test body image concerns. Variables include individual vulnerability factors such as low self-esteem, depression, internalization of the thin ideal, equating appearance with self-worth, and perfectionism (Perloff, 2014a). Another important aspect of the model is rooted in the uses and gratifications approach, and includes gratifications obtained by media. Perloff identifies specific social media platforms of interest in his model including mainstream SNS such as Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, as well as niche sites such as thinspiration blogs and pro-eating disorder websites. He proposed “mediating processes” like “social comparisons, transportation, identification, and online normative influences” (Perloff, 2014a, p. 368). He hypothesized that social media effects may have one of two possible outcomes: greater body dissatisfaction and negative affect. Finally, in the most extreme form, the model cites eating disorders as a possible outcome of the combination of these variables (Perloff, 2014a).

Some studies have examined the relationship between female body image and specific social media platforms—most commonly, Facebook. Research by Mabe and
colleagues (2014) used experimental design to examine the relationship between Facebook use and disordered eating in two studies, with state anxiety measured before and after Internet use. In the first study, 960 women took surveys about their Facebook use. In study two, 84 women were put into two groups: one group logged onto their Facebook accounts for 20 minutes and the control group researched an unrelated topic on Wikipedia. Findings revealed female participants with the most disordered eating spent the most time on Facebook. Additionally, using Facebook was associated with greater weight/shape concerns and state anxiety (Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014). Another study indicated that 13 to 15-year-old girls who spent more time online (engaging in social networking on sites like MySpace and Facebook) had greater internalization of the thin ideal, drive for thinness, and body surveillance (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Of the 1,087 girls surveyed, 75% had Facebook profiles and spent an average of 1.5 hours on Facebook per day (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

One study examined body image and Facebook activity among adolescent girls ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old in the United States (Meier & Gray, 2013). The purpose of the study was to determine the specific Facebook features (such as commenting, Liking, posting a status update) that are associated with body image disturbances in young girls. The researchers measured internalization of the thin ideal (Sociocultural Internalization of Appearance Questionnaire for Adolescents), appearance comparison (Physical Appearance Comparison Scale), Weight satisfaction subscale (Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults), drive for thinness (Eating Disorder Inventory), and self-objectification (Self-Objectification Questionnaire). Participants were also asked about their total Internet and Facebook use, and their
Facebook appearance-related exposure was assessed by how often they use each Facebook feature, such as creating an event, a photo album, posting a photo, posting a link to a friend’s wall, untagging a photo, and more. Results indicated that Facebook appearance exposure was positively correlated with internalization of thin ideal, self-objectification, as well as drive for thinness, but negatively correlated with weight satisfaction (Meier & Gray, 2014). However, no relationship was found for total Facebook use—or total Internet use—and physical appearance comparison. Overall, according to this study, the amount of time spent on Facebook or the Internet is not as important as time spent on photo-related Facebook activity that influences female adolescent body image.

**Mass Media Use among Young Adults**

Although social media seems to be the medium of choice for young adults, it is important to understand how consumption of mass media have shifted over time—namely, magazine readership and television viewing has declined among teenagers and young adults (Perloff, 2014a). For Millennials, the cost of magazines may also be a barrier that keeps them from consuming this media form (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Traditionally, magazines have attracted an elite, affluent readership with disposable income (Matsa, Sasseen, & Mitchell, 2012). Furthermore, consumer subscriptions and circulation rates have been on the decline in the last few years, especially from 2009 to 2011 (Matsa, Sasseen, & Mitchell, 2012). This drop has continued, as sales at the newsstand dropped 12% in the first half of 2014, as subscription rates dropped nearly 2% (Stynes, 2014).

Americans age 12 to 34 still watch television, but the lines are becoming increasingly blurred as the number of individuals who watch live TV declines
(Luckerson, 2014). In fact, about 2.6 million U.S. households have done away with traditional TV and are “broadband only,” which means they do not have a cable subscription or pick up a broadcast signal, according to Nielsen (Luckerson, 2014). TV’s replacement is streaming services such as Netflix, HBO Go, Hulu, and Amazon Instant Video—and 40% of U.S. households subscribe to one or more of the aforementioned video streaming services (Luckerson, 2014). The cable TV industry lost more than 2.2 million customers in 2014, and viewers age 18 and older increased digital video consumption by more than half per day (Ramachandran, 2014). More than ever, people “are engaged in time-shifted television viewing, or watch shows on iPads or mobile devices” (Perloff, 2014a; Stelter, 2012). Accessibility of digital devices, prevalence of wireless Internet connections, and overall ease of mobile communication—paired with an “on the go” lifestyle, especially for Millennials—has at best, changed consumption patterns and at worst, rendered some traditional mass media consumption habits (like watching live TV) outdated.

**Mass Media Effects on Female Body Image**

A breadth of research on the topic of mass media and the proposed effects on female body image has been conducted in the last two decades, focusing on magazines, advertisements, television, and music videos. Mass media messages are designed for and reach a “very large, very heterogeneous, and very anonymous audience” (Harris, 1994). As fashion models, actresses, performers, cartoon characters, pageant contestants and *Playboy* centerfold models become progressively thinner over time, theories of repeated exposure—such as cultivation and social learning theories—posit that these images will affect female viewers and communicate the feminine ideal through their normative and ubiquitous representations (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, &
In terms of print content, researchers found that magazine reading among college women was strongly related to variables like body dissatisfaction and disordered-eating symptomology (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). In another study involving magazines, 15-year-old female participants associated print media with greater body dissatisfaction (Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). Various content analyses have shown that magazines targeted to females (whether girls or women) feature a limited, mostly homogenous ideal: white and thin (Levine & Smolak, 1996). In addition, many magazines feature appearance-refining advertisements for diet-related products (Andersen & DiDomenico, 1992), which is becoming increasingly important in the United States as obesity rates continue to rise (Paquette & Raine, 2004). As magazine subscription rates drop and social media continues to grow in popularity, readers are seeking out magazine consumption on alternative platforms such as smartphones and tablets (Matsa, Saseen, & Mitchell, 2012).

Advertisements have also been studied for their effect on women’s body image. In one study, undergraduate women were exposed to advertisements featuring thin
women or without thin women. Those exposed to the thin ideal ad reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction, negative affect, as well as higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem (Bessenoff, 2006). Additionally, women with higher levels of body image-related self-discrepancy (a discrepancy between their actual body image and their ideal body image) were more likely to engage in social comparisons with the thin models—and feel badly about their bodies as a result of this comparison process (Bessenoff, 2006).

A meta-analysis of 25 experimental studies testing main effect of mass media images of ultra-thin women revealed that the thin ideal significantly affected women’s body image in a laboratory setting (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). “Body image was significantly more negative after viewing thin media images than after viewing images of either average size models, plus size models, or inanimate objects. This effect was stronger for between-subjects designs, participants less than 19 years of age, and for participants who are vulnerable to activation of a thinness schema,” which supports the sociocultural perspective that thinness prompts feelings of body dissatisfaction in females (Groes, Levine, & Murnen, 2002, p. 1).

To assess the influence of the fit ideal, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) measured the effect of fitspiration imagery on a sample of undergraduate females. Fitspiration is defined as “an online trend designed to inspire viewers towards a healthier lifestyle by promoting exercise and healthy food” (p. 61). Participants were given iPads and either viewed fitspiration images or a control group of travel images. Participants viewing fitspiration photos reported greater body dissatisfaction, negative mood, and decreased state appearance self-esteem. Overall, the study's “results offer
support to general sociocultural models of media effects on body image, and extend these to ‘new’ media” (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2005, p. 61).

In visual mass media such as television, the importance of appearance is highly emphasized, and messages about which bodies are considered attractive and ideal—in addition to advertisements about weight loss—are widespread. On television, 30% of the characters were underweight, whereas only 5% of women in the United States are considered underweight (Levine & Smolak, 1996). In fact, about half of the women in the United States are classified as overweight or obese, but only 13% of female characters portrayed on television are overweight or obese (Levine & Harrison, 2009). In addition to disseminating messages about ideals, television may also provide opportunity for social comparisons (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000) and behavior modeling (Botta, 1999). In a study with college women conducted in 1997, survey methodology was used to assess their TV viewership of popular “thinness depicting shows” such as Beverly Hills 90210, and Melrose Place, but contrary to what the researchers hypothesized, results showed that women who viewed these thinness depicting shows did not score higher on measures for disordered eating symptomology (Harrison & Cantor, 1997, p. 60).

Music videos have also been studied for their effect on women’s body image. Content analyses have shown that many videos emphasize physical appearance, as well as featuring thin, attractive and sometimes sexualized women (Sommers-Flanagan, R., Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Davis, 1993; Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). An experimental exposure study by Bell, Lawton, and Dittmar (2007) was the first of its kind, designed to assess the impact of thin models featured in music videos on 16 to
19-year-old female participants. Participants completed measures for positive and negative affect, body image, and self-esteem prior to being exposed to one of three experimental conditions: watch three music videos, listened to three songs (the same songs from the music videos), or learned a list of words (Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007). Affect and body image were assessed following exposure, and females who watched the videos self-reported significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction afterward. Another experimental study by Tiggemann and Slater (2003) examined the impact of music videos featuring thin, idealized women on 84 Australian women age 18 to 30. State mood and body dissatisfaction were assessed before and after viewing the music video featuring the thin and attractive women. Results showed that seeing these idealized, attractive women raised participants’ body level of dissatisfaction after “watching only six such video clips over 15 minutes, far less than the number contained in any single music video television program” (Tiggemann and Slater, 2003, p. 56). Social comparison processes were found to be a mediator to the negative effect of watching the videos.

**Impression Management and Online Self-Presentation**

In the broadest sense, people are universally concerned with how they are perceived and viewed by others in social situations (Goffman, 1959). A person’s goal-directed attempts at influencing, controlling or regulating these impressions and opinions is called impression management (Schenkler & Weigold, 1992). “Other people’s perceptions of us play an important role in our lives; they impact on our interactions, shaping the rewards we receive” (Chester & Bretherton, 2007, p. 223). Most people want others to view them positively, and this behavior is both automatic and ongoing, as “people edit information about themselves in everyday life to provide
the ‘best’ descriptions possible . . . the process is always going on, but its character may change depending on the actor’s goals and the circumstances” (Schenkler & Weigold, 1992, p. 137). This act of self-editing and presentation is crucial because our sense of self-worth and level of social validation can be influenced by how we are perceived by others (Crocker & Park, 2004). Impression management and self-presentation are two closely intertwined concepts, and many researchers have used impression management and self-presentation interchangeably in their research (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

In addition to being concerned with self-presentation in everyday social situations, people are also very concerned with how they present themselves online (Attrill, 2015; Chester & Bretherton, 2007). The aforementioned concept of self-editing can be useful in understanding how people use social media as an aid in their self-presentation, as the way people package social information is also a crucial aspect of impression management. A Pew study conducted with teens found that “pruning and revising profile content is an important part of teens’ online identity management” (Madden et al., 2013). It is this creation and packaging of these “strategic profiles” on social media sites that “influence how others perceive them” (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

In a seminal study about online impression management, Mnookin (1996) found that people are free to represent themselves any way they choose online, and these representations “need not correspond to a person’s real life identity; people can make and remake themselves, choosing their gender and the details of their online presentation” (1996, p. 223). Indeed, our social media accounts can give a myriad of
clues about our identity, including our gender, education level, employment status, social status, fashion taste, hobbies, relationships, health and fitness level, and physical appearance.

For example, the increased popularity of dating websites allows people to control what they show to others when they are free to create their own unique screen name, upload photos of their choosing, write their own bios, and control their level of disclosure to others they “meet” online (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). In fact, in a qualitative study of 34 dating site users, these individuals sought to present their “ideal self” in their profiles (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006, p. 415). Attention to presenting the “ideal self” transcends dating websites—it is also a common practice on social media platforms in which contacts, connections, friends, and followers provide users with an “imagined audience to guide behavioral norms” (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 220).

In terms of actual presentation, there are two kinds: acquisitive and protective self-presentation (Arkin, 1981). The primary goal associated with acquisitive self-presentation is to gain social approval from others (Attrill, 2015). This type of self-presentation style prioritizes avoiding disapproval above all else, and individuals engaging in protective self-presentation want to preserve social approval from others (Tedeschi, 1981). As part of this process, “presenters emphasize attractive aspects of themselves and construct desirable images” (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). For example, when a social media user actively chooses what kinds of photos of herself to upload to her Facebook or Instagram account, and she edits blemishes or whitens her teeth in the photos using a retouching app, she is engaging in acquisitive self-presentation. On the other hand, people may perform another type of self-presentation—protective self-
presentation—when the goal is to do “mitigate” or perform damage control when information about them is provided or shared by others online (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). For example, a user is performing protective self-presentation when she untags an unflattering photo of her posted by a friend.

These presentation styles relate to representations of the self on social media sites in a multitude of ways: people will avoid posting photos of themselves in which they could receive negative backlash or disapproval, they may go to great lengths to portray themselves as more adventurous, outgoing, attractive, financially secure or educated than they really are (Attrill, 2015). These somewhat misleading representations are examples of self-discrepancy, and the ease by which social media allows the user to blur the lines between the ideal self versus the actual self. By carefully curating and choosing which photos she uploads to her Instagram account, for example, a female user can skillfully control what content is associated with her personal image. If she wants to only upload photos in which she appears “made up,” thin, and happy, it’s free (as most social media users don’t have to pay to use these sites), easy, and doesn’t require any interpersonal interaction on her part. In other words, through these mechanisms, she is in total control of her “personal brand” (Marwick, 2010).

Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) created a dual-factor model to explain Facebook use. Motivations for using Facebook are twofold: to fulfill needs for belonging and self-presentation (Seidman, 2012). According to their dual-factor model, need to belong is defined by “the intrinsic drive to affiliate with others and gain social acceptance,” whereas the need for self-presentation refers to “the continuous process of impression
management” (p. 245). The researchers examined existing literature to ascertain how specific personality traits, such as narcissism, neuroticism, extraversion and introversion, shyness, self-esteem and self-worth influence self-presentation on Facebook, as these traits can influence Facebook use. For example, a study found evidence for a correlation linking scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventor-16 (NPI-16) and Facebook activity among an undergraduate population of Facebook users (Buffardi & Campbell, 2010). In this study, users’ profiles and photos showed evidence of self-promotion. In another study, scores on the NPI-16 and the Rosenberg self-esteem scale were administered to undergraduate Facebook users, and their aspects of their profiles were rated, such as their photos, “about me” section, and status updates (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Two groups—people with high levels of narcissism, and people with low self-esteem—were more likely to spend more than an hour per day on the site, in addition to being more likely to post photos that promote themselves and have also been enhanced in some way using Photoshop, a photo editing software (Mehdizadeh, 2010).

In addition to personality traits, societal forces and sociodemographic variables can also affect a person’s Facebook use—for example, based on reviewing past studies, the researchers hypothesized that “members of collectivistic societies show a greater need to belong, whereas people from individualistic cultures display a greater need for self-presentation” (p. 247), operating with the notion that people in Western societies have more autonomy over their individual identities and impression management-related behaviors. A comparative study of college-age Facebook users in
the United States and in South Korea showed that U.S. users engaged in positive self-presentation more so than South Korean users (Lee-Won, Shim, Joo, & Park, 2014).

To further uncover the role that cultural differences play in social media use, Sheldon, Abad, and Hirsch (2011) conducted multiple studies on the topic of Facebook use and social connection using self-determination theory, which posits that humans are motivated by three basic psychological needs. These include the need to feel autonomous, competent, and related, which means feeling close to their social connections (Sheldon, Abad, & Hirsch, 2011). They found seemingly contradictory results: that the frequency of Facebook use was positively correlated with feeling “related” or connected with others, but frequency of Facebook use was also related to feeling disconnected. Thus, general disconnection seems to serve as a motivator for Facebook use, and being “related” seems to reward this use (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

Social media users who actively manage, control and regulate their online self possess a great deal of autonomy and freedom to portray themselves however they choose. However, an issue that is not frequently discussed is the process involved in crafting the idealized self. Popular press articles like one featured in The Atlantic discuss the amount of effort and energy women devote to self-presentation—and the number of articles like these has increased in recent years (Seligson, 2015). A year-long study conducted at Duke University in 2003 exposed just how many social pressures and expectations affect women on campus—what the undergraduate women called appearing “effortlessly perfect” (Rimer, 2003). “They feel they have to wear certain fashionable clothes and shoes, diet and exercise excessively, and hide their
intelligence in order to be considered attractive and successful by their male peers” (Rimer, 2003). According to the study, these expectations for women transcend Duke’s campus and affect students enrolled at colleges across the United States.

In sum, online self-presentation is an inherent aspect of modern social connectivity, especially in online social networks. People engage in impression management on their social media accounts, and may choose to present themselves in different ways, depending on the situation. Individual differences and personality traits, as well as cultural demographics, may play unique roles in how people choose to portray themselves to other people online. However, most individuals engage in positive self-presentation in order to maximize value of their “personal brand” (Marwick, 2010).

**Social Media Profile Curation**

Females in this age group frequently use social media to disseminate messages about how they look physically, and are keenly aware of their physical appearance in the photos they upload to their social media accounts. In this way, they are in total control of their online persona and engage in careful profile curation to showcase only the best photos on their social media profiles. In fact, some bloggers have referred to social media as “life’s highlight reel” (Dentith, 2015; King, 2012; Tubb, 2015). For the purposes of this study, profile curation refers to the conscious process of collecting, selecting, editing and promoting social media content posted online in a manner that maximizes physical attractiveness of the person posting the content. For example, in the focus groups, women expressed concern and even distress about the photos they would post online, some even painstakingly curating the photos—taking 50 or more photos before going out to a social event in order to find one that is suitable to post online, using filters and other editing apps to retouch or otherwise perfect their photos,
and engaging in activities or social situations just “for the photo.” By carefully curating the content they post on their social media accounts, women feel like they can gain social acceptance and secure social capital in the form of admiration from their online followers.

The concept of curation as applied to social media content is not new, however. Marketing companies curate content that is targeted at a specific demographic or consumer market, and post it to social media platforms (Gunelius, 2012). Bloggers curate content they find inspirational or artistic (Chocano, 2012). But “average” social media users curate, too: “everyone is busy curating a perfected online image,” and put a great deal of time and energy in to “managing a digital version of themselves” (Colao, 2012). However, beyond its use in popular culture writing and business news stories, the concept of curation has not been introduced into the academic and theoretical lexicons.

Despite its absence from formalized academic research, young adults are engaging in curation-related behaviors online and on their social media accounts. In a Pew study examining teens and technology use from August 2015, researchers found that 40% of teen social media users age 13 to 17 admit to “feeling pressure to post only content that makes them look good to others” (Lenhart, 2015). In addition, they feel pressure to post content that will generate comments, “Likes,” or will otherwise be popular among their peers on social media (Lenhart, 2015). Finally, 21% of teen social media users report feeling more negatively about their own life as a result of looking at friends' social media content (Lenhart, 2015). In general, teens and younger adults tend
to be more invested in how they appear to friends and followers on their social media accounts.

In terms of physical self-presentation and curation, a U.K. study by quantitative research company OnePoll on behalf of FeelUnique.com, a beauty commerce website, polled 2,000 women 16 to 25 years old and found that women in this age group spend five-and-a-half hours per week taking selfies. They snap seven photos on average before finding one suitable to post online (Strick, 2015). In fact, women in this age group have about 150 selfies on their cell phone (Matyszczyzk, 2015).

For 41% of women polled, looking at photos on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter made them feel bad about themselves, and 67% felt that they needed to look good on social media (Strick, 2015). These pressures have been well documented in popular press: “Modern life is very often a tale of two selves. There's the real-life version of you, the one who wakes, dresses, needs coffee, and prepares your actual face to meet the faces that you meet on the overly crowded train, in the office, at drinks, etc.; and then there’s the digital you, the two-dimensional self that runs alongside you, often behind flattering filters, or good lighting, in some sort of perennial victory lap of life” (Macnicol, 2014).

In November 2015, then 18-year-old Australian Instagram “celebrity” Essena O’Neill made headlines with her decision to quit social media. O’Neill, who had half a million followers, decided to delete 2,000 photos, rename her account “Social media is not real life,” and edited Instagram photo captions to reflect the truth behind what it took to get such perfect shots (Rudolfo, 2015). For example, she edited a photo of herself posing in a bikini on the beach with the caption: “NOT REAL LIFE – took over 100
[photos] in similar poses trying to make my stomach look good. Would have hardly eaten that day. Would have yelled at my little sister to keep taking them until I was somewhat proud of this” (Rudolfo, 2015). She also exposed the reality behind paid promotions, revealing that she was paid $400 just to wear a dress in a photo posted on her Instagram (Rudolfo, 2015). In her last Instagram post on October 27, 2015, O'Neill reveals, “I've spent the majority of my teenage life being addicted to social media, social approval, social status, and my physical appearance. [Social media] is contrived images and edited clips ranked against each other. It's a system based on social approval, likes, validation, in views, success in followers. it's [sic] perfectly orchestrated self-absorbed judgement [sic]” (Rudolfo, 2015). She has since set her Instagram account settings to private, so her photos are not publicly accessible, and screenshots of her Instagram posts included in popular press articles about her departure from social media stardom have been removed.

“Likes” as Social Validation

Many women engage in careful and calculated online impression management and profile curation in order to secure and maximize social media actions from followers, such as Facebook “Likes” and Instagram favorites. Indeed, the women in the focus groups discussed the importance of receiving “Likes” and favorites on their photos and would often go to extremes to save face online and ensure social approval. An article on Elle.com captured the curious phenomenon of receiving “Likes” online (Daly, 2014). It’s what clinical psychologist Dr. Robert Leahy calls the “validation effect,” which he feels is “slowly seeping into millennials' collective subconscious” (Daly, 2014).

Focus group participants discussed how they felt affected by getting (or not getting) “Likes” on social media, which they view as a form of social validation or an
“ego boost,” and even discussed people they know who pay for social media followers. For these women, it’s not just important to get “Likes”—the number certainly matters, but other issues must be taken into consideration. Focus group participants discussed the “‘Likes’ to follower ratio.” If a person on social media posts a photo that has 350 “Likes,” but they have 3,000 followers, it’s perhaps not as impressive or important as someone that only has 100 friends but 86 “Likes,” for example. A Pew study with teens found that “‘Likes specifically seem like to be a strong proxy for social status, such that teen Facebook users will manipulate their profile and timeline content in order to garner the maximum number of ‘likes,’ and remove photos with too few ‘likes’” (Madden et al., 2013).

Adhering to these seemingly trite “rules” is not the experience of an extreme individual in an isolated, rare situation—many young people are aware of and pay close attention to these social media “rules.” In fact, quite a few articles discussing this topic appear in popular press and women’s magazines, such as an article on Vogue.com about “what makes an Instagram-worthy picture.” The writer cites rules such as “never post more than three pictures a day,” never use more than four hashtags in a photo, and almost always use a filter (Bloomingdale, 2015). But perhaps the most important aspect of social media presence is the number of “Likes” garnered by a well-planned photo: “If your picture doesn’t get more than eleven ‘Likes,’ you need to take it down because it sucks. Note: This applies to users with 100 followers or more. If you are new and have fewer than 100 followers, hurry up and get cooler” (Bloomingdale, 2015). This sardonic, tongue-in-cheek article uses sarcasm to make a point about what is socially acceptable and what are considered social media faux-pas, but based on discussions in
the focus groups, many women do adhere to these “rules” and take them into account when uploading content and crafting their online personas.

**Research Questions**

**RQ1:** What is the relationship between the base body satisfaction measure and perceived

- lean/thinness internalization?
- toned/fitness internalization?
- endorsement of little body fat?
- sociocultural norm internalization?
- cues from family?
- cues from peers?
- cues from mass media?
- cues from Facebook?
- cues from Instagram?

**RQ2:** From which sources do respondents get their strongest cues about physical appearance: family, peers, mass media, or social media?

**RQ3:** What is the relationship among body satisfaction score and engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation behaviors on social media?

**RQ4:** What is the relationship among

- social media use (time spent using Facebook and Instagram, frequency of checking Facebook and Instagram for notifications) and perceived lean/thinness internalization?
- social media use and perceived toned/fitness internalization?

**RQ5:** Do respondents engage in profile curation and physical appearance-related impression management of their photos on social media?

**RQ6:** Is there a relationship among
• the number of fitness accounts respondents follow on Instagram and their level of perceived toned/fitness internalization?
• the number of fitness accounts respondents follow on Instagram and their level of perceived lean/thinness internalization?

RQ7: What is the relationship among
• sociocultural norm internalization and lean/thinness internalization?
• sociocultural norm internalization and toned/fitness internalization?

RQ8: What is the relationship among
• endorsing little body fat and sociocultural norm internalization?
• endorsing little body fat and toned/fitness internalization?

Hypotheses

H1: Based on insights from the focus groups and previous research, respondents get their greatest perceived cues about physical appearance from sources in the following order: social media, mass media, peers, then family.

H2: Respondents with a higher level of body satisfaction will report less concern with engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation behaviors on social media.

H3: Respondents who report using Facebook and Instagram multiple times per day, and check for notifications frequently, will report higher levels of perceived thinness internalization.

• Respondents who report using Facebook and Instagram multiple times per day, and check for notifications frequently, will report higher levels of perceived toned/fitness internalization.
**H4:** Respondents will report engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation of their photos on social media, based on insights gained from focus group sessions.

**H5:** Respondents who report following more fitness accounts on Instagram will exhibit a higher level of perceived fitness internalization.
CHAPTER 3
METHOD

Focus Groups

This study employed mixed method aspects to explore the phenomenon at hand from multiple perspectives. First, a series of four semi-structured focus groups were conducted with college-age females enrolled at a large university. Since the area of social media and female body image is still developing, a qualitative approach was used. Since the purpose of the study was largely exploratory and not explanatory (Creswell, 1994), a qualitative approach coupled with the later use of a quantitative method was used to better understand the phenomenon at hand, and to ensure that the concerns and issues affecting college-age women were being captured before developing the survey instrument.

After Institutional Review Board approval was obtained in March 2015, the first focus group was held during spring semester 2015, and the other three were held during summer 2015. All focus groups lasted one hour and a half to two hours, and were held in a room located in the basement or second floor of Weimer Hall, which houses the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida. A total of 27 females participated. Saturation was reached after the fourth session, after which no new themes emerged. Typically, theoretical saturation for qualitative focus groups is achieved between three to six sessions (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). The researcher served as the moderator in each session. The focus group script included questions about social media and mass media use, as well as questions asking about feelings regarding personal body image in relation to mass media and social media consumption. The script used in all sessions is included in Appendix A.
Women were recruited from large lecture-style classes and from Facebook groups for undergraduates at the university to ensure a wide array of participants from a variety of majors. Participants were recruited under the condition that they would be discussing their experiences and opinions associated with mass media and social media. They were given $10 cash and refreshments for their participation. The researcher served as the moderator and note-taker for each session. Participants were given pseudonyms during each session and the researcher used these pseudonyms during the transcription process to protect their identities (a copy of one focus group transcript is included in Appendix B). The focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the researcher, then coded for relevant themes. After initial open coding, the researcher engaged in axial coding whereby the most relevant and recurring themes were categorized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During qualitative data analysis, axial coding refers to how the researcher unpacks codes and relates them to one another (Creswell, 1994). After thorough coding, the researcher began developing a questionnaire based on relevant themes and terms gleaned from the focus groups.

In each focus group session, the researcher asked participants to talk about their media consumption—specifically, their use of mass and social media. Participants talked about watching television shows, sometimes reading print material like magazines and the campus newspaper, and using social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YikYak, Pinterest, Tumblr, as well as news apps like CNN and Fox. Their main purposes for using these apps were to keep in touch with friends, plan social events, obtain local, campus, or national news, and find lifestyle-related content such as recipes, fitness plans, and more. The researcher also asked
participants to describe how they feel about themselves after spending more than half an hour on social media. In addition, the researcher told participants that some research suggests that mass media give messages about how women “should” look, and asked them if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, and to discuss this topic at length. Afterwards, participants also talked about how social media may or may not give messages to women about how they should look. They were also asked if and how social media affects their personal body image. In general, although the focus groups were semi-structured in nature, the researcher made sure to pose the key questions included in Appendix A in each session, but was more interested in the natural conversations that arose as a result of organic discussions among the women.

**Survey Development**

For the survey portion of the study, the researcher put together the questionnaire after coding and reviewing insights gained from the focus group sessions. Whenever possible, existing scales were used in the questionnaire, such as the seven-item Appearance Evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire-Appearance Scale (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990), which poses statements about how the respondent feels about her body in order to evaluate baseline body satisfaction. The Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire-4 (Schaefer et al., 2014) was also used as a guide when the researcher was developing the survey. This questionnaire asks participants about the importance of looking thin or muscular, as well as about the potential sources of influence on their body image, including peers, family, and mass media. After analysis of focus group insights and discussion with a panel of experts, the researcher decided to reword some questions from the SATAQ-4 that were outdated in nature (i.e. questions asking about influence of
mass media), and to further explicate key terms such as “thin” and “athletic” using a sample of college women. Questions specifically asking about Facebook and Instagram were created by the researcher and based on the question style and wording of the SATAQ-4. All questions were evaluated on a scale ranging from 1, “definitely disagree,” to 5, indicating “definitely agree.” A full copy of the final survey used in this study is included in Appendix D.

Questions about online impression management and social validation were also included in the final survey used in this study, and these questions were developed by the researcher based on a review of relevant literature and insights gained from the focus groups. Finally, demographic questions such as age, ethnicity, education level, and social media use were included. The survey portion of the project received Institutional Review Board approval in December 2015. The questionnaire was pretested in January 2016, and changes were made to the survey instrument before it was sent to participants. Data collection began in January 2016 and continued until March 2016.

**Questionnaire Format, Review, and Pretest**

Fifty college women reviewed the questionnaire, and changes were made to the questionnaire following their comments. To participate, they had to be 18 to 22 years old, female, and use Facebook, Instagram, or both. They were recruited through classes at the University of Florida and through undergraduate female sororities, and they did not receive an incentive for their participation. They examined the instrument and made comments, when necessary, about question wording, terms used, and questionnaire length. Mainly, their review indicated the problematic nature of the constructs used to describe the two corporeal ideals: what the original researchers that
developed the SATAQ-4 referred to as thinness and athleticism in their questionnaire (Schaefer et al, 2014).

The main goal of the researcher was to have this sample of undergraduate females assess the aforementioned body image-related terminology. These precautions helped establish construct validity, or the degree to which a test or subscale measures what it aims to measure (Babbie, 2016). To describe the thinness construct, the preferred term among this population was “lean,” whereas the preferred term to describe fitness was “toned.”

The researcher provided four terms (derived from review of body image literature) to describe each construct: slim, thin, slender, and lean were provided as terms to describe thinness; while fit, toned, in shape, and athletic were provided as terms to describe athleticism. Indeed, as suspected by the researcher and suggested by the expert panel, the existing terms “thinness” and “athleticism” were found to be problematic among this population. These women preferred the term “lean” to describe thinness (36% preferred this term), and “toned” to describe fitness (50% preferred this term). Interestingly, the least popular terms among this group was “thin” (16% preferred this term), and “athletic” (4% preferred this term).

When asked to explicate their opinion of these terms in an open-ended format in the survey, they described thin as being more evocative of a woman who is excessively skinny, possibly someone with an eating disorder—i.e. someone who is “underweight,” “slender, lacking in fat and muscle tone,” “not fat but also not muscular. Able to see definition of [her] bones,” and a “size zero.” One respondent said, “thin isn’t a compliment to me—it’s more of an insult. I’d rather be toned than thin. Also, I think of
thin as unhealthy.” Another respondent had a negative view of thinness: “The first things that comes to mind when I think of the word "thin" are negative connotations. I think of stick skinny models who do not look healthy, think of a Kate Moss kind of look. Ribs showing, arms with not much muscle mass, hipbones popping out a bit. I think this is the extreme in terms of the negative connotations of the word ‘thin,’ but that's what first comes to mind.” Finally, one respondent said, “Thin means someone who is naturally lower in body fat than the average person. They don't have to be muscular or strong or even remotely in shape, which is why I say ‘naturally.’ I don't think thin people are necessarily more attractive than people who are in shape/have worked to achieve a certain physique. Thin does not mean healthy or in shape.” This reflects the view that among this age group, thinness is conceptualized as mostly an aesthetic look rather than indicative of any level of physical fitness, or ability to perform strenuous physical activity. Regardless of how they defined thinness, most respondents expressed a negative or displeasing opinion of the term.

The women preferred “toned” among the other terms listed to describe fitness because it suggests a woman who has some visible muscle definition, but is still slim with a low level of body fat. When asked to explicate their meaning of toned, one respondent said: “I think of muscle definition and fitness, while still having a slender physique. With toned, I don't see jiggle and stretch marks, but taut skin and firmness.” And for another respondent, “toned means someone who works out and has muscle. This person is slender, but also has muscle lines and is stronger than someone who is just thin.” Quite a few respondents expressed disapproval of too much muscularity or “bulk,” citing “muscles that are defined but not too large” as more ideal. In general,
respondents mentioned thinness/having a low BMI as a necessary aspect to being
toned, i.e. “to look physically healthy while maintaining society's standard of women
having to be slim to be beautiful.” This body type has often been described as one that
resembles a “Victoria’s Secret model,” and some women mentioned this in the survey.
Women may view this body type as more ideal because it suggests a woman that is
normatively thin, feminine and beautiful, but who also may have some degree of muscle
definition. A study by Chrisler and colleagues (2013) that explored Twitter users’
reactions to the annual Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show, a televised event featuring
supermodels on the runway modeling the lingerie company's latest fashions, showed
that women tweeted approving messages about the models, and made social
comparisons with them.

Questions about social media use were also included, and 90% of the
participants use Facebook several times a day, while 82% use Instagram several times
a day. Self-reported time spent on Facebook and Instagram ranged from 30 minutes to
seven hours. On an average day, 30% of respondents said they check Facebook about
every hour for notifications, and 24% check every half an hour for respondents. On an
average day, 33% of respondents said they check Instagram about every three hours or
more, and 19% indicated they check every half hour. When asked which social media
platforms they use on a daily basis (besides Facebook and Instagram), 88% of
respondents said Snapchat, 43% said Twitter, 14% said Pinterest, and 12% said
Tumblr. The average age of respondents was about 20 years old.

After review of the responses to the questionnaire, the researcher pretested the
survey. Benefits of pre-testing include the identification of questions that pose problems
for respondents, contain problematic wording, result in refusals to answer or complete (Dillman & Bowker, 2000). Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire following the pre-test period. These adjustments included revising the questions relating to how much time participants spend using Facebook and Instagram on a daily basis, as some individuals felt that the wording was still unclear. For the main test, college-age female participants between the ages of 18 and 22 were recruited from courses at UF. The researcher assumes the costs associated with conducting this study.

Survey Sampling

The present study used purposive sampling of female college students to assess the influence of variables such as body satisfaction, level of thinness and fitness internalization, perceived body image-related pressure from peers, family, mass media, and social media, social media use, as well as online impression management and profile curation practices. Non-probability sampling is the type of sampling used in studies including a non-random sample of college-age or undergraduate student populations, and in instances in which creating a complete list of individuals in the sampling frame is not possible or feasible (Babbie, 2016). Women were recruited from large lecture-style classes, from the university research participation system SONA, and from Facebook groups for undergraduates at the university to ensure a wide array of participants from a variety of majors. They were not compensated for their participation.

College students have historically been used as samples for various studies in the social and behavioral sciences, and the findings of such studies passed off by researchers as indicative of some general trend of the general public at large (Nicholson, 2010). Researchers use undergraduate students because in many cases they are easily accessible by the researcher, cost-effective, and willing to participate in
studies for extra credit or minimal incentives (Fowler, 2014). However, a large-scale meta-analysis showed why it is problematic to assume that the thoughts, opinions, and behaviors of Western undergraduates closely resemble those of the general population (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In their study, the researchers introduce the concept of so-called “WEIRD” research subjects—individuals in their early to mid-twenties that are from “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies” (p. 1). As part of their meta-analysis, they examined studies conducted on various topics published in the world’s leading journals in human psychology and behavior to ascertain whether members of this population (which were used in the aforementioned studies) are suitable or representative of the population at large. They introduce two issues about existing social science studies: databases for participants are narrow, and researchers often generalize their findings. The researcher accounts for these issues in the current study by not claiming that these findings are generalizable beyond the population that was used to gather the data, and by being clear about the study’s limitations (which are discussed at length in Chapter 5).

Issues with a lack of diverse sampling frame or database from which to collect such individuals poses a problem for researchers. A study by Arnett (2008) examined studies from the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and found that 67% of the American samples were comprised of undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses. “In other words, a randomly selected American undergraduate is more than 4,000 times more likely to be a research participant than is a randomly selected person from outside of the West” (Henrich et al, 2010, p. 3). To address the second concern, generalization, researchers rarely challenge such assumptions about extrapolating
research findings to the public at large based on a small sample. In other words, according to Henrich and colleagues, “This lack of epistemic vigilance underscores the prevalent, though implicit, assumption that the findings one derives from a particular sample will generalize broadly; one adult human sample is pretty much the same as the next” (p. 3). However, the researchers do not discourage the use of student samples completely, adding, “There are cases where the exclusive use of these samples would be legitimate to the extent that generalizability is not a relevant goal of the research, at least initially” (Heinrich et al., 2010, p. 21; Mook, 1983). For the present study, generalizing about all college or college-age students is not the goal. Since this is an emergent area of research, the goal is to explore how women in this age group, from this sample, think and feel about their perceived sources of body image-related pressures (whether that is from family, peers, mass or social media), and how they engage in self-presentation in their Facebook and Instagram profiles.

Fowler (2014) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of surveys that are self-administered and taken online by respondents, both of which fit the criteria of the present survey. Advantages of self-administered surveys include ability to ask longer or more complex questions, the possibility of obtaining more sensitive data that might make a respondent uncomfortable in a survey administered by an interviewer, and ability to ask “a battery of similar questions” in succession (Fowler, 2014, p. 72). Online surveys include low cost, high speed of return, and time for respondents to fill out questions in a thoughtful, thorough manner at their own pace (Fowler, 2014).

Potential disadvantages associated with online surveys include limitation to individuals with computer and Internet access, need for obtaining a complete sampling
frame/list when using a probability sample, and not having an interviewer to provide clarification while the respondent completes the questionnaire (Babbie, 2016). Also, with self-administered surveys, there is no interviewer present to clarify any questions or misunderstandings by the respondent, so researchers should carefully design the questionnaire. Other disadvantages of self-administered surveys are that they assume a certain level of literacy from respondents, open-ended questions may not receive rich responses, respondents may get fatigued, and a lack of quality control (Fowler, 2014).

**Survey Analysis**

To analyze the survey results, descriptive statistics such as the means, frequency, percentage, and standard deviation were calculated in order to examine relationships between variables for the purpose of further exploring the themes (Johnson & Turner, 1993). Questions 1-7 (the Appearance Evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire by Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990), questions 8-17; 23-34 (based on the SATAQ-4 scale by Schaefer and colleagues, 2014), and questions 18-22 (come from SATAQ-3R by Thompson and colleagues, 2000) consisted of interval variables measured using a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 indicating “definitely disagree,” to 5 indicating “definitely agree.” The survey questions were collapsed into related sub-groups to simplify analysis, and latent variables were created when appropriate. There were questions asking about body satisfaction, lean/thinness internalization, toned/fitness internalization, the endorsement of little body fat, sociocultural norm internalization, cues from family, cues from peers, cues from mass media, cues from social media (social media was broken down into two categories: Facebook and Instagram), and online impression management and profile curation behaviors. These groups of questions comprised the sub-groups.
The Appearance Evaluation subscale was used to measure body satisfaction, and higher scores indicated greater body satisfaction, while lower scores indicated greater body dissatisfaction. Two of the seven items were reversed coded (see Appendix D). Questions to assess physical appearance-related pressures on social media platforms Facebook and Instagram (questions 35-42) were designed by the researcher based on questions from the SATAQ-4 (Schaefer et al., 2014). Questions 43-48 assessed online impression management and profile curation behaviors. They were all interval variables, and all share the same 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 indicates “definitely disagree” and 5 indicates “definitely agree”). All items are positively keyed. Subscale scores were obtained by calculating the mean of all the relevant items, and the score of the full scale were obtained by calculating the mean score of all items within the scale. Factor analysis of the survey showed that these factors were distinct, and reliability analysis showed they were internally consistent with high alpha values above .80 for each factor.

As for other statistical tests, regression and correlation analysis were used to assess the relationship between the interval variables included in the research questions and hypotheses, such as body satisfaction, lean/thinness internalization, toned/fitness internalization, internalization of sociocultural norms, endorsement of little body fat, cues from family, peers, mass media, and social media including Facebook and Instagram, as well as profile curation and online impression management techniques. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were run on the data to assess the significance and strength of associations between variables—in other words, body satisfaction score was correlated or regressed against a suite of latent variables.
CHAPTER 4  
RESULTS  

Focus Group Findings  
The purpose of the focus group sessions were to better understand how college women conceptualize their personal body image, especially with regards to influences such as peers, family, mass media and social media sources. The researcher found that women in the sessions talked about how they did not consume mass media such as print and TV, instead opting for media they had more control over, such as on-demand TV and movie services like Netflix, Hulu, and more. In terms of magazines, they preferred to get the content that appeared in print on the magazine’s website or social media accounts. They shared opinions and anecdotes about how they felt mass media were portraying women—often in a reductive, negative way. They praised social media for ushering in a greater sense of acceptance of “different” bodies and for showcasing these bodies more prevalently than in mass media counterparts.

Another highly discussed aspect of the sessions was how social media (like Facebook and Instagram) affected and influenced the women’s personal body image. However, they did not talk very much about how their family influenced their body image, which is an aspect the researcher was interested in exploring at the start of this study. As such, the insights gained from the focus group sessions helped the researcher decide what aspects were important to include and measure in the survey. The focus group recordings were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher for common themes. A full list of nine themes found in the sessions is included in Appendix C.
Pressures/Looking “Flawless”

Overall, the women in the focus groups discussed societal pressures to be physically attractive, and to appear this way in the social media content they post or in which their friends tag them. They also expressed a great desire to look “flawless” on visually based social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. They discussed the use of photo editing apps and filters to enhance their appearance, which is reminiscent of retouch software used to airbrush cover models in print magazines. However, with the ability to download various free or low-cost apps to do their own photo editing and manipulating, these women now have the power to choose how they portray themselves in their social media content. In one of the sessions, Yolanda (all names used here are pseudonyms, per IRB requirements) discussed the importance of how social media have changed how women share photos and how they portray themselves online:

I was talking about this with someone the other day. I think through Instagram and Facebook, there’s this whole new thing since now we’re so public about pictures of ourselves….in the past, that was never a thing. If you took photos, you kept them. There was no way to show them to your friends unless you physically handed them a photo. So it’s this whole new concept of trying to look good because other people are gonna see you. Before, it was just photos for the sake of memories and stuff.

In a separate session, Brenna also discussed the pressures to look good on social media, and how she did not feel “ready” to post a photo of herself in a bikini online, and feared backlash from friends on social media. This statement also converged with how women often engage in social comparisons with their peers on social media:

Right now I’m doing steps to like, look better and everything, so right now I won’t post any pictures in a bikini or anything like that because I’m waiting until I look better, sort of…because I do compare myself to the other girls that do have perfect bikini bodies. It’s like…people wait until they look like that, which is almost impossible because you are who you are, but it’s
sorta in the back of your mind. It’s like, how are people gonna judge my photo compared to hers sorta thing.

Profile Curation/Impression Management

The combination of pressures to look physically attractive and present themselves positively on social media converged into another theme, which the researcher describes as “profile curation.” There seems to be a set of “social media best practices” for women in this age group, and their awareness of and adherence to these practices is high, based on their discussions on the focus groups. For example, quite a few of the women talked about taking many photos of themselves before posting online—Anna mentioned taking as many as 50 photos of her roommate before they went out at night:

She’ll want me to take a picture of her and it’ll be over and over and over again. I just have no patience for it. So she asks our other roommate. But even when it’s Snapchat, if it’s not a good enough picture of her, or even if it’s being sent to my friends, if she doesn’t look probably better than me—that’s what she’s thinking—in the picture, then I can’t send it to my own friends. In the overall context, I think it’s just a general comparison that you know somebody is looking at this and going to be comparing, so you have to win.

In varying degrees, this sentiment was expressed in all of the focus groups. The women also discussed the importance of coming up with the “perfect” caption for their photos—something witty, but not seen as trying too hard.

Callie: I think the picture is all about the caption.
Lauren: Oh yeah, the caption makes the picture.
Anna: You need a good caption, too.

Women were reluctant to post a photo in which they felt they did not look their best. As mentioned previously, they referred to this as looking “flawless,” presumably a reference to a Beyoncé song of the same name—and they discussed the importance of
only posting the “best” and most positive content on social media accounts. When
judging the photos of someone else, Hanna said,

With social media, if you post a picture, people you know directly target
you saying sometimes bad things, like ‘Oh my God, don't wear that,’ or
they’ll take screenshots—I do this—but you'll screenshot a picture and
send it to all your friends like, ‘Oh my God, what did she do?’ or ‘Can she
use a better filter?’

Many of the women openly discussed the importance of profile curation and
online impression management—almost akin to creating a “best practices” list for social
media. They talked about optimal times of day to post photos, deleting or untagging
photos in which they felt they looked bad, going places and taking photos solely to show
off to friends and followers, which they colloquially dubbed “doin’ it for the ‘gram
[Instagram].” In the first focus group session, Olivia talked about how some women do
things just for attention on social media: “My little sister has an Instagram and she was
posting pictures for the ‘gram [which means doing something on Instagram just to get
attention or “Likes”]. Like, ‘I'm just gonna post all these pictures; I’m gonna get all these
‘Likes.’”

Regarding the optimal time to post photos, Nina said:

I don’t know if you guys have noticed when you post something and it’s in
between classes or certain hours of the day, you will get more ‘Likes.’
Never put something up in the morning because people are still sleeping
[group agrees].Never post something Saturday night because people are
drunk.

Anna added to this, saying, “11 a.m. is the best time to post to Instagram.” All of this talk
highlighted a general insecurity or dissatisfaction with the mundane reality of life, and
the need to showcase a more exciting day-to-day routine to social media friends and
followers.
“Likes” as Social Validation

“Likes” as social validation was another important aspect of the focus group discussions. The more “Likes” a post received, the more a woman’s ego was boosted, as Lauren explained: “I think sometimes when I’m not feeling the best and I haven’t uploaded a picture in a while, I’ll just upload any picture just to get ‘Likes.’ The more ‘Likes,’ the better I feel about myself.” Conversely, the women talked about feelings of self-doubt after posting a photo that did not receive very many “Likes.” The number matters a great deal—and for many women, less than 50 to 100 “Likes” is deemed a social media failure. Some women, like Khloe, talked about knowing people who paid for followers and “Likes” on social media:

I know certain people who have an app to where you’ll get all these ‘Likes’ on a picture—500 ‘Likes’—and I’m like, ‘you don’t even know 500 people’ [laughs]. Certain girls do that. I know two of my friends—she’ll take a simple picture and all of a sudden she got 300 ‘Likes.’ To her, that validates that she’s beautiful, I guess. And in reality, it’s just really sad to me.

Maddie echoed this sentiment, saying,

I compare my ‘Likes’ to other peoples’ ‘Likes.’ Let’s say I post a picture and I think I look pretty good in that picture. And then somebody else posts a picture like five minutes after me, I’m like, ‘Well damn, she already got 25 ‘Likes’ and I’m still on 15!’ So I definitely compare my ‘Likes’ to others, and what their picture looks like as opposed to mine.

They also discussed the ratio of “Likes” to followers, like Nina mentioned:

If you have eight ‘Likes’ in 20 minutes, it’s like, you’re not popular. Sometimes I will look at the ratio of how many followers—if someone has like 11,000 followers but they get like 200 ‘Likes,’ that’s definitely more than I have, but I have 600 followers. So I do look at the ratio and be like, ‘you’re not cool.’ To reassure myself.

Some would go as far as to delete the photo or post if it did not garner an acceptable number of “Likes,” as Anna discussed in one of the sessions: “My roommate follows the
rule that if she doesn’t get 15 ‘Likes’ in 15 minutes, she takes it down. I think it’s nuts.”

Finally, the women discussed how important it is for friends to “Like” their photos to show support, and so the original poster would get more “Likes,” as Michelle explained:

I think with girls it’s more so with your friends like, ‘you better go ‘Like’ my picture.’ Or you’ll go through and see if there’s someone who usually ‘Likes’ your picture and they didn’t this time—how rude! [laughs]. I mean for me, it’s usually just joking. I’ll be watching my friends scroll past it and I’m like, ‘hey wait a second, aren’t you going to ‘Like’ my photo?’

**Uses and Gratifications of Media**

The women also talked about their personal uses and gratifications of media.

The majority of the women in the focus groups do not seek out or read women’s magazines, citing cost and accessibility as a deterrent, like Brenna did: “I only look at headlines at grocery stores or if I’m at home, my parents buy like, *People* [magazine] or something, and I’ll read based on convenience. But I’m not gonna go out and buy one or anything like that.” Many of the other women echoed this sentiment, like Nina, who said, “I don’t even open them at the store line anymore. I don’t bother.”

They also talked about the ability to obtain the same articles and information in the online version of the magazine—for free. Specifically, Sarah talked about how most things people would traditionally only be able to find in a print magazine are now widely available online:

Although, now, like I said before, a lot of the articles that are in magazines are going online. I love to read human-interest pieces and a lot of those are online now, and beauty tutorials and all that. It’s not like a necessity anymore to have to get a copy.

When asked why they use social media, they cited reasons such as for entertainment, humor, and news consumption, to cure boredom and find out about events, and to promote organizations and groups they were a part of. Khloe talked
about how Facebook was useful for connecting members of an on-campus organization she is part of: “With Facebook, I mostly use it for promotional stuff because I am vice president of an organization, so we’re always promoting, we create events on Facebook, we write to people on Facebook, and that’s how I usually promote.” She also talked about using GroupMe to text multiple people at once, like a group chat. Maddie also used Facebook and GroupMe to keep up with friends and current events:

I use Facebook a lot; I follow the links that are on there. Another strange method for how I get my news is from my GroupMe. I have a lot of people that I’m interacting with, so at random moments they’ll be like, ‘oh, look at this article.’ So it’s not really a news outlet but still get some type of news from it.

They also talked about the need to connect with others and for surveillance of others’ bodies. They would use Facebook and Instagram to look at photos posted by friends, followers, and celebrities, like Nina discussed. She talked about how it’s important to look good because you compare yourself to others—whether they are peers or friends—but peer comparisons are more salient because their attributes seem more attainable. In other words, women feel their peers are on a more “level” playing field, as contrasted with celebrities who have the help of hair and makeup teams to keep them looking glamorous: “Yeah, maintain a good shape always because you do compare yourself to other friends, but I guess maturity decreases that comparison with mass media. Not with my friends. Because they’re on my level, so we can still compete.”

Women like Kimberly also talked about how they use social media platforms like Instagram to engage in surveillance of other people’s bodies. She says she uses these photos as “motivation” to get in better shape, but it sounds like there is an aspect of upward social comparison happening as well:
The pictures I do see—it’ll be model pictures of perfect girls and instead of
taking it like, ‘Oh my God, I’m so fat,’ I try to take it as a positive thing. I
told my mom—I screenshot the pictures and I told her, ‘I want you to take
that picture of me exactly like that when I have that body.’

Health/Fitness Content

A contentious topic for the women was the presence of health/fitness content on
social media. They discussed the prevalence of peers and celebrities posting fitness-
related content such as workouts and health-related content such as recipes. When
asked how these posts made them feel, the women fell into two groups: some were
annoyed or turned off by the posts, whereas the posts motivated some of the women.
Lauren talked about how social media can be a motivator to exercise: “I know that
before I go to the gym—I never want to go—and I look on Tumblr and I just get really
motivated. Sometimes in magazines they have workouts that I want to try.”

Sarah talked about how friends on social media would post about their health
and fitness efforts, which would make her sometimes feel negatively about her own
body: “Also, when you see them post selfies at the gym, and they’re like, ‘oh I just
finished my workout.’ [Group laughs and concurs]. Or when they post pictures of their
healthy food that they cooked—I’m like, ‘oh look I’m having pizza. This is not good.’

Izzie discussed how she uses Instagram to search for a certain type of health
content, while simultaneously avoiding other types of content that comes up even
though she is not interested in viewing it: “I look for the healthy food accounts with
smoothie recipes and fruit salad and stuff like that, but I don’t ever look for the
before/after workout pictures and it always just seems to pop up.”

Finally, Maria talked about how social media like Pinterest can be helpful when
she is trying to eat better: “Pinterest is a little more relevant in that aspect because you
can search for ‘healthy ice cream options’ and you can find specific recipes, so you know what’s actually in it. I can substitute this for this if I want less sugar or sodium, for example. I feel like that’s a little easier in trying to find what suits your interests the best.”

**Social Comparison: Peers**

Social comparison was another common aspect in the focus groups—namely, social comparisons with peers and celebrities. The women talked about different attributes on which they would compare themselves with their peers: jobs and internships, success, clothing, boys, and physical body image. Izzie explained how she compares what she is doing to what “pretty people” do on a daily basis, and how she wishes she was taking steps toward being healthier:

> I usually don’t care that really pretty people are traveling the world and interning in New York but some days I’ll be like, ‘wow, I wish that was my life.’ Then I think I should be working out or doing a juice cleanse, but it never actually happens.

In one of the sessions, the women discussed social comparisons and whether mass or social media encouraged greater social comparison. As Shelly expressed, “I think social media does more [than mass media] because it encourages you to compare yourself to friends but then I think mass media through magazines does because you see a lot of cover images and it’s like, ‘Look how great this person looks!’”

Izzie said she felt that social media was more positive because people were sharing more positive articles on social media, and that mass media led to greater social comparisons:

> I feel like social media is more positive than mass media because on social media, I think people share positive things more often. Also, when you’re looking at mass media, it’s mostly celebrities and models. That
leads people to compare themselves to goals that are unrealistic or unattainable.

Though Maria said she did not feel affected by how her friends looked on social media, her discussion of these attributes suggested otherwise:

I feel like as far as body image goes on social media, especially with it being summer, a lot of girls are posting bikini pics at the beach. Some of them, I'm like, 'OK, I'm glad I'm on the tanner side.' And then other people I'm like, 'I'm glad I have a fuller body shape than you do.' Or, I wish I had more toned legs or something, but it doesn't really make me sit there and wallow—like 'oh my god, she's perfect.' It doesn't really affect me personally, but I could see how it could affect others.

Finally, Nina talked about how friends on social media motivate her to exercise and be healthy, but they also served as a source of social comparison:

If it’s a friend of mine that’s posting and you can tell her body is really good, you can tell she’s working out and eating healthy, that’ll be more of an inspiration. The Instagram page for Kayla Itsines [well-known fitness guru], she’s an inspiration for me. But if I see a friend, I wanna be her.

Social Comparison: Celebrities

The women admired celebrities and famous people for clothing and other material items, but also for their body image, as Shelly explained: “I’m also obsessed with Taylor Swift and Karlie [Kloss] and her whole squad. So that’s unmotivating because they’re all like, 6-feet tall and naturally have zero percent body fat. On one hand I think, well, I wasn’t born that way, but they also work for it too. It’s kind of a toss-up.” Adina talked about how she compares herself to celebrities online, and it makes her feel negatively about her own food choices at times: “Like if I see someone with abs, it’s like, ‘But I guess she didn’t have fried chicken for dinner last night like I did.’”

Lisa talked about how she doesn’t necessarily compare herself directly with models and celebrities, but she is certainly aware of their beauty and social media
presence. She acknowledges that they look good, but that they have “resources” to look that way—resources not available to the average woman:

I think if I compare myself to anyone, it’s more friends rather than models. I’ve got in mind that celebrities and models have all these resources to look good that I don’t have, so there’s really no point in…they don’t even look like themselves sometimes. But when you have a really pretty friend, it’s like ‘how did she get so lucky in the gene pool?’ [laughs].

Finally, Kimberly discussed her sister and watching her struggle with her own warped body image:

My sister, she is gorgeous. I’ve always been… not jealous of her, but I’ve always seen her as the perfect girl. She’s tiny, she has a tiny little waist, she has big boobs, she has a perfect butt, she dyes her hair back and forth from blonde to bleach blonde, perfect—she’s gorgeous. But her self-esteem is down to her feet. Everybody thinks she’s a model, every time; they’re like, ‘Oh my God, that’s your sister?’ I’m like, yeah. She is always jealous of me. I’ve had thyroid problems so my weight has been up and down, but some reason I’ve always seen it like I’m going to better myself. She’s always in a competition. She’s so pretty, and she hears it all the time—but she doesn’t believe it. She sees models and she’s like, ‘Why are they so perfect?’ But she doesn’t realize she has this self-image that she’s the most hideous person. She compares herself all the time.

**Feminism**

Feminism was a more implicit aspect of the focus groups, though it was explicit in one of the sessions. Samantha talked about how she feels that mass media represent women:

I definitely think that the media objectifies women, specifically because there are cases where they’re always talking about, ‘oh, look at this model, look at this actress, she’s so beautiful.’ And when you look at a man, they always talk about his intelligence in the media, or they say his acting skills are so great. But you look at women and they’re always focused on their bodies, their fashion, what’s her latest fashion trend? Where did she buy her clothes? What about the men’s outfits? They don’t necessarily do that. They focus on their intellectual stuff, and I think that it’s unfair.

Adina talked about “fitspiration” content on social media, or content meant to motivate people to work out or live a healthier lifestyle. Although this content can be thought of as
harmful because it encourages unrealistic body image standards, she highlighted a negative aspect of fitspiration that some people don’t often notice or think about:

And squatspo [fitspiration photos of people doing squat exercises] is all about the butt pictures, so you have a bunch of pictures of people’s butts—that’s great, whatever [sarcasm]. Then there’ll be the picture of the guy grabbing a butt, or something that’s so very obviously a POV [point of view] male thing. Because you know, heteronormativity is still the main focus on social media, I think. I don’t think that’s helpful to people.

**Judgment**

Judgment permeated the focus group discussions—women talked about being judged by peers and judging their peers on social media. For example, they expressed annoyance when social media friends posted gym selfies and “checked in” to the gym (using Foursquare or other location-based apps), because they felt like these friends were bragging that they worked out or were showing off to get social media attention. They also judged peers for posting sexualized, risqué content just to gain “Likes” or attention from the opposite sex, like Alexis explained:

But I think probably the most common thing that I see from other people is… there’s [sic: there are] a lot of girls who post pictures for very specific reasons. And it definitely is a channel for certain insecurities, certain needs that they’re not getting in other places in their lives, which is the one thing that kinda bothers me. I don’t go out of my way to post pictures of me wearing incredibly low-cut shirts or only a picture of my butt at the beach. Because I feel like those pictures are always posted for a very specific demographic—and not really for the right reasons. But that is something that I see every single day, multiple times a day. Especially with high school, college aged girls. So yeah, I definitely think it’s a big source of… people are looking for reassurance and there is a lot of pressure, I think.

The women judged themselves on social media, much like they felt friends and followers might judge them critically when examining their photos online, as Sarah described:
I used to put pictures of me at the beach in my bikini, but I don’t anymore. It’s become this unconscious pressure of people looking at my body and looking at, yeah I might be thin but I don’t have the six-pack abs or anything. That’s something I don’t do anymore on any social media because I feel like people are judging my body. Especially that uncovered. I know some girls think you should embrace your body, you should show it off. No—I’m not at that point yet.

They judged their peers for “trying too hard” to be attractive on social media, as Nina explained. She talked about how friends will post a photo on social media, but take it down almost immediately if it does not garner what they deem to be an “acceptable” number of “Likes” in a short amount of time. Consequently, she said she judges those people for their social media practices:

And when you see it [taking down a photo] happen, because I caught some of my friends doing that, it’s kind of like ‘Wow, you’re that weak?’ Like when I see a picture and when I reload again like two minutes later it’s gone. Yeah—I was like, ‘Why’d you do that? I was about to ‘Like’ it.’ I guess I’m very critical when it comes to that. I will judge a little bit and it shows weakness.

Women like Joanna talked about how she judges others when they take photos of themselves at the gym—when they are not really there to work out, but are perhaps more interested in being seen and showing off:

I don’t have a problem with that [people posting photos of their progress at the gym] because you want to show people how great you look. That you’ve worked hard for something. But then I know we’ve all seen it—those people that tag #GymSelfies [laughs]. Those bother me, because those are not the people that are there to work out. Those are the people that are there saying, ‘Hey, I went to the gym and walked 30 minutes on the treadmill.’ There’s nothing wrong with walking 30 minutes on the treadmill—good for you. You got off the couch and went to the gym. I will never judge somebody for going to the gym, no matter how little or how much they do. At least you’re there. But the thing is when you’re just sitting there taking selfies of yourself… my biggest problem and what my dad and I talk about when we go to the gym together is these girls that show up in inappropriate clothing to the gym.
They also expressed judgment of mass media sources in how they portrayed women, like a group of women did in one of the sessions when they talked about a well-known actress/model. The women who had read the book *Paper Towns* by John Green felt that Cara Delevigne, who was cast as the main female role, was not true to the physical description of the protagonist in the novel:

Izzie: She’s a model but now she’s like, an actress. Cara Delevigne.

Shelly: Tall, skinny girl. She’s part of Taylor Swift’s squad.

Adina: No—I know who she is.

Izzie: She’s the girl in Paper Towns [movie] but in the book by John Green, the character is supposed to be a curvy girl, kinda rare looking. And then you have this model playing her so I feel like that’s just not...

Adina: Well, good job, Hollywood.

Overall, the females in the focus groups exhibited a very high level of media literacy and could easily call out reductive or limiting representations of women. They expressed disapproval of these portrayals and often called for better depictions of women in film, print, and on social media.

**Survey – Data Analysis**

The survey was administered to college women through Qualtrics, the online survey program. This program was chosen because it was free to the researcher, easy to use, and user-friendly. The initial sample size was 650, but not all responses were usable in the final analysis. Respondents who did not meet the inclusion criteria (females who are 18 to 22 years old and use Facebook, Instagram, or both) were not included in the final sample, and 21 surveys were excluded from the final sample because the respondents failed attention checks, or it appeared that they did not spend adequate time completing the survey. The researcher included three attention checks—
one asking the respondent to indicate “Somewhat agree” for one of the Likert-type questions, one asking the respondent to indicate “Definitely disagree” for one of the responses, and one asking them to manually enter the number 11 into an empty box in the survey. Respondents who passed these attention checks and also spent a reasonable amount of time completing the survey (i.e., those who spent only three minutes were excluded, for example) were included in the final sample. With these checks in place, the final sample size was 629 (n= 629). Survey results were exported into a spreadsheet and data were cleaned before the researcher ran relevant statistical tests using SPSS software.

**Participant Sample Description**

In total, the completion rate for the survey was 87%; typical response rates for online surveys are around 30% (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Respondents were female college students ranging in age from 18 to 22 years old. The mean age of respondents was 20.06 years old, and the standard deviation was 1.32 years. Respondents indicating their age as 18 years old comprised 17.5% of the total sample (n=110), 15.3% were 19 years old (n=96), 26.7% were 20 years old (26.7%), 24.4% were 21 years old (n=154), and 16.1% were 22 years old (n=101). For highest level of education, 16.5% (n=104) of respondents indicated having some college credit but less than one year, 25% (n=156) indicated they completed one of more years of college, but did not earn a degree, 44% (n=277) had an associate’s degree, and 14.5% (n=92) had a bachelor’s degree. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of respondents indicated they were White/Caucasian (n=403; 64.1%), 102 (16.2%) indicated they were Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish, 48 (7.6%) indicated they were Asian, 41 (6.5%) indicated they were African-American, 21 (3.3%) indicated they were African or Black, 10 (1.6%) indicated they
were another race or origin not listed, three (0.5%) indicated they were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and one respondent (0.2%) indicated she was American Indian or an Alaskan native. Table 4-1 contains a full profile of the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 4-1. Demographics of survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Total (N=629)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 years old: 110</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 years old: 96</td>
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<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years old: 168</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 years old: 154</td>
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<td>24.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 years old: 101</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest level of education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college credit but less than one year: 104</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more years of college—no degree: 156</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree: 277</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree: 92</td>
<td></td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian: 403</td>
<td></td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American: 41</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African, or Black: 21</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish: 102</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian: 48</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race or Origin: 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Questions

RQ1:

The goal of the first research question was to examine the relationship between base body satisfaction and a suite of variables including perceived leanness/thinness internalization, toned/fitness internalization, endorsement of little body fat, sociocultural
norm internalization, cues from family, cues from peers, cues from mass media, cues from Facebook, and cues from Instagram. To answer this suite of questions, composite Likert items for base body satisfaction score were summed to create a latent variable. This approach is valid provided that all questions use the same Likert scale and that the scale is a defendable approximation to an interval scale, in which case they may be treated as interval data measuring a latent variable (Lin et al., 2016). All questions used the same Likert scale, measured from 1, which indicated “definitely disagree,” to 5, which indicated “definitely agree.” If the summed responses fulfill these assumptions (which they did), parametric statistical tests such as the analysis of variance can be applied (Lin et al., 2016).

After creation of the latent variable for base body satisfaction, an ANOVA test was performed with the data by fitting a model of the form \( Y = B_i(a) + E \), where \( Y \) is the response variable (base body satisfaction), \( B_i \) is a regression coefficient, and \( E \) is a vector of errors, for each variable of interest (a through i taken from RQ1). To account for the fact that multiple comparisons are being made, p-values were adjusted using the Benjamani-Hochberg procedure, a statistical process that controls for false positives across multiple ANOVA comparisons (Benjamani & Hochberg, 1995). Normality of residuals was assessed using qq-plots, and residuals were extremely well behaved, so data transformations were not an issue. Since ANOVAs were performed and p-values were corrected for multiple comparisons using the aforementioned Benjamani-Hochberg procedure, a post-hoc test such as Welch or Tukey was not performed. A significance threshold of \( p = 0.01 \) was set, indicating a high level of confidence that the associations detected in this study are significant (Benjamani & Hochberg, 1995).
Statistical significance was achieved when regressing base body satisfaction with the following covariates at the 95% confidence interval: Leanness/thinness internalization ($B = -0.49$, $F(1, 604) = 57.32$, $p = 0.001$), endorsement of little body fat ($B = -0.87$, $F(1, 604) = 60.13$, $p = 0.004$), sociocultural norm internalization ($B = -0.63$, $F(1, 604) = 61.88$, $p = 0.002$), cues from family ($B = -0.54$, $F(1, 593) = 145.38$, $p = 0.004$), cues from peers ($B = -0.59$, $F(1, 588) = 131.27$, $p = 0.001$), cues from mass media ($B = -0.32$, $F(1, 580) = 19.17$, $p = 0.001$), cues from Facebook ($B = -0.49$, $F(1, 568) = 104.08$, $p = 0.002$), and cues from Instagram ($B = -0.49$, $F(1, 500) = 96.69$, $p = 0.005$). The relationship between base body satisfaction and the various covariates was negative, indicating that on average, the less satisfied a woman was with her body, the stronger her concern with things like sociocultural norm internalization, endorsement of little body fat, and cues from various mediated sources. The only variable that was not statistically significant was toned/fitness internalization ($B = -0.09$, $F(1, 604) = 3.59$, $p = 0.059$).

The strongest significant effects were between base body satisfaction and endorsement of little body fat, followed by sociocultural internalization, and cues from peers. On average, women who indicated a lower level of body satisfaction were more likely to endorse a desire for little body fat, indicate a higher level of sociocultural norm internalization, and report receiving body image-related cues from peers. Cues from Facebook and Instagram fell toward the bottom of the list, and mass media cues had the weakest association with body satisfaction. A table summarizing the data is included in Table 4-2.
Table 4-2. Relationship between base body satisfaction and multiple covariates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lean/Thinness Internalization</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>57.32</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toned/Fitness Internalization</td>
<td>-0.099</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endorsement of Little Body Fat</td>
<td>-0.87</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60.13</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural Norm Internalization</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>61.87</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Cues</td>
<td>-0.54</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>145.38</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Cues</td>
<td>-0.59</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>131.28</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Media Cues</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.18</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Cues</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>104.08</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram Cues</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>96.69</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ2:**

The second research question asked from which sources do respondents get their strongest cues about physical appearance: Family, peers, mass media, or social media? In a qualitative sense, gathered from discussions taking place in the focus groups, it appears that women get their strongest cues about physical appearance from peers and social media. Although in every focus group, the topic of a mass mediated influence on female body image did emerge, some women felt as if the mass media’s power to affect women’s body image was not as strong or salient as other sources of influence—or rather, that social media had taken over a place of influence once
occupied exclusively by mass mediated sources. To them, mass media sources are somewhat outdated and not as relevant as they were in previous decades. For example, they talked about how they did not consume mass media such as magazines—they would not actively purchase them, but may sometimes seek them out in settings in which they were available, such as doctors’ office waiting rooms and hair salons. Sometimes they would flip through a magazine while waiting at a grocery store checkout line, for example. Focus group participants like Anna talked about how social media are free, and much of the print magazine content is readily available on their websites and social media accounts: “If I’m traveling, I’ll buy magazines. One or two a year I’ll buy, probably. Or if I’m at a salon, I’ll just flip through a magazine. Yeah, like with the *Vanity Fair* cover issue about Caitlyn Jenner [released in summer 2015], I knew it was going to go online the next month so I can read it now and I can see all the pictures so I don’t have to buy it. So I saved $5.”

Participants like Lauren cited accessibility and cost as deterrents for consuming magazines: “I don’t ever buy magazines. I think the only subscriptions that I still currently have are from when I was forced to sell magazines in high school, so my parents just bought them. So I think that’s the only reason I have them.” In one of the sessions, when asked about mass media consumption, four of the participants said:

Kendra: I don’t touch magazines.
Maria: I don’t look at magazines.
Izzie: Me neither.
Lisa: Unless I’m getting my hair done and there’s nothing to do.
Kendra: Online magazines, yeah.
Finally, they also favored video streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and others in lieu of tuning in to live TV broadcasts of primetime shows.

To address this research question quantitatively, negative associations between base body satisfaction score and the covariates were analyzed (see Table 1 for coefficient values). Analysis showed that respondents received their strongest cues about physical appearance in the following order: peer cues (-0.593), family cues (-0.536), Instagram cues (-0.494), Facebook cues (-0.491), and mass media cues (-0.318). The strongest cues were indicated by the regression coefficients that had the largest effect size.

**RQ3:**

The third research question inquired about the relationship between body satisfaction and engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation behaviors on social media including Facebook and Instagram. Each question was treated as its own variable (impression management, profile curation on Facebook/Instagram) and was regressed against the latent variable, base body satisfaction, using one-way ANOVA. Beta, denoted by $B$, indicates the regression coefficient (Reinard, 2006). P-values were then corrected for multiple comparisons using the aforementioned Benjamini-Hochberg procedure. There were statistically significant associations between base body satisfaction and the question asking respondents about the importance of getting “Likes” on the photos they post on social media ($B = -0.84$, $F (1, 571) = 1.84$, $p < 0.001$), as well as statistically significant associations between base body satisfaction and respondents feeling negatively when they do not receive “Likes” on their photos on social media ($B = -1.03$, $F (1, 573) =$
There are statistically significant associations between base body satisfaction and respondents reporting that they have untagged or deleted a photo in which they feel they don’t look good \((B = -0.84, F(1, 573) = 21.68, p < 0.001)\). Associations between base body satisfaction and the question asking respondents about how much effort they put into the photos they post on social media were not statistically significant \((B = -0.36, F(1, 573) = 1.84, p > 0.001)\). Associations between base body satisfaction and the question asking respondents if they care a great deal about looking attractive in the photos they post on social media were also not statistically significant \((B = -0.63, F(1, 571) = 5.52, p > 0.001)\). The regression coefficient (denoted by beta) shows the magnitude of the strength of the association.

**Summary of the results**

**Table 4-3. Relationship between body satisfaction and engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important to Get “Likes” on the Photos I post on Social Media</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Negatively when I Don’t Receive “Likes” on Social Media</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deleting/Untagging Photos in which I feel that I Don’t Look Good</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting Effort into How I Present my Physical Appearance on Social Media</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4-3. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring a Great Deal about Looking Attractive in the Photos I Post on Social Media</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ4:

The fourth research question asked about the relationship between social media use (time spent using Facebook and Instagram, frequency of checking Facebook and Instagram for notifications) and perceived lean/thinness internalization. Running an ANOVA test assessed these relationships. All but one relationship was statistically significant—how often respondents use Facebook ($B = -0.65$, $F (1, 558) = 9.79$, $p < 0.001$), how often they use Instagram ($B = -0.56$, $F (1, 490) = 15.15$, $p < 0.001$), and how often they check Instagram for notifications on an average day ($B = -0.20$, $F (1, 489) = 7.95$, $p < 0.001$). How often respondents report using Facebook had the strongest association. The question that was not statistically significant was how often they check Facebook for notifications on an average day ($B = -0.10$, $F (1, 557) = 2.49$, $p > 0.001$). Results are summarized in Table 4-4 below.

Table 4-4. Relationship between social media use and perceived lean/thinness internalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Use Facebook</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4-4. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Check Facebook for Notifications on an Average Day</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>0.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Use Instagram</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Check Instagram for Notifications on an Average Day</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ4a:**

A sub-question of RQ4 asked about the relationship between social media use (including time spent on Facebook and Instagram each day, and frequency of checking for notifications) and perceived toned/fitness internalization. Running an ANOVA test assessed these relationships. All were statistically significant—how often respondents use Facebook ($B = -0.65$, $F (1, 558) = 9.79$, $p < 0.001$), how often they check Facebook for notifications on an average day ($B = -0.10$, $F (1, 557) = 2.49$, $p < 0.001$); how often they use Instagram ($B = -0.56$, $F (1, 490) = 15.15$, $p < 0.001$), and how often they check Instagram for notifications on an average day ($B = -0.20$, $F (1, 489) = 7.95$, $p < 0.001$). How often respondents report using Facebook had the strongest association. More information is provided in Table 4-5.
### Table 4-5. Relationship between perceived toned/fitness internalization and social media use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Use Facebook</td>
<td>-0.65</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Check Facebook for Notifications</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>0.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Use Instagram</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often Respondents Check Instagram for Notifications</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ5:**

The fifth research question asked if respondents engage in profile curation and physical appearance-related impression management of their photos on social media. This question was assessed in a more qualitative manner by using insights gained from the focus group sessions. Women in the focus groups discussed the importance of positive self-presentation on their social media platforms. This ranged from statements about the best time of day to post photos in order to maximize exposure and “Likes,” to anecdotes about finding the “perfect” photo, as Arianna describes: “I’m pretty positive about my body, but there are some photos where I’m like ‘ew, I don’t look good, I don’t wanna post this anywhere—I don’t want people to see me like that. I want to make myself look better.’ Just in a picture. It’s like oh crap, no, my stomach looks weird there,
hold on; let me take another picture.” Maddie followed up by adding, “Every female has a thousand selfies of the same photo; you just choose the best one and even though it may not look different to anyone else, to me, you can see my eye was kinda squinting in that. They [social media friends] are probably gonna say something about me, like I have a lazy eye or something. It definitely does affect the way I… if I was to post a picture on Instagram, I analyze my photos before I post it.”

RQ6:

The sixth research question asked if there is a relationship between the number of fitness accounts respondents follow on Instagram and their level of perceived toned/fitness internalization. Analysis shows there appears to be a statistically significant relationship between the number of fitness accounts respondents say they follow and their level of perceived toned/fitness internalization ($B = -3.5$, $F (1, 489) = 81.56, p < 0.001$). As perceived toned/fitness internalization increases, the number of fitness accounts respondents report that they follow on Instagram decreases. A description of these findings is provided in Table 4-6.

Table 4-6. Relationship between number of fitness accounts followed on Instagram and perceived toned/fitness internalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toned/Fitness Internalization</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81.56</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ6a:

A sub question of RQ6 asked if there was a relationship between the number of fitness accounts respondents report following on Instagram and their level of perceived lean/thinness internalization. Results indicated that the regression coefficient was -1.1,
F (1, 489) = 10.55, and p < 0.001, indicating a negative but statistically significant relationship between the two aforementioned variables. This means that on average, as a respondents' level of perceived lean/thinness internalization increases, she reports following less fitness accounts on Instagram. More information is included in Table 4-7.

Table 4-7. Relationship between number of fitness accounts followed on Instagram and perceived lean/thinness internalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lean/Thinness Internalization</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.55</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ7:

The seventh research question asked if there was a relationship between sociocultural norm internalization and lean/thinness internalization, and if there was a relationship between sociocultural norm internalization and toned/fitness internalization. Results showed that there is a statistically significant and positive association between sociocultural norm internalization and lean/thinness internalization, as the regression coefficient was 0.31, F (1, 604) = 103.33, and p < 0.001. There was also a statistically significant and positive association between sociocultural norm internalization and toned/fitness internalization, with the regression coefficient valued at 0.14, F (1, 604) = 32.43, and p < 0.001. More information is included in Table 4-8.
Table 4-8. Relationship among sociocultural norm internalization and: perceived lean/thinness internalization; toned/fitness internalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toned/Fitness Internalization</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32.43</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lean/Thinness Internalization</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>103.33</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the terms “leanness” and “toned” have not been tested with sociocultural norm internalization, which is a preexisting subcategory of the SATAQ questionnaires, results here indicate that these terms are salient and valuable to these respondents. When college women were asked to help define the body image terms that mean something to them, they chose words like “toned” and “lean” to describe their “ideal” bodies. Future studies may use such words in their questionnaires, experiments, focus group sessions or in-depth interviews in the hopes that they replace potentially outdated or irrelevant terms like “thinness,” “muscularity” or “athleticism.” Women in this age group don’t describe their ideal bodies using these terms anymore, representing a general shift in body image as thinness has become a less desirable body shape overall, and recognition and desire for a more toned body has become more widespread.

RQ8:

Finally, the eighth research question asked if a relationship exists between endorsement of little body fat and sociocultural norm internalization, endorsement of little body fat and lean/thinness internalization, and endorsement of little body fat and toned/fitness internalization. Results showed that there was a positive and statistically
significant association between endorsement of little body fat and sociocultural norm internalization, as the regression coefficient was 0.19, F (1, 604) = 46.07, and p < 0.001. There is a positive and statistically significant association between endorsement of little body fat and lean/thinness internalization, B = 0.35, F (1, 604) = 354.7, p < 0.001. There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between endorsement of little body fat and toned/fitness internalization, B = 0.17, F (1, 604) = 108.08, p < 0.001. More information is provided in Table 4-9.

Table 4-9. Relationship among endorsement of little body fat and various covariates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariate</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>F-ratio</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural Norm Internalization</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46.07</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lean/Thinness Internalization</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>354.7</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toned/Fitness Internalization</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>108.08</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hypotheses**

**H1:**

Hypothesis one stated that respondents get their greatest perceived cues about physical appearance from sources in the following order: social media, mass media, peers, then family. This hypothesis was not supported, as survey analysis showed that the strongest influencers of body image were peers, family, Instagram, Facebook, and mass media, in that order. These findings were of particular interest because in the focus groups, women heavily discussed the pressures they felt to portray themselves in
a certain way on their social media accounts. However, when it came to the survey, this was not necessarily reflected as strongly as it was in the focus groups.

**H2:**

The second hypothesis established that on average, respondents with a higher level of body satisfaction would report less concern with engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation behaviors on Facebook. This hypothesis was mostly supported. There was a statistically significant relationship between base body satisfaction and feeling negatively when they don’t get “Likes,” as well as body satisfaction and deleting/untagging photos in which they feel they don’t look good. On average, respondents with lower levels of body satisfaction may be more concerned with deleting and untagging unflattering photos, as well as feeling more negatively when they do not receive “Likes” (a form of social validation) on their Facebook and Instagram photos. However, since this is survey data, cause and effect cannot be ascertained.

**H3:**

The third hypothesis stated that respondents who reported checking Facebook and Instagram frequently, used both multiple times per day, and check for notifications frequently will report higher levels of perceived lean/thinness internalization. This hypothesis was mostly supported with significant statistical relationships between the tested variables, with the exception of the question asking about how often respondents check Facebook for notifications. A sub hypothesis of H3 stated that respondents who reported more time spent on Facebook and Instagram, used both multiple times per day, and checked for notifications frequently would report higher levels of perceived
toned/fitness internalization. This hypothesis was supported, as there was a relationship between women who reported greater toned/fitness internalization and all aspects of social media use including how often respondents check Facebook, how often they check Facebook for notifications, how often they use Instagram, and how often they check Instagram for notifications. The fact that all aspects of social media behavior were statistically significant may suggest that perceived toned/fitness internalization is more salient on social media than lean/thinness internalization, or that women who internalize fitness and being toned are more likely to engage in certain social media behaviors like checking Facebook and Instagram frequently, and checking for notifications. This finding supports the idea that as body image norms shift, thinness may not be the ultimate goal for women in this age group.

H4:

The fourth hypothesis established that respondents would report engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation of their photos on social media, based on insights gained from focus group sessions. This hypothesis was supported, as women in the sessions discussed the importance of profile curation and impression management on Facebook and Instagram. They spoke specifically about untagging or deleting unflattering photos, taking multiple photos or selfies before deciding on the appropriate one to post on social media, using various retouching apps and filters to enhance their photos, and posting photos or content at certain times of the day to optimize the exposure and number of “Likes” they receive.

H5:
Finally, the fifth hypothesis stated that respondents who report following more fitness accounts on Instagram would exhibit a higher level of perceived toned/fitness internalization. This hypothesis was not supported—there was a statistically significant relationship between the number of fitness accounts a respondent followed and their level of perceived toned/fitness internalization, but the two variables were inversely related, so the direction was the opposite of what the researcher hypothesized. This may be because respondents with a higher level of fitness internalization are not using Instagram to support their fitness goals or aren’t seeking out this type of content on the social media app.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine how college females presented their body image on two visually based social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook. Focus group sessions were held to gain a qualitative understanding of how they use mass and social media, as well as how they present their body image on their social media accounts. They talked about how they felt pressure to present themselves and their physical appearance in a positive manner when sharing photos on Facebook and Instagram. To add to the findings from the focus groups, an online survey was created and disseminated to college females ranging in age from 18 to 22, who use Facebook, Instagram, or both social media platforms. Participants were not compensated for their time.

Insights from the focus groups and the survey results created an interesting composite profile of the current body image-related issues affecting females in this age group, and how those issues may or may not influence their behaviors on social media. First, examining where women get cues about their physical appearance yielded some unique findings. Based on discussions from the focus groups, social media platforms are highly influential, salient environments for communicating body image norms and a place for presentation of the online self. However, based on survey findings, Facebook and Instagram are not as influential as other sources like peers and family. The women in the focus group sessions did not discuss the ways in which family influence their body image, but they did discuss feeling some level of pressure from peers to portray themselves in a certain way, especially on social media. Overall, though peers were a salient place for receiving body image-related cues, social media was not as salient,
based on survey results. Although the women in the sessions discussed how much social media affect the way they feel about their bodies, they may not be conscious of its effect in practice. Perhaps another reason social media cues were not as salient in the survey findings is because women are unaware or embarrassed to report that they are affixing such importance on the content and photos posted by their friends and followers. Maybe the cues they are receiving are more subtle and implicit, rather than as readily noticeable as ones they receive from family members.

The women in the focus group sessions talked at length about how they curate and control their social media presence, especially when it comes to photos and what they choose to share with their friends and followers, and overall these findings were reflected in the survey. As established in previous studies, women do untag or delete photos in which they feel they do not look good (Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014). This study expanded those findings by examining the relationship of body satisfaction with social media behaviors such as deleting/untagging photos and feeling bad when respondents not receive “Likes.” This expanded finding is important because it further solidifies the notion that women are concerned with positive body image-related impression management online, and that body satisfaction level does matter.

Overall, it seems that body satisfaction—or having a healthy, positive body image—may be a protective factor against engaging in insecure social media behaviors. Indeed, body positivity has received a great deal of attention in recent years, as studies have examined the benefits of programs that promote positive body image (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, Augustus-Horvath, 2010). These types of programs that use holistic models of the self can help women conceptualize themselves as more than just their
physical bodies, and help them cultivate appreciation for the functionality of their bodies, as well as personality traits, skills, and other non-physical qualities. Finally, fitness was an important aspect of the current study, and having women learn to appreciate the strength and resiliency of their bodies can help promote greater body positivity. However, a precaution would be ensuring that women do not idealize a fit body (that they often see on Instagram) that is unrealistic in terms of muscle tone or thinness, which can be problematic—just as problematic as idealizing an excessively thin physique.

Previous studies have used two dichotomous body shapes—excessively thin and very muscular—and characterized these as the physique goals of college women. However, this study shows that these definitions are much more nuanced, and that such an essentialist perspective is inherently limiting to the investigation of college female body image. When the researcher had 50 college women come up with their definitions of the ideal body, they talked about how being too thin was a negative thing—but that it was just as bad as being too muscular, and therefore looking masculine. There appears to be a very fine line between what is considered aesthetically pleasing and “healthy,” or fit, but still very feminine.

Results from the research questions and hypotheses showed that college women have a complicated relationship with their personal body image. Various sources of influence work separately, as well as together, to affect how they feel about the way they look. According to the sociocultural theory of body image, these sources include peers, family, and mass media. The current study also inquired about the influence of social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Finally, survey respondents were also
asked about their social media behaviors and internalization of various factors, such as toned/fitness, lean/thinness, sociocultural norms, and more.

In terms of the hypotheses, the first hypothesis asserted that respondents get their greatest perceived cues about physical appearance from sources in the following order: Social media, mass media, peers, then family, but results from the survey showed that the strongest influencers of body image among these respondents were actually peers, family, Instagram, Facebook, and mass media. Prior research shows the power of peer influence on female body image. When peers are dieting, this can influence individuals in their friend group (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2005; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). In college, women are at a stage in life when they report dieting (Ackard, Croll, & Kearney-Cooke, 2002), bingeing or restraining their eating (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999), taking laxatives or diuretics (Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009), over exercising (Long, Smith, Midgley, & Cassidy, 1993), and other methods to maintain or lose weight.

Family also has an important role in influencing how women feel about their bodies, as a woman’s upbringing can have profound effects on her body satisfaction level, as well as her relationship with food, dieting, and exercise (Moreno & Thelen, 1993; Mukai, 1996; Thompson et al., 1999). The fact that family was found to have such an important effect on the respondents’ body image shows that despite the fact that many college women no longer live in the house in which they grew up, the influence of their parents and family still affects them even after they’ve moved out.

Women reported receiving body image cues from Instagram and Facebook, but the strength of the effects was relatively low, compared with the other perceived cues.
Explanations for this include the notion that women in this age group are not consciously aware of how social media or their behaviors on social media, such as observing the photos of their friends and followers, as well as engaging in upward and downward social comparisons with these individuals. College women admit to judging themselves and their body image in relation to what their peers are posting on Facebook and Instagram, and acknowledge that this has an emotional effect on them, but this was not reflected strongly in the survey results. Or, it could be possible that there is some sort of self-reporting bias associated with respondents admitting that their body image is affected by what they see on their Facebook and Instagram feeds.

Another issue to consider is that social media like Facebook and Instagram don’t function in a vacuum—in other words, women are encountering their peers and family members on social media. Thus, messages about body image can come through interpersonal, face-to-face conversations, as well as through online communication such as Facebook chat, Instagram private messages, and more. As a theoretical consideration, scholars must grapple with the idea that social media influence on body image encompasses cues from peers and family both on and offline. As such, the researcher suggests visually conceptualizing social media as a large Venn diagram in which peers and family occupy smaller circles within this larger Venn diagram. In other words, social media like Facebook and Instagram should be thought of in the context of the types of individuals college women may encounter while using these platforms—like their friends, peers, family members, and even unknown people such as celebrities.

Mass media appeared lower on the list than the other potential cues. Previous research has shown that mass media don’t have as salient of an effect as body image
and communication scholars may think—in other words, the effect of mass media on female body image is overestimated. A meta-analysis of 34 studies by Holmstrom (2004) estimated effect size and analyzed research trends as well as moderating variables such as body dissatisfaction and thin ideal endorsement. The study indicated that a relationship between media and body image, “but that relationship is very small” (Holmstrom, 2004, p. 209).

In the focus groups conducted by the researcher, the women expressed the view that mass media were somewhat outdated. When asked about their media consumption, in general, mass media ranked low on their lists. They preferred to receive news, information and trends from social media sources. When asked if they read or purchased women’s magazines, most females in the focus groups said they did not. It can be ascertained that due to the multitude of media options and sources, mass media sources may not have as strong of an influence as they did in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The second hypothesis established that on average, respondents with a higher level of body satisfaction would report less concern with engaging in physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation behaviors on Facebook, and this hypothesis was mostly supported. There was a statistically significant relationship between base body satisfaction and feeling negatively when respondents don’t get “Likes,” as well as a statistically significant relationship among body satisfaction level and deleting/untagging photos in which they feel they don’t look good. Possibilities for this finding include the idea that women who are more satisfied with the way they look do not feel the need to receive social validation from social
media. Conversely, women with lower body satisfaction levels seem to be more concerned with positive physical appearance-related impression management on their social media sites—in the form of deleting or untagging unflattering photos, being more concerned with the number of “Likes” they receive, and overall curation of photographic content they post on their Facebook and Instagram accounts. Although, based on the discussions in the focus groups, women in this age group are concerned with getting “Likes” and positive impression management and profile curation on Facebook and Instagram, this concern seems to be more powerful for females with lower levels of body satisfaction.

Hypothesis three stated that respondents who reported checking Facebook and Instagram frequently, used both multiple times per day, and check for notifications frequently will report higher levels of perceived lean/thinness internalization. This hypothesis was mostly supported—there were statistically significant relationships among the tested variables, with the exception of the question asking about how often respondents check Facebook for notifications. Respondents who use Instagram and Facebook more frequently, as well as check for notifications more often, may be doing so in order to receive social validation in the form of “Likes” on their photos. Indeed, women in the focus group sessions discussed the importance of getting “Likes” on their social media content, and often said it was like an “ego boost” for them. Conversely, they felt negatively when they didn’t receive “Likes” or other forms of social validation, like comments. Some women even talked about how they would post a photo on Facebook or Instagram just to receive “Likes,” and feel better about themselves. To explain why there was not a statistically significant relationship between perceived
lean/thinness internalization and how often respondents check Facebook for
notifications, it helps to think about how females in this age group feel about Facebook.
In general, they feel that it has lost its appeal and are more interested in Instagram.

A sub hypothesis of H3 stated that respondents who reported more time spent on
Facebook and Instagram, used both platforms multiple times per day, and checked for
notifications frequently would report higher levels of perceived toned/fitness
internalization. This hypothesis was supported, as there was a statistically significant
relationship between women who reported greater toned/fitness internalization and all
aspects of social media use, including how often respondents check Facebook, how
often they check Facebook for notifications, how often they use Instagram, and how
often they check Instagram for notifications. The fact that all aspects of social media
behavior were statistically significant may suggest that perceived toned/fitness
internalization is more salient on social media than lean/thinness internalization, or that
women who internalize fitness and being toned are more likely to engage in certain
social media behaviors like checking Facebook and Instagram frequently, and checking
for notifications more often. This finding supports the idea that as body image norms
shift, thinness may not be the ultimate goal for women in this age group.

The fourth hypothesis established that respondents would report engaging in
physical appearance-related impression management and profile curation of their
photos on social media, based on insights gained from focus group sessions. This
hypothesis was supported, as women in the sessions discussed the importance of
profile curation and impression management on Facebook and Instagram. They spoke
specifically about untagging or deleting unflattering photos, taking multiple photos or
selfies before deciding on the appropriate one to post on social media, using various retouching apps and filters to enhance their photos, and posting photos or content at certain times of the day to optimize the exposure and number of “Likes” they receive.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis stated that respondents who report following more fitness accounts on Instagram would exhibit a higher level of perceived toned/fitness internalization. This hypothesis was not supported—there was a statistically significant relationship between the number of fitness accounts a respondent followed and their level of perceived toned/fitness internalization, but the two variables were inversely related, so the direction was the opposite of what the researcher hypothesized. Since this area is emergent, there is no prior research on this sub-topic upon which the researcher can base her assumptions. This finding was unexpected, but perhaps an explanation as to why this relationship occurred is that respondents with a higher level of toned/fitness internalization are not using Instagram to support their fitness goals or aren’t seeking out this type of content on the social media app. In other words, women who report higher levels of toned/fitness internalization may derive their “fitspiration” photos or content from other sources, not from Instagram fitness accounts. Alternatively, perhaps they do not trust the credibility of the accounts, or they feel insecure by the often-unrealistic representations of fit bodies on this social media platform and look elsewhere for this type of content.

A similar notion may be used to explain the findings for the sub question of RQ6, which asked if there was a relationship between the number of fitness accounts respondents report following on Instagram and their level of perceived lean/thinness internalization. Results showed that there was a negative but statistically significant
relationship among the number of fitness accounts followed and the respondents’ level of perceived lean/thinness internalization. This may be because women don’t trust Instagram for credible fitness information, or because a woman who internalizes leanness and thinness, or otherwise endorses a thinner body shape (versus one that is more toned or muscular), is not interested in following accounts on Instagram that emphasize or promote bodies with increased muscle tone. This may be due to the fact that this type of female does not find this body shape aesthetically pleasing, and thus, does not aspire to have such a body.

**Mass Media’s Waning Influence on Female Body Image**

One of the main findings of this dissertation was that mass media might be losing salience or popularity among female college women. While the women acknowledged that mass media, like print magazines and TV/film, do influence female body image in a mostly negative way, they also said they don’t seek out women’s magazines and generally do not watch live TV—instead choosing social media components to women’s magazines (i.e. websites or social media accounts of popular fitness or women’s lifestyle magazines), as well as on-demand TV and movie platforms such as Hulu, Netflix, Amazon, etc. For women in this age group, the freedom to choose was an important recurring theme. They want to choose the type of media they consume—when they want it, how often they want it—as well as the type of content. They want to be able to curate content based on their interests, which advances our understanding of media uses and gratifications.

Previous research provides insights to better understand why respondents did not rank mass media cues higher as compared to other potential sources of influence such as family, peers, and Facebook and Instagram. A body of literature suggests that
mass media effects are not as powerful as some studies indicate—in other words, the influence of mass mediated sources like TV and magazines is overstated in research studies. This assertion was supported by the present study, as it appears among these respondents, mass media sources do not have as powerful of an effect as they perhaps once did—because consumption of this type of media have reduced or otherwise changed over the years. This finding is important for the field of body image and communications at large, because it means that researchers should move away from examining mass media sources and focus on trying to better understand the role that social media sources play. Since Facebook and Instagram were found to play a role as a source from which respondents’ receive body image-related messages, but their influence was not as high as other sources, it is worthwhile for scholars to examine why this may be the case in future studies. As for the present study, reasons why Facebook and Instagram weren’t found to be as important as other sources for receiving body image cues include the notion that respondents in this age group are not aware that they are receiving body image information from these social media sources, or perhaps there is some social stigma associated with admitting that they are being influenced by Facebook and Instagram.

**Social Media’s Role in Female Body Image**

In online articles and in anecdotal conversations, social media is often described as (or even criticized for) being a negative influence on female body image. Popular press articles seem to suggest almost unequivocally that social media platforms have almost a “hypodermic needle” effect on female body image, and Facebook and Instagram are often portrayed as breeding grounds for insecurity, positive self-portrayal and social comparisons. For example, *Glamour* magazine’s annual survey revealed that
women partaking in the survey felt worse about their bodies than in prior years, and many respondents cited social media as a major reason why. They felt negatively about their bodies regardless if they were looking at celebrity bodies or the bodies of their friends on social media. Increasingly, the lines between the “perfect” celebrity body and the flawlessness of the average social media connection are becoming blurred due to the widespread use of retouching apps among women in this age group. By having total control over their social media image, these women are actively building their own brand on their Facebook and Instagram accounts.

However, what these studies fail to represent is the often-complex nature of female body image and how it plays out on social media. What women may feel in terms of cues and pressures to present their bodies in a certain way on Facebook, Instagram and other visually based platforms is inextricably tied to other psychosocial and cognitive traits such as neuroticism, competitiveness, concern with privacy and professional decorum, need to express themselves sexually in their social media content, and external factors such as upbringing, religiosity, maturity level, and a host of other issues. In many ways, a woman’s level of body satisfaction can only tell part of the story when it comes to explaining female body image.

According to the present study, there is some truth to the notion that women want to be in control over their online image, and want to present a better version of the self in the photos they post on their social media accounts. Additionally, women in this age group do feel pressures or receive social cues from these platforms that may influence the content they post and the way they interact with each other. Previous studies have shown that women do want to portray themselves in a positive manner on social media
(Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014), but it is prudent to understand how other psychosocial factors, such as body satisfaction, insecurity and self-esteem, may influence these online behaviors in order to fully uncover the role that Facebook and Instagram play.

The proliferation of health-related social media content has also contributed to the spread of niche fitness culture with the emergence of “Instagram stars” and “Instagram fitness models,” which many women in the focus groups said they had encountered when browsing their Instagram feeds. In many cases, they do not seek out this content—instead, this content is brought to them because it ranks highly in algorithmic searches on Instagram. Either way, they are being exposed to it—and in some cases, influenced by it—whether they are consciously aware of it or not. The women acknowledged this in the focus groups by talking about how this type of content can be motivating to them. Furthermore, many women have begun to associate Instagram with this type of health/fitness content because it appears so frequently on the social media platform. Over time, it is possible that these types of photos may influence a positive lifestyle change, but they also have the potential to influence women negatively, as they idealize fit bodies and compare themselves to another unrealistic standard, much like women did with magazine supermodels in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Social media like Facebook and Instagram are filled with accounts promoting this type of content, whether it is daily eating regimens, workout routines, or weight loss tips. Results from the present survey show that a respondent’s level of perceived toned/fitness internalization has a statistically significant but negative association with the number of fitness accounts she reports following on Instagram. The researcher
originally hypothesized that women with higher levels of toned/fitness internalization would report following more Instagram fitness accounts, presumably because they would be more interested in this type of content and thus more likely to seek it out on social media. The idea was that a respondent would seek out this content because it would motivate her to stick to her fitness goals, or may influence her to lose weight. However, an explanation for the current finding may be because women with high levels of toned/fitness internalization are looking elsewhere for this type of content. To invoke the uses and gratifications model of media consumption, another possibility is that college women with higher levels of toned/fitness internalization are not using Instagram to seek out health/fitness-related content. Since many “Instagram models” are actually promoting products or otherwise using their Instagram accounts to market and advertise sponsored products or content, perhaps women do not view them as trustworthy or credible sources of health and fitness information. Finally, many of the Instagram fitness accounts are run by individuals with no exercise, nutrition or fitness background or training, which may contribute to a lack of credibility in the eyes of these women.

Another interesting finding is that there is a relationship between a woman’s level of toned/fitness internalization and all of the measured social media behaviors, including how often she checks Facebook, how often she checks Facebook for notifications, how often she checks Instagram, and how often she checks Instagram for notifications. There is also a relationship between a woman’s level of lean/thinness internalization and her social media behavior, including how often respondents check Facebook, how often they use Instagram, and how often they check Instagram for notifications. A possible explanation for these findings is that women who internalize appearing toned
or lean to a greater degree are more concerned with being frequently connected to their social media networks on Facebook and Instagram. An inherent limitation with surveys is that researchers are unable to make claims about causation. In this case, perhaps having greater concern with their body image, including aspects relating to leanness and appearing toned, is related to how these women are using social media—i.e. to engage in surveillance of other women’s photos, in a form of social comparison.

The women in the focus group sessions did talk at length about how they used their social networks to peruse photos of their friends and celebrities, taking note of how these other women presented their body image, how they dressed, their hairstyle, body shape, and more. Perhaps the need to check Facebook and Instagram multiple times per day and check for notifications at a more frequent rate suggests that these women feel compelled to continue the surveillance of others throughout their day—or perhaps, connectivity has become so ubiquitous in modern society that it has become almost like second nature to these respondents. The non-significant finding about checking Facebook multiple times per day is not surprising, as some of the women in the focus groups discussed Instagram as their visual social media platform of choice, perhaps suggesting Facebook has fallen in popularity. Anecdotally, among college women and younger age groups, Instagram is often regarded as the social media platform of choice. People in this age group feel that Facebook has lost its appeal in some ways because “older” individuals (such as their parents, teachers, and grandparents) have begun using Facebook more frequently. Demographic characteristics from Pew Research Center show that 64% of online adults in the 50 to 64-year-old category use Facebook, and 48% of online adults 65 years old and older use Facebook (Duggan, 2015).
An important goal of this dissertation was to examine whether or not thinness was still a desirable body shape among women in this age group. They talked about how strides have been made in the last five years to include a more diverse array of bodies in media content ranging from plus-size actresses, singers, and models on magazine covers and social media sites, to advertisements featuring “real” bodies, like the ones produced by beauty company Dove. Survey results show that though thinness (but not excessive thinness) may be a coveted body shape, being toned has also become important to college women. This can be a positive thing because it opens up the conversation to include bodies that are “different,” whether they are considered plus size, muscular, or athletic. Historically, these types of bodies have been marginalized because they are considered “masculine” by the mainstream. However, celebration of fit, strong bodies like Ronda Rousey and Serena Williams broadens the Western view of “beauty” and forces people to consider an alternative definition of what female beauty can be.

**Online Impression Management and Profile Curation**

An aspect that was highly discussed among the focus group participants was the need to control how they appeared to their friends and followers online. According to the survey data, respondents do engage in online impression management and profile curation. In particular, women who reported less satisfaction with their bodies were more concerned with receiving social validation from Facebook and Instagram, including “Likes,” and reported feeling negatively when they did not receive them. In addition, there was a relationship between body satisfaction and deleting or untagging photos in which respondents felt they did not look good.
Results suggest that on average, women who have a higher level of body satisfaction perhaps are not as concerned with impression management and profile curation to the same degree of more dissatisfied or insecure counterparts. Although women reported other sources such as peers and family as stronger cues for body image than Facebook and Instagram, social media often function as microcosms of our social world. For college women who are already dissatisfied with their bodies, hyper focusing on the content posted by their friends, taking great care to control their social media self-presentation, and deriving self-esteem from social validation (including “Likes”) from friends and followers may drive them to experience more negative emotions and heighten their insecurities. The implications of these negative emotions may drive women to post revealing or scandalous photos to elicit male attention, or to post content to simply garner “Likes” and comments from social media followers—as some women in the focus group sessions discussed. These negative feelings and the need to receive positive feedback by posting content may develop into a dangerous cycle, similar to some aspects of social media addiction. If women become addicted to the attention they derive from their social media accounts, it can be dangerous for their wellbeing.

Social Media Use and Body Image

As the focus group sessions and survey data show, the relationship that college women have with their social media networks can be a complicated one. Though they report feeling negatively when they see photos of friends and celebrities who have “better” bodies than they do, discuss instances in which they engage in surveillance of other people’s photos, admit to making social comparisons with people on social media, they don’t necessarily feel pressure or take cues about body image from Facebook and Instagram, according to survey findings from the present study. Again, this may be
attributed to the fact that respondents feel uncomfortable with admitting that they do receive body image-related cues from Facebook and Instagram, or because they are simply unaware that they are receiving such cues.

A woman’s perceived level of toned/fitness internalization and her level of lean/thinness internalization, coupled with the ways in which she may use social media, can have important effects on her body image. For college females who report higher levels of lean/thinness internalization, they also report using Facebook and Instagram more often and checking Instagram for notifications more frequently. For women who report higher levels of toned/fitness internalization, they also report using Facebook and Instagram more often and checking both social media platforms for notifications more often. Since this is survey data, causation cannot be assumed—i.e., it is unknown whether it’s a woman’s level of body image internalization that causes her to use social media differently than her peers who have reported less internalization. The researcher can hypothesize that respondents who exhibit higher levels of lean/thinness internalization and toned/fitness internalization may use Facebook and Instagram differently than their peers who exhibit less internalization because individuals who are more concerned with their body image want to engage in surveillance or social comparisons on social media that may either make them feel better or worse about their own bodies. In terms of future research, experimental studies could confirm causation, as well as test the relationship between lean/thinness internalization, toned/fitness internalization and social media use—as well as adding in measures for self-esteem and social comparisons—which would be a prudent area for further study.

Theoretical and Practical Implications
This study used sociocultural theory of body image as a major theoretical foundation, and a primary goal of the study was to advance the theory. In particular, an important goal was to determine if and how sociocultural theory of female body image should be updated or changed as a result of this dissertation’s findings. The current model of sociocultural theory of body image posits that three factors, peers, family, and mass media, influence how people think about their bodies. With the widespread adoption and use of social media, including Facebook and Instagram, body image researchers have started examining how these social media platforms may affect how people think about their bodies—and if the current sociocultural model needs to include social media in addition to mass media. The current study looked at Facebook and Instagram, because they are visually based platforms that allow for easy photo sharing and surveillance of other people’s photos, unlike platforms such as Twitter, for example, which is more focused on disseminating textual content. In light of the current findings, the researcher recommends expanding the current sociocultural model of body image. The theory should be advanced to take into account how social media may influence how women conceptualize their personal body image in relation with what they see on social media—including opportunities for social comparisons, and purposeful, positive self-presentation (such as carefully curating photos so that they are in total control of how they appear to social media friends and followers). Positive impression management has become a crucial part of how women interact with each other and how they build their personal narrative on their social media accounts.

Another important theoretical aspect that is closely related to the sociocultural theory of body image is the tripartite model, which expands on the theory to suggest
that the three sources of influence (peers, family, and mass media) influence women to engage in appearance comparison and internalization of the thin ideal. Findings from this study suggest that women do engage in appearance comparison, which continues to be a constant aspect of being a female in Western society. However, findings from this study also suggest that interest and adherence to the thin ideal has somewhat diminished over time, especially since the fit ideal is becoming more popular among women in this age group. The proliferation of fitness culture has influenced women to engage in various forms of exercise to tone and strengthen their bodies, including gyms and boutique fitness activities such as the Bar method (also known as barre), hot yoga, aerial yoga, CrossFit, Pilates, and more. Couple the availability of these fitness methods with the fact that health and exercise content has become more ubiquitous than ever on the Internet and social media—people routinely share recipes, fitness routines, weight loss tips, and even anorexia/bulimia-related content on social media. All of these cultural changes signify that the definition of the “ideal” body is shifting in Western society, and technology is certainly playing a huge role in influencing these changes.

Women continue to be socialized to care about and value their physical appearance from a young age, and technology may shine a brighter spotlight on these issues for some females who are particularly vulnerable to body image-related insecurities. Considering all of these factors from a practical standpoint, action can be taken to help ameliorate the effect of negative body image-related content on social media. Findings from this study are of interest to a wide variety of people, including academics and body image researchers, professors and university administrators, secondary school educators, parents and family members of young women, as well as
young women (and men). If these individuals want to help reduce the amount of body image insecurities and help improve the self-esteem and self-worth of young women, they should teach females how to recognize non-physical, positive traits and compliment each other on these qualities. Schools and organizations can enact change by developing and implementing body positive programs that also teach media literacy and train women how to communicate with each other in a more accepting, meaningful way. Finally, administrators, educators, parents, and other individuals who frequently interact with young women can be trained so that they will recognize signs and signals of a female who is in distress or is experiencing body image-related issues. Further recommendations will be discussed in the Conclusion section.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Historically, body image has been a complex topic with a multitude of terms, and everyone approaches the issue with their own unique perspective. For example, “thin” may mean something completely different to a woman who weighs 95 pounds versus a woman who weighs 200 pounds—odds are, they do not have the same conceptualization of what the “ideal” body is. These individual differences makes the task of body image researchers more complicated, as agreement on definitions for the common terms used in this type of research are hard to agree upon. For these reasons, an obvious limitation of any body image-related study, especially one conducted with college females, is that agreement on the exact meaning of terms like “toned” and “fit,” though defined by the researcher (with the help of women in this target age group) sometimes hold various meanings based on a participant’s upbringing, ethnicity and sexual orientation, region in which she grew up, history of body image disturbance or an
eating disorder, other preexisting psychological issues, and a host of other potential factors that may be difficult if not impossible to account for in a study such as this one.

Although the researcher felt that using a multi-method approach was an advantage to the study and understanding the issues at hand, she also acknowledged that the focus groups and surveys had different findings. For example, women in the focus groups emphasized social media and peers as the most salient sources of body image influence, but did not talk very much at all about how their family may influence them. Findings from the survey showed that family members were more of a source of influence than originally thought. In terms of what the researcher believed was more “credible,” or valid, she felt that she received richer data from the focus group sessions because women were allowed to expand upon their thoughts and feelings in a way that they weren’t able to in the survey. For scholars designing future studies on this topic, choosing a mixed methods approach can bring clarity and richer data to complex issues like those associated with female body image.

A limitation of the study included the fact that the majority of participants were white females, though the current sample represented the majority of ethnic groups including White/Caucasian; African-American; African or Black; Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; or participants of other race or origin. Future studies should aim to diversify the sample size by conducting smaller studies with certain ethnic groups, or trying to include a more ethnically diverse sample to assess if differences exist based on respondents’ ethnicity. Previous research has shown that certain groups, such as African Americans and Latinas, may be less influenced by mass media information about the “ideal” body
(Lopez, Blix, G.G., & Blix, A.G., 1995). However, other scholars have asserted that body image issues are not just a “white girl’s problem,” (Bordo, 2013) and that these issues affect all ethnic groups and sexualities. A worthwhile observational study could examine how various ethnic groups and/or lesbians portray their personal body image on their social media accounts to see if differences exist based on ethnicity or sexual orientation, as there is a lack of research on members of the LGBT community. Additionally, very little research exists on the body image of transsexual and transgender women, especially related to their mass media consumption and social media behaviors, which would also be an area of future investigation. Providing a more complete picture based on diverse communities will strengthen this area considerably.

With regards to the body satisfaction measure, future studies should expand upon this by examining other types of variables, such as self-esteem and insecurity, to see if relationships exist. Understanding a woman’s level of satisfaction with her body is only a piece of the puzzle, and body image is a very personal issue that can be influenced by a host of factors including upbringing, social interactions, media consumption, childhood trauma, and more. Investigating additional psychosocial and cognitive variables can help researchers put together a more complete picture of the issue at hand.

In terms of the perceived sources from which women can receive body image-related cues, opportunities for further research are plentiful. Since peers and family were such salient sources, future studies can focus on uncovering how female peers influence each other’s body image. Is it through interpersonal conversations about fat talk, teasing, or just commiserating about body dissatisfaction in a group? As for family,
prior research shows that a woman’s relationship with her mother is particularly important when determining a variety of body image issues. Future research could dig deeper to assess the mechanisms and process by which norms are transferred from mother to child, and how this influence persists throughout time and how it influences college women, even if they have left their nuclear family unit and moved to attend university or college. And finally, the researcher noticed that although family was not discussed very much in the focus group sessions, it became very important in terms of the survey results. Perhaps the family was not discussed very much because women felt some level of apprehension or awkwardness talking about this topic in front of a group of their peers. Future studies could use one-on-one, in depth interviews with college women to examine what role family members play in the concept of body image.

Since profile curation was found to be such a crucial part of how these women interact with social media, further studies need to be done to assess this area. When women are so painstakingly curating their online profiles, do they face any level of distress when their peers and family don’t see them looking their best? In other words, do people feel misled by how these women are presenting themselves online versus how they really appear in person? The discrepancy between the ideal and actual self is a concept that is very salient when it comes to social media, college women, and investigating their personal body image. With regards to profile curation and positive online self-presentation, future studies should use qualitative approaches to assess how the photos uploaded by college women can create a source of distress or discrepancy when they encounter peers and family members face-to-face, versus how they perceive them online.
The researcher was particularly interested in lean/thinness internalization and toned/fitness internalization as body image concepts—and how salient these concepts were to current college women. However, another aspect to investigate is how important it is to these women to achieve or have these body shapes. What type of social currency (other than an advantage in romantic relationships and increased chances to attract a more physically attractive partner) does the “ideal body” afford these women? Do they think that once they achieve their ideal look, their problems in life would be solved or somewhat reduced? Understanding how college women value beauty and their personal body image—in relation to the social advantages and social currency it may afford—is another prudent area for research.

Another limitation included the fact that surveys can only reveal thoughts, beliefs, and opinions that the respondents are consciously aware of, as they are self-reported data. Thus, respondents may not feel comfortable to report how social media may affect their body image because they may feel insecure or some sort of social stigma associated with admitting that what their peers post on social media affects them. Another idea is that respondents may be unaware of the degree of influence that social media have on their body image because access to these platforms has become so mainstream and ubiquitous in American society. In addition, survey data can’t establish cause and effect. To further explore these preliminary findings, future research will focus on confirming the results from the survey, perhaps using experimental design. For example, an experiment could measure baseline body satisfaction levels, and then include a follow up measure after exposure to ultra-thin or ultra-fit bodies in photos posted to simulated Facebook or Instagram profiles. To add to the findings of this study,
researchers should examine if and/or how the specific social media platform (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, or others) plays a role in influencing how women conceptualize their personal body image. Extending this study to look at other social media platforms such as Pinterest, Twitter, and Snapchat would also be a worthwhile research endeavor and would add to the body of knowledge in this area.

**Conclusion**

This study was originally inspired by the proliferation of media coverage of and popular press articles about how social media platforms can influence women’s body image. Coupled with the fact that females in this age group anecdotally discuss the ways in which social media influence them to portray themselves in a certain way, this area is rife for further research. Based on focus group sessions and the survey, the researcher found that women in this age group do report receiving cues about physical appearance from a multitude of sources, like peers, family, and media sources, but the perceived influence of social media may not be as strong as people think—or, perhaps, women are not as aware of how it is influencing them because social media and constant connectivity have become so ubiquitous in modern society.

Having a positive body image was found to be a protective factor against issues like endorsement of little body fat, sociocultural norm internalization, and influence about body image from various cues. Since having a healthy body image is so important and can help women combat feelings of negativity or insecurity, especially on social media, the case for promoting media literacy programs is strong. Teaching women at an early age that they are more than their looks can help them recognize maladaptive behaviors. As this study found, peer influence is quite powerful—in fact, it may be the most powerful cue for receiving information about body image—and media literacy
programs can start at the grassroots level to ensure healthy conversations between women. Especially crucial in environments in which women may become competitive or in which looks are the focus, such as sororities, all-female clubs/organizations, cheerleading, dance and other sports, media literacy programs such as the Delta Gamma sorority’s “Fat Talk Free Week” can help women build interactions based on internal qualities, not placing so much value on the way they look.

Families also play an essential role in how women view their bodies. Females derive cues about diet, food, weight loss, and body image from their mothers, who they view as same-sex role models. Parents should be acutely aware of how their comments and actions may influence their daughter from a young age, and how these feelings may continue into adulthood. Previous studies have found that negative comments from parents to daughters about physical appearance can have profound and lasting effects (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004).

Finally, women do derive body image cues from social media, though not as much as they do from peers and parents. When women are in college, they have a great deal of freedom—they are more in control of their own time, the type of media they choose to consume, and how much they choose to live their lives online. Since body dissatisfaction coupled with increased concern with social media validation can contribute to feelings of negativity among women in this age group, colleges and universities can also take an active role in addressing these issues by holding informational sessions, providing and publicizing targeted counseling and wellness services/interventions, and creating public service announcements for helping students for whom social media and body image has become problematic.
APPENDIX A
FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR SCRIPT

Introduction

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this focus group. My name is Nicki Karimipour and I am a Ph.D. student in the College of Journalism and Communications. I know your time is valuable, and I appreciate your willingness to be a part of my study. I look forward to hearing what you have to say. Before we begin, I have a few items to go over.

First, I want to encourage you all to participate in the discussion and offer your answers and opinions. Everyone’s input is valuable in this study. I want you to feel like you can share your opinions and experiences freely.

You’ve each selected a pseudonym, displayed on your nametag. Please address each other by these pseudonyms to encourage honesty and active sharing of viewpoints. Your real names will not be used by me in this research.

For the purposes of accurate documentation, this session is being audio recorded with two devices, in case one of them unexpectedly stops working. These audio recordings will not be published or posted; they are only being used by me to transcribe this session. The recordings will be used for research purposes.

I ask that you please be respectful of each other’s opinions, even if you disagree. Please let others finish their thoughts before you chime in. Because of these recording devices, if more than one person speaks at a time, it may become difficult to make out the comments in the recording, so please make an effort to speak one at a time.

Also, I want you to feel free to explain your answers and put them into context, but also allow time for others to contribute their thoughts and opinions to the questions.
I also ask that you keep your comments relevant to the question or closely related to the question being asked. Try not to go off-topic, as we have a limited amount of time and I want to be sure everyone gets to share her views.

Please silence or turn off your cell phones. If for some reason, you absolutely must take a call, I ask that you please step outside of the room.

This session should last no more than two hours. Thank you very much for taking the time to read & sign the consent form and for your participation today.

**Background Information**

In this session, we’ll be talking about your use of social media and mass media. First, I’d like to clarify what I mean when I say “mass media.” I mean print--like magazines, and TV, music videos, etc. When I say “social media,” I mean any website or app you use to communicate with others, whether you know them in real life or not. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, and more.

**Opening/Warm-up Question**

Briefly we’ll go around the room for this question – What specific mass media do you use each week, and for what main purposes?

Briefly we’ll go around the room for this question -- What specific social media do you use each week, and for what main purposes other than to keep in touch with friends? (Go around to all participants)

**Key Question 1**

After spending more than 30 minutes on social media, how do you generally feel about yourself? (Go around to all participants)
(After this point, let those who feel like sharing participate freely, taking special care to ensure one or two people are not dominating the conversation)

**Key Question 2**

I’ve heard you all share how you feel about yourself when you spend time on social media. Now, let’s switch gears back to mass media for a second. There is some research to suggest that mass media give many messages for how women should look. What do you think? Does that affect you personally?

*(Follow-up)* Now talk to me about social media. Do you think it does the same thing or something different in terms of giving you messages about how women should look?

**Key Question 3**

When it comes to your physical body image, do you think that is affected by social media? If so, how?

Talk to me about a specific time when social media made you feel negatively about your personal body image (give example).

*(Probing question; Follow-up if this comes up in the course of the discussion)* So, would you say that you were comparing yourself with the person you saw on social media? How did that make you feel?

When it comes to your personal body image, do you think that is affected by mass media? If so, how?
Closing Question

In this focus group, I was interested in body image media (both mass & social media). (disclose/explain intention). We covered a few main topics in our discussion today, but is there anything you’d like to add that we didn’t discuss?

Conclusion

Those are all the questions I have for you today. Thank you very much for your participation. Please feel free to enjoy any last refreshments on your way out.
Thank you all for coming today. My name is Nicki Karimipour and I'm a Ph.D. student here in the College of Journalism and I'm working on my dissertation, and I hope to use information gained in these focus groups as part of that. So again, thank you for helping me and coming out today and being part of that. I wanted to go over a few things before we get started. I want to encourage you all to participate freely—I really value your opinions, and I want to hear what you have to say. Even if you disagree with something that someone says, please be respectful. I want you to feel like you can share your opinions freely. I mentioned the audio recorders, and I'm using them to document what we talk about here today. The reason there are two is in case something fails. I'd like to ask you all to keep your discussion and comments as closely related to the question at hand as possible. The last thing is just to silence or turn off your cellphones and if you need to take a call, please step outside.

Again, thank you very much for participating today. In this session, we'll be talking about mass media and social media, and your use of both of those things. First I'd like to clarify what do I mean when I say mass media. For mass media, I mean anything print, like newspapers, magazines, also film, music video and TV. Social media would be any app or website you use to connect with friends or family—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, other kinds of blogs, et cetera.

So I wanted to start off by going around the room and asking: what specific mass media do you use each week and for what specific purposes?

Brenna: OK. Well I watch TV…I guess that’s considered mass media?

NK: Mhmm.

Brenna: I also have AP mobile, which is like a news site on my phone that gives me updates and everything. Honestly, that’s pretty much it in college. Sometimes a newspaper.

Samantha: I probably would read a magazine once a week and if you consider Netflix mass media—do you consider Netflix mass media?

NK: I would say movie slash TV.
Samantha: OK so I watch a lot of that. Um, I study a lot so I don’t have a lot of time to follow it; I just go on social media. That’s my main addiction if you’d call it that. Magazines like Seventeen, and I’ve seen some Vogue issues, so a little bit of those.

Arianna: For mass media, since college, I don’t really have a TV so I don’t really watch TV as much as I used to, but I have Yahoo! News. I’ll just scroll through headlines just to know what’s going on.

NK: OK…so mostly social media? To get news?

Arianna: Yeah. I mean, sometimes in the grocery store I’ll look at magazine headlines just to see what’s going on. Tabloids.

NK: OK. Anybody else?

Faye: For mass media, I had a newspaper with me. I read the Alligator almost every day. And that’s basically just to know what’s going on in Gainesville. I find it really useful to know about local information and local events because I like to be involved in that. I wouldn’t really consider it a news source even though they do cover local and national news, but I use it more for events. And then I listen to NPR.

Michelle: I get CNN updates on my phone and then usually when I get those, I’ll read through what’s going on. Occasionally, the Alligator. Definitely TV and occasionally movies.

Yolanda: TV, movies, umm...yeah. Things they already said.

Maddie: Yeah, kind of the same for me. I use Facebook a lot; I follow the links that are on there. Another strange method for how I get my news is from my GroupMe. I have a lot of people that I’m interacting with, so at random moments they’ll be like, ‘oh, look at this article.’ So it’s not really a news outlet but still get some type of news from it.

NK: I didn’t really hear you all talk about print. Well, newspapers…but in terms of magazines, do you all read any print magazines?

Brenna: I only look at headlines at grocery stores or if I’m at home, my parents buy like the People [magazine] or something, and I’ll read based on convenience. But I’m not gonna go out and buy one or anything like that.

Faye: I have a magazine subscription to Glamour. But my parents have a Cooking Light magazine that I scroll through.

NK: How about women’s magazines?

Group: No.
NK: So maybe let’s switch gears and talk about social media. On a daily basis, what social media outlets would you say you use?

Maddie: Basic ones—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram…at least for myself, that’s what I use.

Brenna: And Snapchat.

Maddie: Oh, Snapchat.

Arianna: I usually just use Facebook and Snapchat. I’m just starting to get into Instagram. I just got into it this fall.

Yolanda: I have a Tumblr, but I don’t use it to communicate with friends or family like how you define social media, I just use it for my own entertainment. Creative outlet.

NK: So you’re basically just looking at visual things on Tumblr?

Yolanda: Yeah, basically.

Faye: I would say the same thing, but with Pinterest. So Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest—that’s about it.

NK: OK. Anybody want to add anything else? (Pause). So one of the main purposes for social media are obviously to keep in touch with friends and family, but other than that purpose, is there a reason that you use social media?

Brenna: Whenever I get bored.

Maddie: To see what’s going on.

Yolanda: I’ll post photos on it not only to share with friends and family, but as a way of organizing my own photos.

Michelle: I think that’s where I get a lot of my news. Snapchat has the news thing where you can go through those…. and, yeah. Posting pictures.

Arianna: To advertise events, too—it’s a great way to say, ‘hey guys, come to this.’

NK: OK, so keeping in touch with friends; advertising for events. What do you find yourself looking at on social media?

Brenna: On Twitter, I look at….I don’t have a Vine, but I look at Vines on Twitter and I mainly look at those for the animals and the funny ones.

NK: OK, so like videos and entertainment.
Brenna:  Mhmm.

NK:  What else?

Arianna:  Just interesting articles and funny videos.

Faye:  How I got here [this focus group] was through the UF ’18 page, and I find it really useful—again, to see what kinds of events are going on—but also to help people answer questions and whatnot.

NK:  OK, so connecting and learning about events. So...after spending about half an hour on social media, how do you generally feel about yourself?

Brenna:  Well, I usually go on social media right when I wake up and before I go to bed. So it sorts wraps up my day, or it begins my day by looking at what other people do. That sounds kinda pathetic, but it’s true. And then like, if I’m bored throughout the day, it’s just something to do. Depending on what I see, I could feel positive or negative depending on if I see something bad or funny. But generally, if I don’t see something that sparks an actual feeling, I just feel fine.

NK:  You mentioned positive and negative feelings. Could you tell me a little more about that?

Brenna:  Yeah. Well, if I see a funny, cute video of a dog I’m going to feel happy—it’s so cute. But if I see something like someone’s mom died or something even petty like an ex-boyfriend talking to a new girl, it sorts just makes you feel down.

NK:  Anybody else want to share how you feel about yourself after spending about 30 minutes on social media?

Yolanda:  I think it depends on the social media. After I go on Facebook for a long time, I feel really terrible about myself. That was a really bad use of time. But Snapchat, I really love watching the global stories. Like, last night was Tel Aviv. I’ll go through the entire thing and watch it and I think it’s opening me up to new cultures and I really wanna travel so it goes with that. It depends on the outlet. Usually Facebook, I’ll feel the worst about myself.

NK:  OK, so you say you feel bad about yourself when you go on Facebook. What makes you feel that way?

Yolanda:  Well...it’s so superficial! Everything I’m seeing, it’s like, photos of my peers or whatever...and I’ll find myself...it sounds bad, but looking at them and judging, I guess? (gets flustered). I don’t know, even though I don’t really think of myself as a judgmental person. And so I think Facebook kind of makes you do that even if you don’t even see yourself that way. So
after you’re done you’re like, why did I just do that? Why do I even care what they’re doing?

NK: Does anybody else feel that way?

Faye: I think that’s a really good point that you made about feeling bad about wasting time on social media because it really doesn’t matter. Like, I don’t need to know about any of their lives in that much detail. I don’t care what you had for breakfast. But the bigger life events, it’s nice to be able to know and network with people that you care to keep in touch with. So that’s a negative. But then a positive is going on sites that…well, I’m gonna bring it back to Pinterest, but I use it as a tool for finding organizational things, or finding gardening ideas or recipes or something. So that doesn’t make me feel bad, but it doesn’t make me feel good, either—it’s just helpful.

NK: Mhmm.

Michelle: I think with Facebook, another thing is…the things you see on Facebook. If there’s something big happening in the world or the United States and there’s a ton of people posting about it, there’s always going to be people that have opinions you don’t agree with and then sometimes people will be getting in arguments about it. So after going through and reading all of that because I always end up reading through those types of things, I feel annoyed by it.

Maddie: Flashiness on social media also makes me annoyed. Like if I’m on Instagram or even Twitter and somebody is like, ‘just left the mall, popped like 100 tags.’ I’m like all right, so you went shopping, that’s cool; you got to show all your outfits? I actually follow people on Instagram who will show their money and be like, ‘oh, going to the mall’ and afterwards they’ll post a picture of their receipt. For what? Why did you do that?

NK: What other things make you feel annoyed?

Brenna: Just that people think their lives are that important. It’s kind of a paradox because you go on it to see other people’s lives, but then when they brag too much, you’re like, OK calm down.

NK: [pause]. I’m going to go back to something you said. You said that sometimes you feel like you go on social media to look at what your peers are doing.

Yolanda: We all don’t want to admit it, but it happens. That’s our society, unfortunately—I’m so against it. And yet, I do it. I should probably delete Facebook and everything because honestly, it’s terrible and it goes against everything I believe in. But you see girls popping up on your Facebook and Instagram and they’re dressed all slutty going to a party or
something, and you judge them for doing that even though they’re probably having a good time. Then you catch yourself thinking, ‘oh what are they doing?’ Who cares what they’re doing; they can do what they want. Even if they’re making bad decisions, why should it bother you? But for some reason, we still judge girls for doing ridiculous things.

Brenna: And guys.

Yolanda: OK, and guys—yeah.

Faye: It’s kind of the nature of social media because everything has a “Like” button and if you scroll past it, do you like it? It’s like you immediately judge it just by scrolling.

NK: OK—anybody want to add anything to that?

Michelle: I mean, I’ll admit that even if it’s unintentional, I judge people as I’m scrolling through. Obviously as you’re looking at something, you have some sort of initial reaction to it even if you catch yourself. You still have some sort of response to it, whether it’s positive or negative.

Arianna: I don’t really see it as judging, I see it more as if you have an opinion on something and maybe someone is clashing with your opinion and that makes you uncomfortable and maybe you start feeling negatively. Not necessarily judging—there is some incidences where you judge like, ‘ooh, I don’t like that shirt—why’s she wearing that shirt? Who would buy that shirt?’ But then there’s some things where it’s like, ‘oh you got engaged at age 19? I wouldn’t get engaged that young but if you’re happy, go for it.’

Brenna: I agree with that.

NK: OK. Anybody want to expand on how they feel about themselves when they spend time on social media?

Samantha: Honestly, when I’m on social media and I scroll through feeds and I see a lot of celebrities or I see a lot of people putting their weight loss stuff on there, it kinda makes me feel bad. I’m not at my standard of what I wish I could be, and the body image thing…it makes me feel bad sometimes about myself after I go on social media for a long time. Or if I go on Instagram and I see models’ pages because I follow a lot of fashion designers. I’m like, why can’t I look like her? And I’m sure there’s more of us that do that, too.

Brenna: Yeah, I agree with her on that.

Michelle: And I think also when you’re on social media, for the most part people don’t post the bad things that are going on, so you’re seeing all these people posting stuff from when they’re traveling or when something big
just happened, so if you’re having a bad day or nothing’s really going on in your life or you’re worried about something, you might think all these people are happy and my life sucks. Even if it’s just how you’re feeling in the moment.

NK: So maybe just putting up the positive stuff and highlighting that?

Michelle: Yeah.

NK: So you [Samantha] brought up body image. Does anybody else feel that way when they look at social media or even mass media?

Yolanda: Yeah, so I’ll see really fit girls on Instagram but I think we might have different reactions to it because what I get out of it is like, you know, I could look like that if I went out and worked out right now. It’s kinda more of a motivator for me whereas maybe you might feel more sad? [addressing Samantha]. At least that’s what I got out of what you were saying. For me it’s like, everyone can look like that, we just have to put in the effort so it kinda motivates me more, I think.

NK: So maybe viewing those images is a sort of motivational tool for what you hope to accomplish?

Yolanda: Mhmm.

Brenna: I agree more with her [Samantha]. I feel really down when I see that. Like aw, I wish that could be me, but it’s not, sorta thing. I mean, I’m happy with my life but it’s just those small instances where you’re like, mine could be better if I had this or if I looked like that.

NK: Do you all seek those images out, do you follow those people, or do they just kind of pop up in your feed…how does that happen?

Brenna: They pop up, or it’s one of my friends from high school or college or something.

Samantha: Yeah, it’s my friends from high school or their friends that they’re posing with…I’m just like, can I look like that, please? Thanks.

Faye: I follow a lot of health blogs, so I see a lot of beautifully sculpted yoga bodies and I’m like, well…I could do that. But I’m also happy with the way I am, so it’s a motivator but at the same time I use it to judge where I am. I see that and I am also recognizing that I’m comfortable with myself so that’s something positive.

Arianna: For me personally, I don’t really compare because everybody has a different body shape and everybody is different, so you can’t really compare yourself to somebody who’s six foot when you’re five foot
because your body type is different. So me personally, I don’t. I’m just like, ‘oh dang, she has abs. Let me look at mine.’ [shows stomach]. I mean, I’m not horrible; it’s just not a negative thing in my eyes. Everybody has their insecurities and me personally, I don’t get too sad or upset with people. I’m just like, oh wow, good for her.

NK: OK.

Michelle: I think for me it just kinda depends on what kind of day I’m having. If I’m feeling bad about myself one day or having a bad hair day and you see someone who is posting really pretty pictures, you’re like ‘oh man. I wish I looked like that.’ But I mean, other days it’s different so it kinda just depends on how I’m feeling.

NK: OK. Anybody else want to share?

Yolanda: What you were saying about how if someone’s hair looks really good and you’re not having a good hair day… I sometimes think about it in the opposite way. Like wow, I’m glad I don’t care that much to go curl my hair when I go out at night—because I don’t. I’m sorry, you look nice, but why did you put in that much effort? So in a way, makes me more confident in who I am, looking at girls who I may see as insecure because they go to those extremes to make themselves look nice.

NK: I see. All right, so we talked about how you all feel when you go on social media, so maybe we can switch gears and talk about mass media. Mass media is anything print, such as a newspaper or magazine, and TV, film, music videos. There is some research to suggest that mass media tells gives messages to women about how they should look. What do you all think about that?

Brenna: I think it’s true. Here’s one example: People think George Clooney or Brad Pitt are like the hottest guys on earth, but they’re kinda old. If you see an older women, they never ever say, she’s so beautiful. They always say she looks so good for her age. Or they comment on how young she looks. So I feel like there’s always pressure to look young, to look fit. They don’t even give moms a break. Like, ‘oh she already had her baby, how does she bounce back so quick?’ Women can never just be how they are. It’s like they always have to be one step more.

Yolanda: I actually think a little differently than Brenna does. I don’t think that the media is telling us how we should look; I think that we see beautiful people in the media because they’re nice to look at. So if you want to interpret that as the media telling us how we should look, well, I guess that people want us to all be as beautiful as we can. I think—maybe I’m wrong—but maybe it’s a fact that there’s…hmm. This is interesting because I guess everyone sees a different body image as being beautiful but I think that it
comes back to what's healthy for you. It’s healthy to be fit so people see that as being the most beautiful. I think the media is just portraying what’s pleasing to the eye, and if you wanna interpret that as how you should look, well, it’s good for you to be fit and I think I’m going off a little bit…

NK: No, that’s OK—keep going.

Yolanda: I’m done [laughs].

NK: Samantha, do you want to share?

Samantha: I definitely think that the media objectifies women, specifically because there are cases where they’re always talking about, ‘oh, look at this model, look at this actress, she’s so beautiful.’ And when you look at a man, they always talk about his intelligence in the media, or they say his acting skills are so great. But you look at women and they’re always focused on their bodies, their fashion, what’s her latest fashion trend? Where did she buy her clothes? What about the men’s outfits? They don’t necessarily do that. They focus on their intellectual stuff, and I think that it’s unfair.

Maddie: I also feel like when you’re looking at magazines or even on TV, you see the same type of person. For example, when you see a black family on TV, it’s always the light-skinned mother and you may have the dark father, then the girl with the curly hair. And that’s not how all black families look, but that’s how they’re objectified on television or in the magazines. So I feel like they portray beauty as a certain type and it’s always consistent. Like, I hardly see any variation.

NK: OK, so when you say it’s the same type, define that for me.

Maddie: Yeah, like I said, whenever you’re gonna see a black woman you’re gonna see a light-skinned girl with curly hair, if you see a white woman she’s probably gonna be tall, blonde, possibly brunette depending on what type of magazine you’re looking at. That type of stereotype…like, you see the same person whenever you look at a magazine. Look at a magazine right now, you’re probably gonna find that every page is gonna look the same.

NK: What do you all feel about that?

Arianna: I don’t necessarily think it’s the same person, or that they’re objectifying women, I think they’re just selling what sells. Really, what women want is…women are insecure about themselves; they wanna be beautiful, and society is going on what’s trending and they’re using that for their own gain and their own profit. So they’re over exemplifying…like, overdoing it. ‘Look at her gorgeous complexion; she’s flawless! You wanna know why? This product right here, you should buy it!’
Samantha: I think they’re just reinforcing that idea whenever they say that because I know a lot of my friends...we’re all for intellectual conversations, having quality conversations with people, reading books, staying educated; we’re not so into getting the high fashion, getting the perfect, clear skin. I think it’s different for everyone, but personally, me and my friends are not so concerned with that. I would think that a lot of women are like that. They’re not all just about the physical, material world.

Arianna: Yeah.

Samantha: I was just also gonna say, the thing about models...you’ll never find a 5-ft tall women who has Down’s syndrome or has some kind of disability. You will never find that on a high fashion magazine, I guarantee it. So I think that doesn’t represent the population—we’re all different.

Brenna: Well, if we’re talking about high fashion, to be honest, being 6-ft tall...it’s how the clothes hang on you. It always hangs better than on shorter people. For shorter people, it’s harder to find clothes that hang well [begins to backtrack and rethink her statement, perhaps for fear of offending others]. I think it just depends because not everyone wants to be like that—not everyone wants to be a 6-ft model. And men are just as insecure, too. And I think mass media affects them as just as much, because they’re seeing all these attractive actors too. I don’t think it’s the same level of intensity as women.

NK: Does anybody want to expand or add on that? [long pause]. We talked about how mass media tells women they should look and got some different opinions on that. Now, let’s switch gears to social media. Do you think social media gives any messages for how women should look?

Arianna: I feel like social media goes against mass media a lot. I feel like a lot of people are angry with that and they have to say, ‘no—this is wrong. We should do this’ even though some of it is a little over the top and not exactly the complete truth.

NK: OK. Can you be a little more specific?

Arianna: OK. So I came across this story on Facebook, I clicked and I opened it and it’s about this girl...I think she was at Wal-Mart. She overheard this mom and this daughter and they were looking through clothes and the daughter looked at this tank top and it was a huge, plus size shirt. She was like, ‘look, I can fit me and my friend in here.’ She was joking around about that, you know, because it’s big. Children don’t really think about that kinda stuff. And I guess this woman who thought that shirt would fit her felt really upset about it, but then she came back and she bought the shirt and took a selfie with it. It went viral and everybody’s like, ‘oh, shame on the mother and daughter for doing this to them. Everybody should love
their bodies.’ And there’s other people arguing: no, she’s unhealthy. This is not OK. The whole thing about it was that she overheard someone just joking. People were saying they made fun of her even though they never really made fun of her. Maybe it was just a comment she found offensive because of her insecurities, but it created so many different perspectives. People take it different ways like, this is OK; no this is not OK. It’s just like social media causes a lot of fights.

NK: Anybody want to add anything else about…

Samantha: I wanna say social media for me raises awareness about a lot of things that I previously had no knowledge about. For example, Tumblr allowed me to gain knowledge on feminism, which I previously had no knowledge of—I didn’t know what it meant. And now I can proudly call myself a feminist. I also didn’t know about the #AllBlackLivesMatter, and that brought awareness for me and now I’m trying to be egalitarian and fight racism, fight sexism, so it makes me want to raise the world to a more peaceful place.

Brenna: Well, mass media, if you wanna get down to it, says that most people who are beautiful or successful look like this. And social media is like no it’s OK, everyone’s beautiful.

Arianna: Yeah.

NK: So you would say social media is promoting a more positive body image?

Brenna: It can, because people go on there and express their opinions. It’s not so much censored by what attracts viewers. So I mean, there’s a lot of hate on there too, but for the most part I would say it’s pretty positive in terms of body image. It’s trying to make everybody feel better about themselves.

NK: Do you all agree, disagree, want to share something else?

Yolanda: Agree. Especially on Tumblr. Tumblr is a crazy social media—honestly, it’s nothing like I thought it would be, and then when you get into the depths of it…to some extent, it’s overly accepting. Hmm…that’s not the right word. Accepting is great, but it’s pushing things, even overthinking things, like how in her example—you were making fun of her; you can’t make fun of her [woman at Wal-Mart]. Like, maybe they weren’t making fun of her. It takes things to the extreme, so in that sense, Tumblr is hugely accepting of different people but then it depends in what sense you’re looking at things. If you wanna say that maybe Facebook and Instagram make you wanna look a certain way because you see… I don’t know. I think it depends on your outlook on these social media. Because if you go on Instagram and you’re insecure or something, you’re going to leave feeling bad about yourself, but you don’t have to. You can go on Tumblr and feel good about yourself, so I think they’re all different.
Michelle: I think all of that is great, and there are a lot of people who are for social justice and all that, but then I think it kinda comes to a point where they go too far and then they just find everything offensive. And they’re trying to pick apart every situation. Sometimes there’s really nothing to be offended about but they’re trying to make something into a problem when it’s not. So I think it’s good to an extent, but then you’re just making a problem when it’s not.

Brenna: Yeah, I agree with that.

Samantha: I think it’s a double-edged sword for body image. If you go on Tumblr, they have some really terrible pro-ana and pro-mia tags. And those can be really depressing. Those are really terrible. And unfortunately, they don’t censor those or delete those. I’ve seen some really bad ones myself, just scrolling. And then on Instagram, they have a tendency to censor that stuff, so I feel like depending on the social media you’re getting different perspectives.

NK: Have any of you seen any pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia content like Samantha has mentioned?

Brenna: I haven’t personally.

Michelle: I’ve heard about it, but I don’t look at it and I haven’t seen that.

Samantha: I’ve seen it and they talk about thigh gaps and not eating, or like, there’s all kinds of pro-ana diets. And I message them and I’m like, ‘are you OK? How can I help you?’ I feel terrible for them. These girls are in trouble.

NK: Has anyone else heard of thigh gap?

Brenna: Yeah, that was a trend or something a little while ago.

Arianna: I heard about it only recently from one of my friends. Someone was joking about it and I was like, ‘what’s a thigh gap?’ and she showed me some pictures. I was like, ‘what’s wrong with her legs? Why are they like that? And why does it matter?’ I don’t understand what the big deal is. So she has a different body type, some people can’t do that because they’re naturally curvier. It doesn’t mean anything—I was so confused for a little bit.

Michelle: I think people turn things that you can’t really achieve into a trend like the thigh gap. That’s kinda just how your bone structure is. So it’s not really something you can achieve but they turn it into something where there’s workouts for you to get one when it might be impossible.

Yolanda: I think it stems, though, from…I mean, it does look nice. Like not to be superficial or something, but my legs touch and I’d rather if they didn’t. Not
because of this whole trend thing or thigh gap, but just the concept of having thinner legs might look nice. I think that’s just what it stems from, but it gets blow into weird proportions because it starts trending, and that’s a big problem with social media. It does stem from truth, I think, for a lot of people. But yeah, it gets blow out of proportion because like they said, for some people it’s not even attainable so it shouldn’t become what it has been.

Brenna: And girls are more critiqued on social media on how they look than guys are by far. Like even with the thigh gap, you don’t see guys with thigh gaps and posting it—well, they can’t, obviously. But that’d just be weird! You just don’t see it.

Faye: Yeah, except for the ‘dad bod’ trend…positive body image.

Brenna: Yeah, they're promoting dad bods, which is sorta like out-of-shape. I’m sorta like, that’s hypocritical because it’s just setting guys up who have no reason to talk, and just insulting girls because they don’t have…what about mom bods? We can just promote that.

Arianna: That already happened. There was a whole thing where moms were posting their after-baby bod photos as a response to that.

NK: So when it comes to your own personal body image, do you feel like that’s affected by social media in any way?

Samantha: Mine, definitely is, to be honest. Makes me wish that I went out running instead of eating a bowl of Captain Crunch.

NK: OK. Anybody else want to share?

Arianna: For me, it depends. I’m pretty positive about my body, but there are some photos where I’m like ‘ew, I don’t look good, I don’t wanna post this anywhere—I don’t want people to see me like that. I want to make myself look better.’ Just in a picture. It’s like oh crap, no, my stomach looks weird there, hold on; let me take another picture.

Maddie: Yeah, I agree. Every female has a thousand selfies of the same photo; you just choose the best one and even though it may not look different to anyone else, to me, you can see my eye was kinda squinting in that [group laughs]. They’re [social media friends] probably gonna say something about me like I have a lazy eye or something [Group laughs]. It definitely does affect the way I… if I was to post a picture on Instagram, I analyze my photos before I post it [Group mhmm’s and agrees].

Brenna: For sure.

NK: Do you all agree with that? [Group agrees]
Michelle: Mhmm.
Samantha: Definitely.
Faye: Yeah, I would say that I analyze the pictures of myself that I would then post more so than analyzing anybody else’s posts against myself. [Group agrees]
NK: Do you all analyze your peers’ photos with the same level that you analyze your own?
Maddie: Nope.
Brenna: No.
NK: Do you analyze the photos of your peers in any way?
Brenna: I glance over it like, ‘oh they look nice.’
Arianna: Yeah, they look like they’re having fun. They look cute; what are they doing?
Michelle: I think definitely when it’s yourself; you know certain things that you look for in pictures of yourself. Like ‘oh, my hair does that weird thing’ and you’ll look for it, but other people…you just look at them overall.
Samantha: For Snapchat, one thing that I find kinda annoying is when I see my friends having fun without me or they went somewhere and didn’t invite me I feel left out.
Maddie: You send that salty [angry] Snapchat like…
Samantha: I am that salty Snapchatter. Having fun without me [Group laughs].
NK: What other specific things make you feel negatively or bothered on social media?
Brenna: Well, I do feel negatively about my body whenever I do see these allegedly “perfect” girls. I can’t help but compare to my own friends. Even though on a normal basis, I feel fine about myself, you know? I have insecurities but it doesn’t really tie me down. It doesn’t faze me on a normal basis, but whenever I go on social media, that’s just what I do. I become the insecure person who just compares her body. But on the normal basis, I’m not like that. So I think it [social media] brings it out in me. I don’t know about anybody else.
Samantha: I agree with that. Also, one video I found on Facebook that did make me feel good about myself was this video where they undid all the airbrushing
on the models. I don’t know if you guys have seen that—I was like, wow! They’re like us. And I felt a lot better. Maybe if I airbrushed myself with all that Photoshop, I could look similar.

Michelle: On Buzz Feed they had a video of people that worked for them, and they had professional makeup done…I think they were people you’d consider to be average people…they aren’t models or anything. So they did their makeup and their hair and they airbrushed them. They looked like people that you’d find on the cover of a magazine. And before all of that, they just looked like a normal person. So it kinda makes you realize.

Faye: People are more aware of that. I know there are some companies like an underwear company [Aerie] that all of their models are untouched and un-airbrushed and their bodies are what you see in their ads. And Dove did that All Women campaign and they have real women. They’re just real people in towels and you don’t even think twice that they’re just regular people. So I think that’s bringing awareness to the fact that you don’t have to be perfect to advertise a product, nor do you have to compare yourself to perfect supermodels.

NK: So in terms of mass or social media, which one is more body positive in your opinion?

Brenna: Probably social media, especially Twitter.

Maddie: I was on Instagram and Twitter…have y’all seen the #DontJudgeMe?

Faye: Oh, the ugly and beautiful thing?

Maddie: Yeah.

NK: What is that?

Maddie: It’s like this new trend like “Don’t judge me,” so they try to make themselves look really ugly and then they’ll do all kinds of stuff to their face and then they’ll pan the video out, then they’ll pan back in and it’ll be them all done up with makeup and they look real good. I was kinda just like, what’s the purpose? What are you really promoting? People were like OMG, this is so inspiring but I’m like, what you’re trying to say is that if you’re ugly, there’s no room for you to like…I don’t know…it’s not promoting anything positive to me. And that’s on social media. I feel like that’s promoting, in my opinion, a negative view of beauty or whatever. But then when you go on mass media like television, there will probably be different outlets where they’ll say ‘plus size is beautiful’ or ‘this or that is beautiful’ so again, it really does depend.

NK: OK. Anybody else want to share?
Samantha: Regarding the Dove body commercial, I’m more prone to purchasing from a company that supports non-airbrushing models; people that I can relate to. Because if I can relate to something, then I’m more likely to be like, I wanna be like that person and I see that it’s feasible, then I’m more prone to becoming a consumer for that product.

Michelle: I think in mass media, I mean, it’s gonna be different based on where you’re looking, but I think a lot of that is moving toward being more body positive. They’re trying to start campaigns and ads where they project those ideas.

Faye: But then again, those ads still stick out like a sore thumb. Like oh, they’re doing something really great! But that’s one ad compared to all the rest. So, you can still see that they’re doing good, but you compare it to everything else and it’s like, well, nothing’s really changing.

Maddie: Yeah, it’s just like part of the trend. For example, have you ever been to Forever 21’s plus size section? But you never see plus size models on the actual ads on the outside of the store where it’s visible from the road.

Samantha: Mhmm.

Faye: Yes, and I saw on Buzz Feed there was a video about plus sized models trying on a bunch of different things at stores advertised as plus size. There was one video about that and there was one video about “one size fits all.” There really isn’t a one size fits all.

NK: Let’s go back to the comparison comment. Someone brought that up. Do you all feel like you compare yourself to peers, or celebrities, or both, perhaps?

Brenna: Yeah.

Michelle: Yeah.

Maddie: I think everybody does. I compare myself to my peers sometimes in terms of...for example, education-wise if I see some of my high school friends are not in school, I’m kinda like ooh that’s awkward, we both had the same opportunities. Why are you working at Coldstone [laughs]? So, I just feel like I do judge a little bit sometimes when I compare my life. Like OK, I’m kinda on the up-and-up.

NK: Educationally, OK. What other attributes would you say you compare, if you do compare?

Brenna: Personality. Because you can see how they are, and if they’re one of those people who flirts with every person on social media, you’re like hmm...let’s see how far that gets you. Or if they’re mean or one of those
people that has to jump into every argument and say their piece. You don’t judge them, but you sorta have an idea of them even if you’ve never met them before. Or it could be like, one of my best friends, she has to jump in to every argument and say her piece. I’m just like come on; it’s not your place. So social media is a place where you can…. I don’t wanna say judge, but just have this mindset about people that you don’t have in person all the time.

NK: OK, education, personality…we talked about accomplishments and travel.

Michelle: Personally, I look at certain people and if they look a certain way…definitely I’ll admit I look at celebrities and be like, ugh I wish my skin looked like hers but you never know if they’re editing it or they probably have super expensive makeup or treatments that they get done, so to an extent, yeah. But then you kinda have to think about it realistically.

Brenna: I’ve had some friends on social media….not nudes or anything, but they show pictures of themselves that are really revealing—boys and girls. I’m just like, why would you put that on social media? It’s gross in my opinion.

Yolanda: My peers make me feel more insecure when I’m comparing based on body image because celebrities, there’s a reason why they’re famous. They look really good. And your peers, none of them are probably going to be famous, so it’s more everyday people that you’re more on level with in the social hierarchy.

Samantha: I feel like I relate more to my peers than a celebrity, I just wanna say that.

Michelle: It’s more like the average kinda person.

NK: I wanted to circle back to a topic that I think we touched on a little bit when we talked about content on social media. Do you ever feel like you see content relating to healthy living and working out? [Group agrees]. Do you feel like you seek that out, or is that something that sort of appears? [Most say: both]. Can you talk to me about that?

Arianna: For me, I’ll have friends who are fit and they’re like, I’m gonna do this fitness challenge. Then I’m like oh I could do that fitness challenge; I’m gonna do it too. Then you click a link or something and all of a sudden all these ads of fitness stuff pop up. Your suggested stories are like, take this fitness boot camp. So, I would say both [seek out and appears].

Maddie: I definitely agree; a lot of times, that fitness stuff, I feel like it’s a trend as well. You know all those new Fit Bits and fit bands? Being fit is really a trend now and I’ve noticed it a lot more—people are trying to work out more. It happens every so often, I feel like, with the new diets and stuff. It pops up ever so often. And then also, people just wanna be healthy too, at
the same time. You see documentaries like the McDonald’s one, I forgot what it’s called…

Brenna and others: SuperSize me.

Maddie: Yeah, and then you’re like oh I’m eating so terribly, I wanna eat healthy and then you see a Whole Foods around the corner, or a Trader Joe’s and you’re like oh I’m gonna be healthy now. And then you see McDonald’s again and you’re like, I kinda want some fries [laughs].

Brenna: Yeah, I have a lot of friends that post their healthy meals on social media and it does sorta motivate you. That looks good; I should try it. Or I need to go on this diet when you’re looking at the food you’re actually eating or something like that.

Samantha: When I look at those things, I also think, I wanna be healthy too. So I start buying things that are healthy and as I go on, I start to go on, I start to notice that my bill for food skyrockets. The price for unhealthy food compared to healthy food is absolutely ludicrous. I feel like there should be some kind of law that makes healthy food just as inexpensive as unhealthy food. There’s gotta be a way to make that price lower, because that’s why there’s such an obesity epidemic because in the crisis we’re having right now, nobody can really afford to always eat healthy. That’s why I feel like all the celebrities are all on the diets, because they can afford it more than I can—I’m a college student; I’m just trying to pay my student loans off. I’m eating Ramen noodles—that’s my nutrition [laughs].

Michelle: I think as far as seeking it out, personally I go on Pinterest a lot and on Pinterest, one of the things I’ll always look for is healthy meals if I’m about to go grocery shopping; I’ll try to find something to make that’s healthier than what I usually eat. Or different workout things. I run a lot, but sometimes I wanna try something different so I’ll find different workout routines or exercises to do.

Faye: I intentionally seek those kinds of things out because I played team sports all my life and now that I’m in college, I don’t really have time to commit myself to a team. So I workout on my own and I don’t really know what to do without a coach. I use social media as a tool to plan workouts. But then I also seek it out because as a vegetarian for five years, four of those years were at home where I had supportive family members that were interested in my health and tracking all the nutritional needs that I had, as well as planning recipes and figuring out everything. Now that I’m on my own, I have all of that background but then again I’m on my own so I have to really put time and effort into planning meals and finding healthier alternatives to things.
NK: OK. I want you guys to close your eyes and think about a specific time when social media made you feel negatively about your personal body image. Talk to me about that.

Brenna: When a girl that I didn’t really like had a better body than me. It’s mainly people that I don’t like that much, if I feel like they look better than me. This sounds so petty, but it’s true. If they look better than me, I feel worse about myself than if it’s someone that I genuinely liked looked better than me.

Michelle: I agree with that.

Maddie: Me too.

Yolanda: [laughs] Yeah, that’s definitely true.

Michelle: It’s like you come across someone on Facebook that you went to high school with that you weren’t best of friends with and you’re like aw man, look where she is now. But if it’s your friend you’re like oh it’s so great that you’re working towards this.

Faye: There was this girl in high school that is genuinely so mean. Just outright mean. But now she posts all of these really positive things and I was like, that is so fake—I’ve known you for so long and I tried so hard to be friends with you but every single instance of friendship, she just ruins it [laughs]. I’m sorry to say it, but those positive thoughts that she’s putting out, I can’t see that as being genuine. And I know she’s doing that for Likes. And she’s beautiful, but it really frustrates me.

NK: OK, so when you say doing it for Likes, what do you guys think about that kind of thing? Do you think people post things just to get Likes? [Group agrees]. Do you feel like you feel a certain way if you post something and it doesn’t get a certain amount of Likes on social media?

Arianna: Of course.

Brenna: Yeah.

Maddie: I’m salty [upset/angry]. I compare my Likes to other peoples’ Likes. Let’s say I post a picture and I think I look pretty good in that picture. And then somebody else posts a picture like 5 minutes after me, I’m like, well damn, she already got 25 Likes and I’m still on 15! So I definitely compare my Likes to others, and what their picture looks like as opposed to mine.

Yolanda: I don’t know if this is that relevant to your study, but in high school, this guy that I know would post a picture—he’s really into working out, like obsessed with it, it’s strange. He posted a picture and he would walk around the class and be like, ‘hit me with that Like.’ He’s physically
seeking them out [group laughs]. I don’t know if other guys do this, but it’s like this one instance that I saw so it’s interesting to compare it to females because you might think women might be more insecure about that sort of thing, but here he is, this buff guy and he’s like ‘please Like my photo.’ It’s like, are you kidding me? I don’t care about that as much as he did so it’s kind of interesting.

Maddie: I feel like a girl would never do that—like, ‘go Like my picture!’ I feel like that’s just guys—guys definitely…I’ve seen pictures where guys will be like, ‘go Like my last post.’

Yolanda: Really?

Maddie: Yeah, it’s really attention seeking.

Yolanda: That’s so interesting.

Brenna: I think women are that way secretly but it looks worse if I’m like, ‘OMG, go follow me on Insta and “Like” all my selfies’ [imitates Valley girl]. That makes everyone think of me as this petty person that just cares about herself, superficial …well for guys, I don’t think it’s as much…well, you can think he’s superficial. But it’s not like an instant reaction as much as if I, or one of us, were to do it.

Michelle: I think with girls it’s more so with your friends like, ‘you better go Like my picture.’ Or you’ll go through and see if there’s someone who usually Likes your picture and they didn’t this time—how rude! [laughs]. I mean for me, it’s usually just joking. I’ll be watching my friends scroll past it and I’m like hey wait a second, aren’t you going to Like my photo? I don’t seek out people and be like hey, why aren’t you Liking my picture, if you’re not really close friends with them.

Brenna: True friends “Like” your pictures.

Maddie: Yeah.

Faye: Yeah, I heard my boyfriend’s sister….we were in the car together and she was like, ‘OMG, she keeps posting selfies, but I’m her friend so I have to Like them.’ [group laughs]. There’s a code…like a social construct that forces you to Like your friends pictures? Who cares.

Yolanda: I was unaware of that [laughs]. I guess I’m a bad friend. I’ll just Like a picture if I genuinely like it.

Samantha: I also think with the whole posting things to get Likes thing, I think that’s definitely true because you don’t find people posting things like, ‘wow I just failed this exam.’ No one’s gonna Like that, so why would they post it? That’s why you always see positive things about peoples’ lives being great
and wonderful all the time, which makes us sometimes feel bad because we’re comparing ourselves to their level of happiness when it’s just different happiness.

Brenna: And I also think a lot of social media is like…whenever you post a picture, 95% of the time, you’re in it. Generally, people are in the photo [as opposed to it being just a landscape]. They feel better about themselves when you Like their picture, because it’s like liking them. Liking how they look at that moment or something.

Maddie: You can’t go on social media looking any type of way.

Arianna: I think it depends on the social media. If you’re talking to just your friends…

Maddie: Then I could be like, I just woke up. On Instagram, you can’t just…

Arianna: Especially if you’re profile is not private and anybody can view it and share it.

Maddie: And then screenshots are real. People are nasty; they just take screenshots of anything. Your business is for the public. Really, if you don’t want it to be seen, you don’t need to post it because we now have screenshots and those are going to be sent in everybody’s GroupMe’s, text messages, iMessages, whatever. So you can’t look crazy.

NK: What types of things would be screenshots?

Samantha: Screenshots of your friends’ faces so you can use it as blackmail for something.

Maddie: Right!

Samantha: Like you sent this picture of me, I’ll send this ugly-faced picture of you.

Maddie: Yeah. Funny things, too. But mostly it’s like negative things.

Arianna: I screenshot things I want to remember. Like omg, so funny.

Maddie: Or text messages are the most notoriously screenshots.

Brenna: And people post them.

NK: So Maddie, you said you can’t go on social media looking any type of way. What are your opinions on that?

Brenna: It’s like, if it’s for everyone to see…like on Snapchat, you can send things specifically to friends, or you can put it on your story. On my story, I try not to look bad. But if I’m sending snaps just to my friends, I’ll triple-chin it, I
really don’t care what I send them. It depends on if it’s really private or if it’s something everyone can see. Because you don’t wanna look bad…you want everyone to think that you look nice.

Samantha: And also on Facebook, I would never post a picture of myself in my basketball slides and shorts and hair a mess, right after practice. I would probably be more professional with the way I look, have my hair nice, because your employers are definitely looking at your social media. They’re like, is this person going to be fit for the company and do they represent our values well, because consumers can look at their profile and see what they represent because they represent the company. So it’s really important to keep a professional look on your social media. There’s a disconnect between social media and real life.

Faye: I don’t have any bad pictures of myself because if I were to post something, I don’t take pictures of myself. It’s either in groups or with someone, but it’s mostly to highlight events. But I just recently started thinking about because I just started TA’ing and I was thinking…I’ve looked at my TA’s on Facebook before, what do they see on my profile? So I went on the public view and saw they can see I’m in a relationship, I worked here, I’m from here… I was like mmm, what are they gonna think? I mean, there’s nothing negative on there but you still have to think about what people can see.

Maddie: I definitely do that sweep of my social media like OK, let me look at these pictures because I was young, so let me see what I’ve done 56 weeks ago.

NK: OK, so I just wanted to close by saying that in this focus group, I recruited under the impression that you all would be talking to me about your use of mass media and social media, but I was really interested in body image—women’s body image, so I’m glad that came up naturally in the course of our conversation. Are there any topics you feel like we didn’t cover relating to body image now that you know it’s about media use and female body image?

Yolanda: I was talking about this with someone the other day. I think through Instagram and Facebook, there’s this whole new thing that since now we’re so public about pictures of ourselves….in the past, that was never a thing. If you took photos, you kept them. There was no way to show them to your friends unless you physically handed them a photo. So it’s this whole new concept of trying to look good because other people are gonna see you. Before, it was just photos for the sake of memories and stuff. I still try to keep it that way if you look at my Instagram—I have one picture of my face on the whole thing. It’s more about experiences and memories and documenting your life. So this whole new concept of trying to look good for people…it’s a whole new body image sort of thing because
you’re comparing yourself to all of these girls that are your peers. And it also then takes it to people posing more inappropriately on social media because they…who knows? There might be a cute guy looking at your photos, whereas in the past, that was never a thing. So now people are more slutty with how they pose and it kinda changes our culture, so I may see a girl and have a different image of her in my head now that I see photos of her on her Instagram if it’s like a low-cut top or whatever. So I think just generally, my point is that social media…in a way, it could turn you into even more of a superficial person than you are in the sense of trying to look good all the time. Just the fact that it’s so new to our culture, that’s the strangest aspect of it to me.

Brenna: And another thing about body image…right now I’m doing steps to like look better and everything, so right now I won’t post any pictures in a bikini or anything like that because I’m waiting until I look better, sort of…because I do compare myself to the other girls that do have perfect bikini bodies, so I don’t know if that’ll help you, but it’s like…people wait until they look like that, which is almost impossible because you are who you are, but it’s sorta in the back of your mind. It’s like, how are people gonna judge my photo compared to hers sorta thing.

Samantha: And I think social media is definitely objectifying women. Like your example [Yolanda] with girls dressing slutty or that kinda thing, I think it’s because social media objectifies women and that’s exploiting them—making them dress a certain way because that’s what’s expected of a lot of them.

Yolanda: But I think that it’s not just that social media does that, but it’s the fact of the girls…I mean, they’re doing it for themselves, obviously, but it’s because they think that people are paying so much attention to them and that they always have to look good. That’s another thing that social media does, and it’s not just because like, it’s objectifying women or whatever. It’s just because girls wanna look good for whoever is seeing them. And it’s gonna be there forever—it’s a photo.

Faye: Yeah, you’re right. It’s so instantaneous. If you were to even think back 15 years ago, you would have to have a camera, intentionally take a picture, wait to get it developed, have a photo and then still care about it. Now you can just snap a picture and send it off so there’s not this whole waiting period of still having to think about it. Rather, it’s just instant, you can send it off—boom, people can judge it and think what they want.

Samantha: But also about the attention thing…I think they’re not gonna get a bunch of Likes if they’re under a sheet [like a burka], so that’s an extreme example but it’s just to prove a point that that’s why they’re exposing themselves. Because that’s how they’re gonna get Likes. And I think a major trigger of
Brenna: Social media just introduces you to so many more people, so it’s like you have so many more people to impress. Those people can see what you’re doing; so there are so many more people that you have to entertain, almost. There’s so much more of an audience. Even if they aren’t paying attention to you or whatever, they can still look at it.

Yolanda: Another thing that I’ve noticed is the weird concept of girls when they post pictures...sometimes it’s so obvious that they’re trying to highlight a certain part of their body. That’s something else that never would come up because you used to just take photos for yourself or maybe your partner, or whatever [laughs]. But you’ll see girls, they’ll be turning around in a bikini and their whole butt will be out. And it’s just like, who are you doing this for? So in a way if you’re insecure, that could maybe enforce that for you. But for me, it just makes me look even worse on those girls and then it comes back to judging again. I see girls who are trying to flaunt certain parts of their body and I’m so confused by it. So social media does that a lot.

Maddie: Ah, I don’t know; I wouldn’t blame social media for that just because when you see a picture, you wanna see that picture after—regardless of if it’s going up or not. Somebody takes a picture of me, I wanna see it. That’s still me in the photo. Although social media does make people highlight certain parts of their body, I still feel like you wanna look good in a photo even if it is just for yourself. You’re gonna highlight things you like about yourself, so if you really like your hair, you’re gonna take a headshot. If you like your legs, you’ll take a full body. That’s kinda like how I see it.

NK: OK. Anybody want to add anything else?

Yolanda: I was mostly talking about the more sexualized parts of the body. Legs, I totally get that, because it’s like a good angle or whatever for you. But if a girl is taking a picture of her face but then angles it so that her entire chest is in it, too...that’s kinda more where I was coming from, even though you wanna look good for yourself too, yeah, but that’s obviously for another reason. You’re trying to show off to people.
Brenna: But why can’t a girl reveal something about herself that she’s proud of? What about that is so bad to post? I mean, I’m just playing devil’s advocate for this.

Yolanda: Yeah.

Brenna: As opposed to a guy who’s posting his entire chest and maybe he’s not getting backlash for that, but girls do.

Yolanda: I give them backlash, so… [laughs]

Brenna: Well, yeah. But generally, they don’t get backlash for it from the majority of people. So it’s just like what about girls, why can’t they do that?

Samantha: There’s definitely a double standard.

Maddie: Yeah.

Samantha: Like the nipple thing that’s going on right now. Women can’t post their nipple on Instagram and they take those pictures down, but for guys, they can have their nipples showing in every photo.

Yolanda: It’s kind of based on truth though. This comes back to a lot of things like the thigh gap. It stems from some truth like it’s healthier to be thin. There’s some truth to that. So the nipple thing, women’s nipples have been sexualized more than men’s nipples. That’s a thing! [Group laughs] Women’s breasts are more sexualized than men’s.

Samantha: I don’t want my body to be sexualized.

NK: OK… on that note, I think we are going off topic! Before we wrap up, in my other focus groups, a lot of women have talked about social comparisons on social media. Looking at other people and thinking of yourself in relation to that person, with relation to body image specifically. Like we talked about—peers, celebrities, things like that. Do you all think that is a thing you do?

Brenna: Yeah, definitely.

Arianna: Kind of.

Yolanda: Yeah, more so with peers, right? Didn’t we say that?

Maddie: More with peers.

Yolanda: Because it’s more obtainable. If they can do it, we can do it.

NK: How does that make you feel about yourself?
Brenna:  Mmm, I dunno. I can get really negative, or I can even say I look better than her and I feel really positive about myself. It just depends. If I’m having a crummy day, it’s just the cherry on top like oh, that’s just great [sarcasm]. It depends. It’s not really one reaction or the other.

Samantha:  It’s really sad because I feel like we are all competing for the better sense of happiness, and I feel like that’s based off of someone else not being as happy as we are. I do it too. And I wish I could change that but I dunno…do you guys understand what I’m saying?

Maddie:  Mhmm.

Brenna:  Mhmm.

Samantha:  Like you said, you [Brenna] look prettier or your body is better than your friend’s, I mean, I kind of understand that. That’s terrible.

Brenna:  You don’t want to do it; it’s just your immediate reaction to it.

Samantha:  I’m trying to change that toward myself because it’s terrible. But if I can find someone to work out with and do sports with, I think that would be really awesome and motivational because you’re taking someone with you on your quest towards being better.

NK:  OK. Thank you all for being here today and participating.
APPENDIX C
LIST OF FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Pressures/Looking “Flawless”

Societal pressures to be physically attractive (and to appear this way in social media content)
Emphasis on looks
Photoshop
Editing software/apps
Filters
Photo angles

Profile Curation/Impression Management

Social media “best practices”
Taking multiple selfies or photos until you find “the one”
Deleting photos in which you look bad
Showing or emphasizing only the positive aspects
“Doin’ it for the ‘gram”
Time of day to post a photo for maximum “Likes”
Insecurity

“Likes” as Social Validation

More “Likes” = ego boost
Self-doubt after not receiving “Likes”
Deleting things that don’t get “Likes”
Importance of getting “Likes” (the number matters)
Getting a certain amount of “Likes” in a timely fashion after posting photo (“15 ‘Likes’ in 15 minutes”)
“Likes” to follower ratio
Buying followers

Uses and Gratifications of Media

Not using mass media: Not reading women’s magazines
Deterrents to mass media consumption: Cost, accessibility, ability to get same or similar content for free online; constant availability of technology (namely, smartphones)
Uses & gratifications of social media: For entertainment, humor, to obtain news, cure boredom, find out about events, promote organizations/groups, connect with others, surveillance
Health/Fitness Content

Peers & celebs posting fitness-related content
Recipes
Workouts
Motivation – they derive motivation from seeing this type of content
Annoyance

Social Comparison: Peers

Body image
Travel
Job
Accomplishments
Relationships/boyfriends
“Lifestyle envy” (material items like clothes/shoes/etc.)

Social Comparison: Celebrities

Body image
Travel
Job (or lackthereof)
Accomplishments
Relationships/boyfriends
Lifestyle envy

Feminism

More pluralistic portrayals of female beauty in social media and some mass media content
Recognizing that media exploit women
Objectifying women’s bodies

Judgement

Judging peers on social media for: posting gym selfies, “checking in” to the gym
Reductive practices of mass media in portraying how women look physically (which shows they are quite media literate and media critical!)
Judging peers for posting sexualized/risqué content
Judging peers for “trying too hard” to be attractive on social media
APPENDIX D
COPY OF SURVEY

Screener question: Are you female? Are you between 18-22 years old? Do you use Facebook and/or Instagram? (boxes for FB, IG, or both) [If yes to all questions, proceed. If no, Qualtrics prevents participant from taking the survey]

Informed consent document [If participant disagrees, she is prevented from taking the survey. If she agrees, she is permitted to continue]

Base body satisfaction measure: The Appearance Evaluation subscale of the Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990) used to evaluate level of baseline body satisfaction.

Directions: Please read each of the following items carefully and indicate the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement.

1= Definitely disagree
2= Somewhat disagree
3= Neither agree nor disagree
4= Somewhat agree
5= Definitely agree

1. I like the way my clothes fit me. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I like my looks just the way they are. 1 2 3 4 5
3. Most people would consider me good looking. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I dislike my physique. 1 2 3 4 5
5. I like the way I look without my clothes. 1 2 3 4 5
6. My body is sexually appealing. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I'm physically unattractive. 1 2 3 4 5

Based on Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire – 4 (created by Schaefer et al., 2014)

Directions: Please read each of the following items carefully and indicate the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement. In the context of these questions,
toned refers to a body that has some level of muscle definition without looking excessively muscular.

1= Definitely disagree
2= Mostly disagree
3= Neither agree nor disagree
4= Mostly agree
5= Definitely agree

8. It is important for me to look toned.
   1  2  3  4  5
9. I think a lot about looking toned.
   1  2  3  4  5
10. I want my body to look lean.
    1  2  3  4  5
11. I want my body to look like it has little fat.
    1  2  3  4  5
12. I think a lot about looking lean.
    1  2  3  4  5
13. I spend a lot of time doing things to look toned.
    1  2  3  4  5
    1  2  3  4  5
15. I want my body to look lean.
    1  2  3  4  5
16. I think a lot about having very little body fat.
    1  2  3  4  5
17. I spend a lot of time doing things to look more toned.
    1  2  3  4  5
18. Clothes look better on people who are attractive.
    1  2  3  4  5
19. Clothes look better on people who are lean.
    1  2  3  4  5
20. Clothes look better on people who are toned.
    1  2  3  4  5
21. People who are good looking are more successful.
    1  2  3  4  5
22. Attractive people are better liked than unattractive people.
    1  2  3  4  5

Answer the following questions with relevance to your Family (include: parents, brothers, sisters, relatives):

23. I sense that my family members would want me to improve my appearance.
    1  2  3  4  5
24. I sense that my family members would want me to look leaner.
   1  2  3  4  5
25. Family members encourage me to decrease my level of body fat.
   1  2  3  4  5
26. Family members encourage me to look in better shape.
   1  2  3  4  5

Answer the following questions with relevance to your Peers (include: close friends, classmates, other social contacts):

27. I sense that my peers would want me to improve my appearance.
   1  2  3  4  5
28. I sense that my peers would want me to look leaner.
   1  2  3  4  5
29. My peers encourage me to decrease my level of body fat.
   1  2  3  4  5
30. My peers encourage me to look in better shape.
   1  2  3  4  5

Answer the following questions with relevance to the Media (include: television, films, magazines):

31. I have noticed a strong message from television, films and magazines to improve my appearance.
   1  2  3  4  5
32. I have noticed a strong message from television, films and magazines to look leaner.
   1  2  3  4  5
33. I have noticed a strong message from television, films and magazines to look in better shape.
   1  2  3  4  5
34. I have noticed a strong message from television, films and magazines to decrease my level of body fat.
   1  2  3  4  5

Which of the following social media platforms do you use? Check all that apply:
   Facebook
   Instagram
[they get questions based on the social media they indicated they use]

Based on SATAQ-4; created by Nicki Karimipour (2015)

Directions: Please read each of the following items carefully and indicate the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement.

1 = Definitely disagree
2= Somewhat disagree
3= Neither agree nor disagree
4= Somewhat agree
5= Definitely agree

Facebook:
35. I've felt like I should improve my appearance from looking at my Facebook friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5
36. I've felt like I should look leaner from looking at my Facebook friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5
37. I've felt like I should look in better shape from looking at my Facebook friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5
38. I've felt like I should decrease my level of body fat from looking at my Facebook friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5

Instagram:
Directions: Please read each of the following items carefully and indicate the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement.

1= Definitely disagree
2= Somewhat disagree
3= Neither agree nor disagree
4= Somewhat agree
5= Definitely agree

39. I've felt like I should improve my appearance from looking at my Instagram friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5
40. I've felt like I should look leaner from looking at my Instagram friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5
41. I've felt like I should look in better shape from looking at my Instagram friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5
42. I've felt like I should decrease my level of body fat from looking at my Instagram friends' photos.
1 2 3 4 5

Online impression management & profile curation:
Directions: Please read each of the following items carefully and indicate the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement.

1= Definitely disagree
2= Somewhat disagree
3= Neither agree nor disagree
4= Somewhat agree
5= Definitely agree

43. I put effort into how I present my physical appearance on social media.
   1  2  3  4  5

44. It is important to me to get Likes on the photos I post on social media.
   1  2  3  4  5

45. I feel negatively when I don’t get Likes on my photos on social media.
   1  2  3  4  5

46. On which social media platform(s) do Likes on your photos of yourself matter most to you?
   [boxes for: Facebook; Instagram; they matter equally to me; none of them matter to me]

47. I care a great deal about looking attractive in the photos I post on social media.
   1  2  3  4  5

48. I have untagged or deleted a photo in which I feel that I don’t look good.
   1  2  3  4  5


49. Please indicate your age: [18-22 with boxes, listed out individually]

50. Please indicate your highest level of education: 12th grade no diploma, High school diploma or equivalent, Some college credit but less than one year, One or more years of college—no degree, Associate’s degree, Bachelor’s degree, Master’s degree, Professional degree, Other [please specify])

51. You identify your race/ethnicity as:
   White/Caucasian; African-American, African, or Black; Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; Other Race or Origin [please specify])

52. In a typical day, how many hours would you say you spend on traditional mass media (TV, radio, movies, magazines, newspapers)? (Open-ended with boxes for hours & minutes)

53. How often do you use Facebook? [participant will get this Q if she originally indicated that she uses FB]
   Several times a day, about once a day, 3-5 days a week, 1-2 days a week, every few weeks, less often.

54. Think about the average day. How much time do you spend on Facebook? [boxes for participant to fill out time in hours and minutes]
55. On an average day, how often do you check Facebook for notifications?
Less than every 5 minutes, about every 5 minutes, about every 10 minutes, about every
20 minutes, about every 30 minutes, about every 40 minutes, about every 50 minutes,
about every hour, about every two hours, about every three hours or more.

56. How often do you use Instagram? [participant will get this Q if she originally
indicated that she uses IG]
Several times a day, about once a day, 3-5 days a week, 1-2 days a week, every few
weeks, less often.

57. Think about the average day. How much time do you spend on Instagram?
[boxes for participant to fill out time in hours and minutes]

58. On an average day, how often do you check Instagram for notifications?
Less than every 5 minutes, about every 5 minutes, about every 10 minutes, about every
20 minutes, about every 30 minutes, about every 40 minutes, about every 50 minutes,
about every hour, about every two hours, about every three hours or more.

59. Which social media platform(s) do you use on a daily basis to share photos of
yourself with friends and followers? (what social media do you use to share photos of
yourself/how many pics/how often? – open ended questions)
Twitter
Pinterest
Tumblr
Snapchat
Vine
YikYak
Reddit
LinkedIn
Google Plus+
Flickr
Other: [please specify] __________

60. Do you follow fitness accounts on Instagram? [If they indicated they use IG, they
get this question. Boxes for yes/no. If “no,” skip question and survey concludes]
If yes, follow-up: In your estimation, how many fitness accounts do you follow on
Instagram? 0-5; 6-10; 11-15; 16-20; 21-25; 26-30; 31-35; 36 or more

Thank you for your time. Your responses have been recorded.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Stelter, B. (2012, February 8). Youths are watching, but less often on TV. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/09/business/media/young-people-are-watching-but-less-often-on-tv.html


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nicki Karimipour received her Ph.D. and her master’s degree from the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. She graduated from Florida State University with bachelor’s degrees in English Literature and Humanities, with an emphasis in contemporary art history. While at Florida State, she served as assistant arts and life editor of the campus newspaper, the FSView & Florida Flambeau. Her work experience combines practical field experience in journalism, public relations, editorial and social media with teaching these skills to undergraduates in a rigorous academic setting. She has been teaching at the UF College of Journalism and Communications since 2012, and has taught courses such as Multimedia Writing, Magazine and Feature Writing (online and in person), as well as Health Media Innovations. During her doctoral studies, she was the recipient of the Outstanding Graduate Instructor teaching awards at the College and university-wide level in spring 2015 and 2016, respectively. In November 2015, she and a team of undergraduate students launched a digital health and wellness magazine aimed at a college demographic, called The Student Body. In the past, she has conducted research on a variety of health-related topics including body image and social media, hematology, tuberculosis, e-cigarette use, eating disorders, and general health behaviors. She has presented her research at leading national and international academic and professional conferences for communications and journalism educators. She also has experience working on large-scale medical grants in an academic, teaching hospital setting. Finally, her research has been published in peer-reviewed journals, a forthcoming book chapter, and her professional work has been featured in online and print publications such as Ms. Magazine, Adios Barbie, Clutch Magazine, INsite magazine, and Florida Trend Magazine. After
graduating with her Ph.D., she will work in patient recruitment and strategic communication at the University of Southern California’s Clinical and Translational Science Institute in Los Angeles, California.