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Dolna 17, Warsaw,
Poland 00-773
+48 226 0 227 03
editorial_office@rsglobal.pl

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THE IMPACT OF INSTAGRAM ON BODY IMAGE AND HEALTH BEHAVIORS IN YOUNG WOMEN - A LITERATURE REVIEW

Anna Baranowska (Corresponding Author, Email: baranowska.anna96@gmail.com)

University Clinical Hospital No. 2, Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, Szczecin, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-1762-2414

Aleksandra Oparcik

Medical Center HCP, Poznań, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0008-0438-3797

Kinga Szyszka

J. Gromkowski Provincial Specialist Hospital in Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-3467-4121

Anastazja Orłowa

University Clinical Center of the Medical University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0005-5125-3686

Kamil Turlej

University Clinical Center of the Medical University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0008-2919-284X

Laura Kurczoba

Józef Struś Multi-Specialist Municipal Hospital, Poznań, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-1330-991X

Anita Pakuła

Medical University of Silesia in Katowice, Katowice, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-7866-2939

Marta Cieślak

University Clinical Hospital in Poznań, Poznań, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-5522-3786

Klaudia Martyna Patrzykąt

109 Military Hospital with Policlinic in Szczecin, Szczecin, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-9440-5444

Julia Pawłowska

St. Barbara Provincial Specialist Hospital No. 5 in Sosnowiec, Sosnowiec, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-4309-0226

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Instagram, as a platform strongly based on visual content, plays a significant role in shaping appearance ideals, self-perception of body image, and health behaviors among young women. Exposure to idealized content, influencers, and fitspiration materials increases the tendency toward social comparisons and may influence self-esteem, eating habits, and physical activity.

Methods: This narrative review was based on searches in PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science for studies published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis included empirical works focusing on women aged 15–35, examining the impact of Instagram use on body image, social comparisons, health behaviors, and psychological well-being.

Results: Idealized content and fitspiration are consistently associated with increased body dissatisfaction, more frequent social comparisons, and a higher risk of eating disorders. Instagram may enhance motivation for physical activity; however, this motivation is often driven by appearance-related pressure, contributing to compulsive exercise. Body-positive content improves mood and body acceptance, although its influence on long-term health behaviors remains limited. Negative outcomes are intensified by factors such as psychological susceptibility and internalization of appearance ideals.

Conclusions: Instagram significantly affects body image and health behaviors in young women. Appearance-focused content is linked to poorer well-being, whereas messages promoting body acceptance may offer protective effects. Further longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to better understand the underlying mechanisms and develop effective health-promoting interventions.

KEYWORDS

Instagram, Body Image, Young Women, Mental Health, Fitspiration, Body-Positive, Eating Disorders, Physical Activity, Social Media

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Introduction

Social media are now more widespread than traditional forms of communication, as users can easily access them through mobile devices. Additionally, recipients actively participate in communication by creating their own content, sharing materials from others, commenting on posts, and personalizing the information they view and distribute [1]. Instagram, launched on October 6, 2010, is a social media platform focused on sharing photos and short videos. In recent years, the reach of this platform has grown significantly, and according to the latest data, it has over 2 billion monthly active users. The largest proportion of its audience falls within the 18–34 age group.

The dynamic rise in Instagram's popularity goes hand in hand with growing research interest in its impact on users' psychological functioning, particularly self-esteem, health behaviors, and body image. Numerous studies indicate that regular exposure to idealized, aesthetically curated images promotes social comparison and may lead to dissatisfaction with one's appearance [2]. Research on the correlation between Instagram use and self-esteem is increasingly diverse; some authors point to the negative influence of frequently viewing appearance-related content, which is associated with reduced body satisfaction [3].

The mechanisms explaining this relationship focus primarily on social comparison processes: viewing idealized images fosters upward comparisons, which may lower body esteem and trigger dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Experimental studies confirm that the type of comparison (upward vs. downward) significantly modifies the effects of exposure to visual content [4]. At the same time, emerging research shows that body-positive content on Instagram may serve a protective function - a 2025 meta-analysis demonstrated that formats promoting self-acceptance and body diversity contribute to increased body satisfaction and improved emotional well-being [5].

Considering these relationships, this literature review focuses on the mechanisms linking Instagram use with body image and health behaviors among young women. The aim is to identify both the negative and positive effects of use and to outline research directions that may inspire interventions promoting healthy engagement with social media platforms.

Methodology

This review was conducted as a narrative literature review with elements of thematic analysis, enabling the synthesis of methodologically diverse studies examining the impact of Instagram on body image and health behaviors among young women. A systematic search was performed in PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science using the following keywords: “Instagram,” “body image,” “social comparison,” “self-esteem,” “fitspiration,” “body positive,” “eating behaviors,” “young women,” and “health behaviors.” Publications from 2015 to 2025 were included to capture the most recent empirical evidence. Eligible studies were empirical in nature - quantitative, qualitative, experimental, or diary-based focused specifically on Instagram use among young women (approximately 15–35 years old), and addressed outcomes related to body image, self-esteem, social comparison, or health-related behaviors. The review excluded theoretical papers, studies examining social media in general without distinguishing Instagram, and research focusing solely on clinical disorders without relevance to everyday Instagram use. The selection process consisted of screening titles and abstracts, reviewing full texts, and extracting essential information regarding study population, methodology, content type, and key findings. The synthesis followed a thematic approach, identifying core areas such as exposure to Instagram content, social comparison processes, body-positive content, health-related behaviors, and strategies aimed at reducing the platform’s negative effects.

3. Results

3.1 Instagram Exposure and Body Image

Self-esteem is an individual, subjective evaluation of oneself. It encompasses one’s sense of self-worth, the way one perceives one’s role in the world, and beliefs about one’s own abilities, including the sense of efficacy and confidence. Qualitative and experimental studies clearly demonstrate a link between the type of content viewed on Instagram and the perception of one’s own body.

Fenech (2022), in her thesis based on interviews with young women (aged 18–25), found that respondents often compared their bodies to the “ideal” images on Instagram. They reported feeling pressured not only by content posted by influencers but also by peers who “presented” perfect lives and physiques. These comparisons influence self-esteem: the number of “likes” and followers becomes a symbol of a user’s social value [6].

Nelson et al. (2022), in their experimental study of 205 women aged 18–76, randomly assigned participants to three groups, each exposed to specially prepared Instagram posts. The study compared the effects of body-positive, thin-ideal, and neutral posts. Before and after exposure, the researchers measured body satisfaction, body appreciation, levels of self-objectification, and mood. Women who viewed body-positive content reported significantly higher body satisfaction and body appreciation than those who viewed thin-ideal or neutral images. Interestingly, levels of self-objectification did not differ significantly between groups [7]. A qualitative diary study by Glaser, Jansma, and Scholten (2024), involving 28 young Instagram users (79% women, mean age ≈ 21.9), asked participants to document posts that influenced their body perception over five days. Four categories of content were identified: Thin Ideal, Body Positivity, Fitness, and Lifestyle. Each category evoked a different set of emotions, but “Thin Ideal” posts were selected most frequently by the participants. These posts made them feel uncomfortable, as their own bodies differed from the images presented. In contrast, Body Positivity content was associated with positive emotions, social comparison did not occur, and participants expressed support for this type of content [8]. The authors emphasize that not only the amount of time spent on Instagram matters, but also what is viewed and how it is interpreted. Pedalino and Camerini (2022), in their study of 291 adolescents and young women (mean age ≈ 19.8), examined how different forms of Instagram use are associated with body dissatisfaction. Simply browsing profiles - without active engagement - was linked to decreased body appreciation, but only when viewing influencer profiles, not those of peers. Commenting and posting one’s own content were not associated with body dissatisfaction. Lower body acceptance was also correlated with higher BMI and younger age [9]. This study highlights the need to raise awareness among high-reach social media creators about the impact their content can have on viewers well-being. Very similar conclusions were presented by Brown and Tiggemann (2016). Even short-term exposure to attractive images of celebrities and peers on Instagram led to

worsened mood and increased body dissatisfaction among young women. In contrast, viewing neutral content did not produce such effects. These findings suggest that exposure to idealized images on social media can negatively affect users well-being and self-perception of appearance, even within a very short time [10].

The study by Piccoli et al. (2022) showed that photographic activity on Instagram promotes more frequent appearance-based comparisons with others, which in turn leads to stronger internalization of societal beauty standards. This mechanism - comparison and internalization - explains why greater activity on Instagram is associated with higher body dissatisfaction and stronger drive for thinness among women. The authors emphasize that the issue is not Instagram use itself, but the manner in which it is used, particularly the focus on posting and evaluating photos [11].

3.2 Social Comparisons as a Mediating Mechanism

Social comparison is defined as the innate need of individuals to determine their personal worth and to shape opinions and beliefs about themselves based on how they perceive themselves in relation to others, through evaluating similarities and differences [12]. Individuals often engage in social comparison to assess and enhance their self-esteem. This can occur through both upward and downward comparison. Upward comparison takes place when a person compares themselves to someone perceived as better than them - this may concern success, appearance, and/or likability - which then leads to a desire to become more similar to that person. Upward comparison can cause individuals to believe that they are not living as well or as happily as others, which often leads to feelings of loss or negativity [13]. Additionally, a study involving 1,172 women (aged 18–35) showed that the tendency toward social comparisons fully mediated the relationship between Instagram use intensity and depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and eating disorder symptoms [14]. Experimental studies also support this mediation: Taylor and Armes (2024) found that upward comparisons lower self-esteem and body-esteem, whereas downward comparisons can improve these indicators [15].

Researchers McComb and Mills (2021) aimed to examine whether the trait of appearance-based perfectionism moderates the effect of upward comparisons with idealized Instagram models on young women's body image. The study included 142 female psychology students. In the experimental group, women compared the size of their body parts with those of attractive Instagram models, while the control group viewed neutral photos (landscapes) without appearance comparisons. The publication showed that viewing images of idealized Instagram models worsened young women's body-related well-being. This effect was particularly strong among individuals with high appearance perfectionism - these women compare themselves more frequently and more harshly, leading to greater body dissatisfaction and lower confidence. Additionally, it turned out that rumination and catastrophizing explain why perfectionist women react more negatively to comparisons with models. The study therefore shows that not all individuals are equally susceptible to Instagram's influence, and that personality traits and emotion regulation strategies play an important role. It also indicates that working on reducing rumination and catastrophizing may decrease the negative effects of comparisons on Instagram [16].

Rüther et al. (2023) divided 231 women aged 18–35 into two groups. One group viewed images of influencers, and the second group viewed control images of women in natural scenes. The authors used the Social Comparison Scale (SCS) to assess state comparisons in the context of the images participants viewed. They also examined whether psychological resilience moderates the influence of exposure to SMI (social media influencer) images on social comparisons and self-esteem. No significant moderation by resilience was found. However, the study showed that exposure to influencer images led to upward comparisons, which were correlated with lower state self-esteem. Surprisingly, the direct effect of SMI images on state self-esteem was positive: women who viewed influencer images had slightly higher overall state self-esteem than the control group. This indicates a suppression effect - a negative indirect effect (through comparisons) but a positive direct effect - suggesting complex psychological processes. This shows that SMIs may operate ambivalently: they can be a source of threat (comparisons) but also of positive inspiration, depending on context and psychological mechanisms [17].

In summary, social comparisons especially upward comparisons and comparisons involving influencers are a strong mediating mechanism that explains why Instagram use may lead to worsened body image and self-esteem among young women.

3.3 The Role of Body-Positive Content and the Moderation of Negative Effects

The body positive movement emerged as a social response to the unrealistic and narrow beauty standards dominating media, especially social media. Its central idea is that every body deserves respect, and that appearance should not determine one's sense of self-worth. The roots of the movement date back to the 1960s and 1970s, when initiatives advocating for the acceptance of people with higher body weight began to develop. However, the contemporary form of "body positivity" has evolved mainly since 2012 thanks to activity on social media platforms such as Instagram. The goal of the movement is to reduce cultural pressures that lead to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and lower self-esteem, especially among young women. Creators and users of body-positive content post images, slogans, and narratives promoting naturalness and body diversity, and encouraging a more compassionate attitude toward oneself.

Research shows that exposure to body-positive content can have beneficial psychological effects: it improves mood, increases body satisfaction, and reduces the tendency toward social comparisons. At the same time, some researchers note that even body-positive content still focuses heavily on appearance, which means it may not fully address the deeper problem of cultural body-centeredness. As of September 2024, there were approximately 19,616,000 posts on Instagram with the hashtag #bodypositive. Increasingly, studies are examining the effects of body-positive content on Instagram and its potential protective role. A meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* indicates that exposure to content promoting body acceptance (body diversity, positive language) is associated with increases in body satisfaction and body appreciation, as well as reductions in negative emotions. However, the body positive movement does not entirely eliminate the risk of social comparisons or self-objectification. In some cases, such content may still reinforce comparisons or appearance-focused thinking [18].

A long-term experience sampling experiment showed that exposure to body-positive posts from influencers increases weight satisfaction and healthy eating behaviors over time [19]. However, the impact of fitspiration content is more complex. In an experimental study, women who viewed #fitspiration images experienced increased negative mood and greater body dissatisfaction, although no increase in actual physical activity was observed after exposure [20].

In the study by Ladwig et al. (2024), researchers analyzed how different types of popular social media content influence state body dissatisfaction and women's emotional well-being. The online experiment included 382 women, both with and without self-reported eating disorders. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: exposure to fitspiration, body positivity, or body neutrality content. Body dissatisfaction and positive and negative affect were measured before and after exposure. The results showed that fitspiration content increased body dissatisfaction and lowered positive mood. In contrast, both body positivity and body neutrality led to decreased body dissatisfaction and a reduction in negative affect, regardless of the presence of eating disorders. Body-neutral content was additionally associated with a slight decrease in positive affect, which the authors interpreted as an effect of increased introspection while reading the texts [21].

These findings suggest that body-positive content can mitigate the negative impact of idealized body images on Instagram; however, these effects depend on the type and context of content consumption.

3.4 Health Behaviors: Diet and Physical Activity

Diet and Eating Disorders

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have indicated that popular dietary trends on Instagram may be harmful. Davey et al. (2025) showed that short-term exposure to fashionable dietary trends (#cleaneating, #whatieatinaday) is associated with an increase in eating disorder symptoms (measured with the EDE-Q), especially among younger women. This indicates that even a single exposure to such content may heighten the tendency toward unhealthy eating behaviors [22]. Similarly, in a randomized online study, female students viewed either images of aesthetically pleasing, low-calorie meals or a neutral feed. In the low-calorie meal condition, an increase in intentions to engage in disordered eating behaviors was observed, suggesting that not only body-related content but also food-related posts may be risky [23].

Mechanisms of risk were also confirmed by research on problematic Instagram use. Fioravanti et al. (2024) demonstrated that addictive use of the app is associated with increased eating-disorder psychopathology, with appearance-based comparisons and growing body dissatisfaction playing a key role [24]. Meanwhile, a population-based study by Thompson et al. (2023) showed that the relationship between social media use and dietary restriction as well as eating disorder symptoms affects not only adolescents but also middle-aged women, highlighting the cross-generational nature of the phenomenon [25]. Newer analyses

also emphasize more subtle nutritional consequences. In a study by Bayram and Ozturkcan (2025), intensive and problematic Instagram use was linked to selective eating behaviors (picky eating) and a less balanced, one-sided diet, which may negatively impact metabolic health in the long term. This means that Instagram's influence may not manifest solely as classic eating disorder symptoms; it may also lead to unhealthy forms of food control and reduced diet quality [26].

Research indicates that exposure to dietary, fitspiration, and clean-eating content on Instagram is associated with increases in restrictive eating behaviors, greater internalization of the thin ideal, and heightened eating disorder symptoms. These effects mainly concern young women and are stronger in the context of problematic app use. Taken together, this suggests that Instagram may constitute a significant risk factor for unhealthy eating habits and a deterioration in one's relationship with food.

Physical Activity

Studies analyzing the relationship between Instagram use and physical activity indicate an ambivalent impact on young women. Exposure to fitspiration content - dominant on Instagram and featuring images and videos of athletic bodies and intense workouts - often boosts motivation to exercise but simultaneously strengthens appearance-related pressure. Prichard et al. (2020) found that after viewing fitspiration, young women felt a stronger need to start exercising, but their mood decreased and body dissatisfaction increased [27].

The study by Breves et al. (2025) was a 22-day longitudinal experiment in which 181 female participants were exposed to content from body-positive, fitspirational, or body-neutral influencers. The authors measured changes in weight satisfaction, healthy eating habits, and physical activity levels. The results showed that both body-positive and fitspirational content led to increased weight satisfaction and improved healthy eating compared to the control group. However, no significant changes were observed in physical activity levels [19].

A cross-sectional study involving 890 Instagram users (mainly women) investigated whether following fitness influencers is associated with physical activity levels. Individuals who reported feeling motivated to exercise by influencers content were more likely to meet WHO physical activity recommendations and more often followed health- and fitness-related accounts. The findings suggest a link between following influencers and greater physical activity, but due to the self-report and cross-sectional nature of the study, causality cannot be determined - active individuals may simply be more inclined to seek fitness content [28].

Research on Instagram-based interventions shows that short workout programs and instructional content increase young women's self-reported motivation and momentary physical activity, but their impact tends to be short-lived. Although participants willingly engage with such support, current evidence does not confirm long-term behavioral change, highlighting the need for larger, controlled studies [29].

Instagram can serve as a motivational tool for some young women, but to effectively promote sustained, healthy exercise behaviors, the content must be credible, health-oriented, and designed to foster users' intrinsic motivation. Otherwise, there is a risk of short-term, pressure-driven activity and growing body image concerns.

4. Discussion

The collected findings show that Instagram plays a significant yet highly differentiated role in shaping body image, well-being, and health behaviors among young women. The key mechanism remains social comparison - particularly upward comparisons with idealized influencer bodies, which consistently correlate with lower self-esteem, greater body dissatisfaction, and an increased risk of eating disorders. However, the results indicate that not all content produces the same effects: exposure to body-positive content has partially protective effects, improving mood and enhancing appreciation of one's body, although it does not fully eliminate appearance-focused thinking. On the other hand, fitspiration - though ostensibly motivational - tends to intensify appearance pressure, reduce well-being, and is associated with more compulsive than health-oriented motivations for physical activity.

The findings on health behaviors emphasize that Instagram can be both a source of risk (restrictive dietary trends, increased disordered eating behaviors) and occasionally a tool of support (short exercise interventions, educational content). Further research is needed to determine which types of Instagram engagement support well-being and which threaten it.

5. Conclusions

Instagram has a significant impact on body image and health behaviors among young women, but the direction of this impact is not uniform. Idealized content (thin and athletic bodies, restrictive dietary trends) is associated with higher risk of lowered mood, poorer self-esteem, and unhealthy patterns related to eating and physical activity. Body-positive content can partially buffer these effects by improving body perception, although it does not always lead to lasting, health-promoting changes.

In the case of physical activity, Instagram more often reinforces appearance-related pressure than internal motivation for movement, resulting mostly in short-term or compulsive engagement. Overall, the findings suggest that Instagram's influence depends primarily on the type of content consumed and individual user characteristics. In practice, this highlights the need to educate young women about critical media literacy, promote body diversity, and support content focused on health rather than appearance pressure.

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