

Presentation of Self and Regulation of Bodies on Social Media

OXFORD
BROOKES
UNIVERSITY

Alisha Butcher, 16010934
16010934@brookes.ac.uk

Introduction:

This study investigates the way in which we present ourselves on social media as a result of societal expectations, as well as exploring the implications of exposure to images of attractive bodies on the way we feel in our bodies, and how individuals engage in gendered embodiment. The topic is important because it highlights the emphasis that our society has placed on the discourse of healthy lifestyles and ideal body types, in today's consumer culture. This research puts forward the argument that young people 'perform' when interacting on social media in order to enforce their desired impression of themselves onto the other.

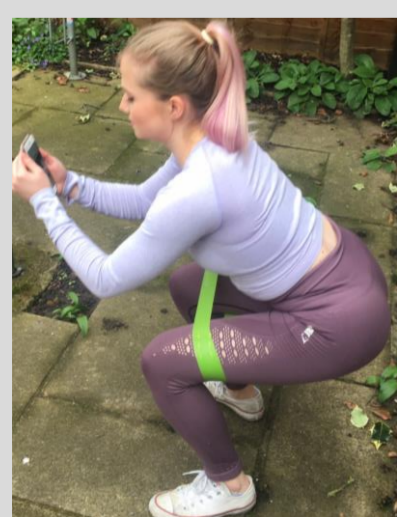
Research Questions:

1. Is there a gender difference in the way individuals use and interact on social media?
2. How do people feel about the self they present on social media?
3. To what extent does social media personas and trends inspire people to engage with their bodies in particular ways?



Methodology:

I used one-to-one semi structured interviews with six Oxford Brookes University students. I chose to focus on students because they are typically of the age range 18-24, which is the age group who use social media the most. Semi-structured interviews produce 'raw' findings, so this method was useful in obtaining qualitative data, especially as certain topics discussed may have been sensitive to some participants, so enabled me to create rapport with them. One of my research questions draws upon whether there is a gender difference in social media usage and implications, so I decided to interview participants of both genders.



* Photographs taken by myself of participant showing me how #fitspiration implicates her everyday life *

To conclude, in late modernity, presenting ourselves online has become tremendously easier with increasing agency and individualisation. Furthermore, this research has enhanced our understanding of the ways in which we regulate our bodies as a result of social media.



Findings and Discussion:

The interviews highlighted the significance of an 'ideal body image' portrayed on social media, which participants described as making them feel 'shit, insecure or depressed about themselves'. This supports existing literature claiming that exposure to attractive bodies on social media correlates with body

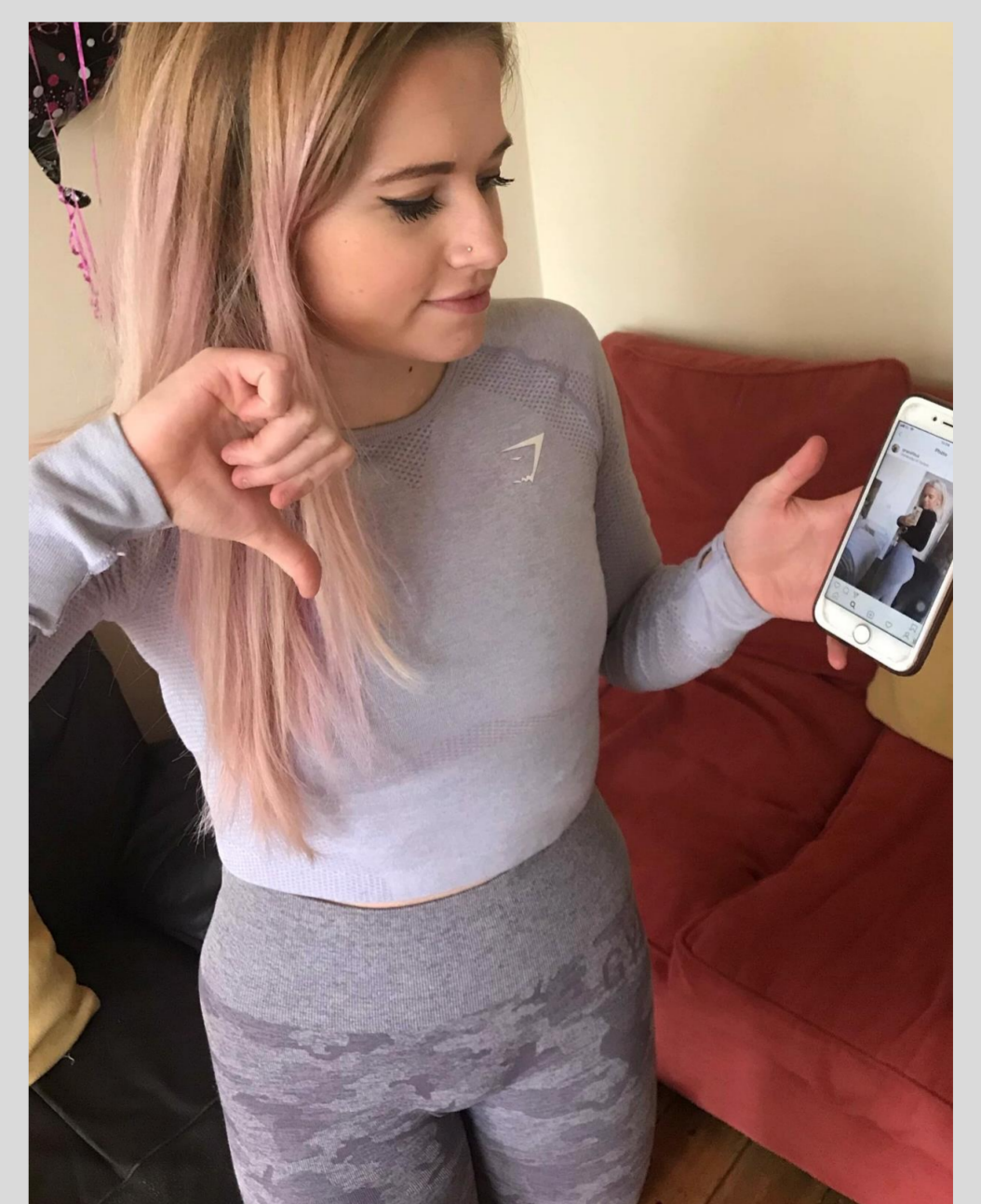
dissatisfaction (Vries et al, 2015, cited in Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). It can be argued that this ideal body image can be classed as a discourse; a shared meaning that has power over society (Foucault, 1972). Males are less likely to edit their images before posting, possibly suggesting that males are less conscious of their body image than females, indicating a slight gender difference in the implications of social media on users. This may be a result of the rise of consumer culture and Giddens' Individualisation Thesis (May, 2011), which emphasises our agency in choosing our own lifestyles. Secondly, Instagram's #fitspiration was discussed as both beneficial to one's health and also demotivating, thus supporting literature claiming that #fitspiration can be harmful to individuals who place too much emphasis on it (Tiggermann and Barbato, 2018). Lastly, the presentation of self enables social media users to create new identities online, whereby, often, one will portray themselves as more sociable than in 'real life', possibly more glamorous or desirable. Goffman's Interaction Order and Dramaturgical Model (1983 and 1959) is important in this discussion because he stated that impression management must take place in order to present yourself online in a desirable way. Throughout my findings, Foucault's concept of Self-Surveillance (1977) and Discourse, as well as the increase in late modernity and consumer culture, has been drawn upon to highlight the power that social media has on users, especially regarding how we regulate our bodies.

Conclusion:

This research has been successful in highlighting the power that discourses of healthy lifestyles and an ideal body image has on members of society, especially with reference to Instagram's trend #fitspiration.

Future research could:

- Conduct a longitudinal study to investigate how social media affects users long term.
- Recruit more participants (possibly of a wider age range) to make the research more externally valid



References:

- Fardouly, J. and Vartanian, L. R. (2016). 'Social Media and Body Image Concerns: Current Research and Future Directions', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol 9, pp.1-5. Available at: https://ac-els-cdn.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/S2352250X15002249/1-s2.0-S2352250X15002249-main.pdf?_tid=3b2fc450-59ae-494a-a7f5-d9e7128eb63b&acdnat=1537358653_0acdf3e8b223cb02576a8e69f600001d (Accessed: 23 August 2018)
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin Books.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1983). 'The Interaction Order', *American Sociological Review*, Vol 48(1), pp.1-17.
- May, V. (2011). *Sociology of Personal Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tiggermann, M. and Barbato, I. (2018). "'You look great!': The Effect of Viewing Appearance-related Instagram Comments on Women's Body Image", *Body Image*, Vol 27, pp.61-66. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/science/article/pii/S1740144518302018> (Accessed: 23 August 2018)