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The beauty complex: social media trends, effects, and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Media plays a crucial role in the portrayal of ideal beauty standards. Research has shown that social media's influence on conveying body ideals is greater today than that of broadcast media. Online interactions with beauty content can contribute to the appreciation of one's internal and external features. However, these interactions can also lead to sexual objectification, appearance comparisons, and body image concerns. This study sought to investigate the emerging themes of beauty studies on social media and the potential areas of study that require scholarly attention. A systematic literature review was conducted to identify studies on beauty in social media published between January 2015 and May 2023 in two databases: Scopus and Web of Science. A thematic analysis of 32 articles established the following emerging themes: body positivity, negative effects of social media, activism, makeup, and advertising. Opportunities for areas that require scholarly attention include culture and religion, gender, longitudinal studies and experiments, the need for more representative samples, and the study of diverse social media platforms. The limitation of this study is that this subject area is still growing, and articles that had not been published at the time of data collection were not included in the current study.

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Introduction

The concept of beauty is as old as that of mankind. The pursuit of understanding its exegesis and relevance has attracted great philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Emmanuel Kant among many others (Ibanga, 2017). Plato defined beauty as a glorious, lofty, outstanding, and harmonious comparison of elements (Plato cited by Pappas, 2016). He stated that beauty promotes the exploration of what is good (Plato cited Pappas, 2016). On the other hand, Aristotle defined beauty with reference to symmetry, proportionality and appropriateness (Aristotle, 1996). Lastly, Emmanuel Kant differentiated two kinds of beauty: vague beauty, whose appraisal is not made on presupposed principles, and fixed beauty, which is appraised based on pre-set principles (Kant, 1987).

Beauty standards vary across cultures. In Western societies, which are more individualistic cultures, beauty is characterized by a thin and toned woman who has a symmetrical face, thin nose, full lips, and high cheekbones (Tolentino, 2019). On the other hand, in collectivist cultures such as Africans, Azawagh Arabs, and some Asian communities, beauty is characterized by small breasts, small waists, and large hips, where fatness and large hips are associated with womanhood and a sign of fertility (Popenoe, 2004; Waters, 2014).

The current study on beauty on social media is grounded on two theoretical frameworks: the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). The media provides a vast amount of information on human thinking patterns, behaviour, and values that are transmitted through modelling to the masses which in turn has a remarkable social impact (Bandura, 2001; Simpson

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& Mazzeo, 2016). Individuals make a conscious decision to invest in learning and mimic behaviour (Bandura, 2001). Modelling plays a crucial role in portraying societal rules and standards of behaviour. These modelled attitudes and behaviour in turn influence self-regulation (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016). Individuals are mostly drawn to models that they perceive as competent or those who possess similarities to them such as age or gender (Bandura, 1986; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Peers are important models especially when individuals have certain doubts about their capabilities in the adoption of certain behaviour (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Research shows that social media's influence on conveying body ideals is greater today than that of broadcast media (Lev-Ari et al., 2014; Cohen & Blaszczynski, 2015). Currently, 4.48 billion people worldwide use social media, which was more than double the number of users in 2015, at 2.07 billion (Dean, 2023). These numbers include those aged 13 years and above (Dean, 2023). These social media users engage with at least six different social networking sites and spend at least 2 hrs and 24 min on these applications (Dean, 2023). The beauty content on social media portrays beauty as analogous to physical appearance, especially the face, thereby imposing and reinforcing societal beauty-related standards (Chae, 2021; Moorti, 2018). This beauty content also continues to promote Western societal standards of beauty that are characterized by thin, athletic, and muscular bodies, elongated features, high cheekbones, symmetrical faces, full lips, and slender noses (Tolentino, 2019). Interaction with beauty content on social networking sites involves watching skincare and makeup routines, beauty product reviews, and cosmetic procedures from peers, other women, influencers, and celebrities (Chae, 2021).

Social media usage not only affects how individuals conceptualize beauty but also has positive and negative effects on users. On one hand, online interactions with beauty content could lead to a broad conceptualization of beauty, which contributes to an appreciation of one's internal and external features (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016). The body positivity movement on social media is one example of an effort to promote body appreciation. Body positivity refers to measures taken to criticize societal expectations of body image and beauty norms and is aimed at advocating for respect and acceptance of different body appearances, shapes, and sizes (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook have played a critical role in publicizing this movement, with over seven million posts to date in the form of visual or written messages (Cohen et al., 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Research has shown that positive body image leads to the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of an individual (Swami et al., 2018). It also leads to an increased positive outlook towards physical activity, intuitive eating, pursuit of healthy living, and a decrease in the desire for alcohol intake, smoking, and dieting (Andrew et al., 2015, 2016).

The social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) postulates that individuals compare their beliefs, attitudes, and abilities with those held by other people because this serves as a way of assessing the accuracy of one's sense of self. Social comparison can be categorized in two main ways: upward comparison which refers to comparing oneself with others who they deem superior due to their physical attractiveness, social rank etc. and downward comparison where one compares themselves with those they deem inferior (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Social media provides immense opportunities for individuals to compare themselves with other people. Thus, online interactions with beauty content could be detrimental to women and girls, as it leads to sexual objectification, appearance comparison, and body dissatisfaction (Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Vries et al., 2016). Prior research has shown that Facebook usage leads to self-objectification and concerns about body image among women (Fardouly et al., 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, 2014). This is because of social appearance comparison and appearance-related feedback on social media (Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Vries et al., 2016). Second, sharing selfies and viewing images online has been linked to body image concerns, body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and sexual objectification (Vries & Peter, 2013; Wu et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2021). Furthermore, the proliferation of social networking sites and competition for social media users' attention have led to an increase in the development and use of filters and modification applications. These filters and applications help to remove imperfections on images, such as teeth whitening, adjusting body part sizes, and smoothing the skin (Elias et al., 2017; Farid, 2009). Such edited images continue to perpetuate societal beauty standards, which in turn leads to increased social appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020).

The growth and potency of social media use by adolescents and youth and its effect on conveying idealized beauty standards which in turn affects how the youth conceptualize beauty offer immense opportunities for research. This systematic literature review sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the emerging themes of beauty studies in social media?

RQ2. What are the potential areas of study that require scholarly attention?

The study identified the following emerging themes: body positivity, negative effects of social media, activism, makeup, and advertising. Opportunities for areas that require scholarly attention include gender, longitudinal studies in body-positive content, data collection methods, culture and religion, the need for more representative samples, and the study of diverse social media platforms.

Method

This study adopts the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Review protocol (SPAR-4-SLR) which consists of three stages and six sub-stages (Paul et al., 2021).

Identification

This study espoused the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria

- Articles must have been published in English between January 2015 and May 2023.
- Target population was adolescents, teenagers and/or the youth.
- Primary data for the study was sourced from social media.

Exclusion criteria

- Data was collected from broadcast media such as Television and Magazines.
- Articles not written in English.

Acquisition

A protocol was established to determine keywords and relevant literature. Since the aim of this study was to identify emerging themes and opportunities in beauty in social media the following keywords were identified: beauty* AND social AND media*.

To identify relevant literature for this study, we identified two databases: Web of Science and Scopus. We limited our study to start from January 2015 and end in May 2023. The period was selected because of the immense growth in the adoption of social media between 2015 and the present. In fact, currently, a total of 4.48 billion people worldwide now use social media, this is double the number of users reported in 2015 which was 2.07 billion (Dean, 2023). Second, Holland and Tiggemann (2016) conducted a systematic literature review on the effect of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating.

Since beauty is a broad subject that is covered in many disciplines, we limited our search on the Web of Science to the selected disciplines/topics (presented in [Table S1 in Supplementary Appendix 1](#)). We limited our search in Scopus to the selected disciplines/subject areas (presented in [Table S2 in Supplementary Appendix 1](#)). The initial search produced 565 articles on the Web of Science and 556 articles on Scopus.

Purification

The titles and abstracts of these publications were then screened manually by the lead author using the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned above. The process is detailed in [Figure 1](#). As a result of the purification process, only 32 articles were included in this study; a summary of these articles is presented in [Table S4 in Supplementary Appendix 3](#). A summary of the excluded articles is presented in [Table S3 in Supplementary Appendix 2](#).

Evaluation

The articles were then analysed thematically; this involved an iterative process and reflective reading of articles to establish emerging themes and opportunities that require scholarly attention on beauty studies in social media.

Reporting

The findings were then presented in words, figures and tables and will be discussed in detail in the results and discussion section.

Risk of bias

The study employed the use of MMAT (2018) tool to assess the risk of bias in the 32 articles selected for this study (Hong et al., 2018). The assessment on the risk of bias was carried out by the two authors. The MMAT tool was selected because it can be used to appraise qualitative studies, experimental studies, descriptive quantitative studies as well as mixed methods studies (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT (2018) tool assesses bias by looking into the following: the appropriateness and adequacy of the data collection method, data interpretation, coherence in data collection, analysis and interpretation (Hong et al., 2018). The results reveal that 17 articles show low risk of bias while 15 articles have been classified as unclear. 10 of those articles categorized as unclear used a quantitative descriptive method. They were categorized as unclear mainly because the sampled population was not representative of the target population (see [Table S4 in Supplementary Appendix 3](#)). Four of the other studies categorized as unclear used quantitative randomized trials; two of these studies have been categorized as unclear because they were not explicit in how they carried out randomization (Rahmi et al., 2017; Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). It was also not clear whether the groups were comparable to the baseline (Michele et al., 2023) or whether the study had complete outcome data (Cohen et al., 2019). The qualitative study carried out by Kaur and Kumar (2022) has been categorized as unclear because one of the research questions regarding the popularity of social media platforms in beauty and wellness industry would have been answered more appropriately using a quantitative method.

Results and discussion

A thematic analysis of the articles addressing beauty in social media revealed five major themes: body positivity, negative effects of social media, activism, makeup, and advertising.

Body positivity

A systematic literature review established that only five studies addressed body positivity. These studies focused on the impact of body-positive content on body image-related issues, such as positive moods, body satisfaction, and body appreciation (Cohen et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020; Manning & Mulgrew, 2022; Michele et al., 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2020). A detailed list of these articles is presented in [Table 1](#).

The results of the reviewed studies indicate that exposure to positive body content plays a significant role in increasing an individual's positive mood, body satisfaction, body appreciation, and positive attitudes towards individuals who post such content (Cohen et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020; Manning &

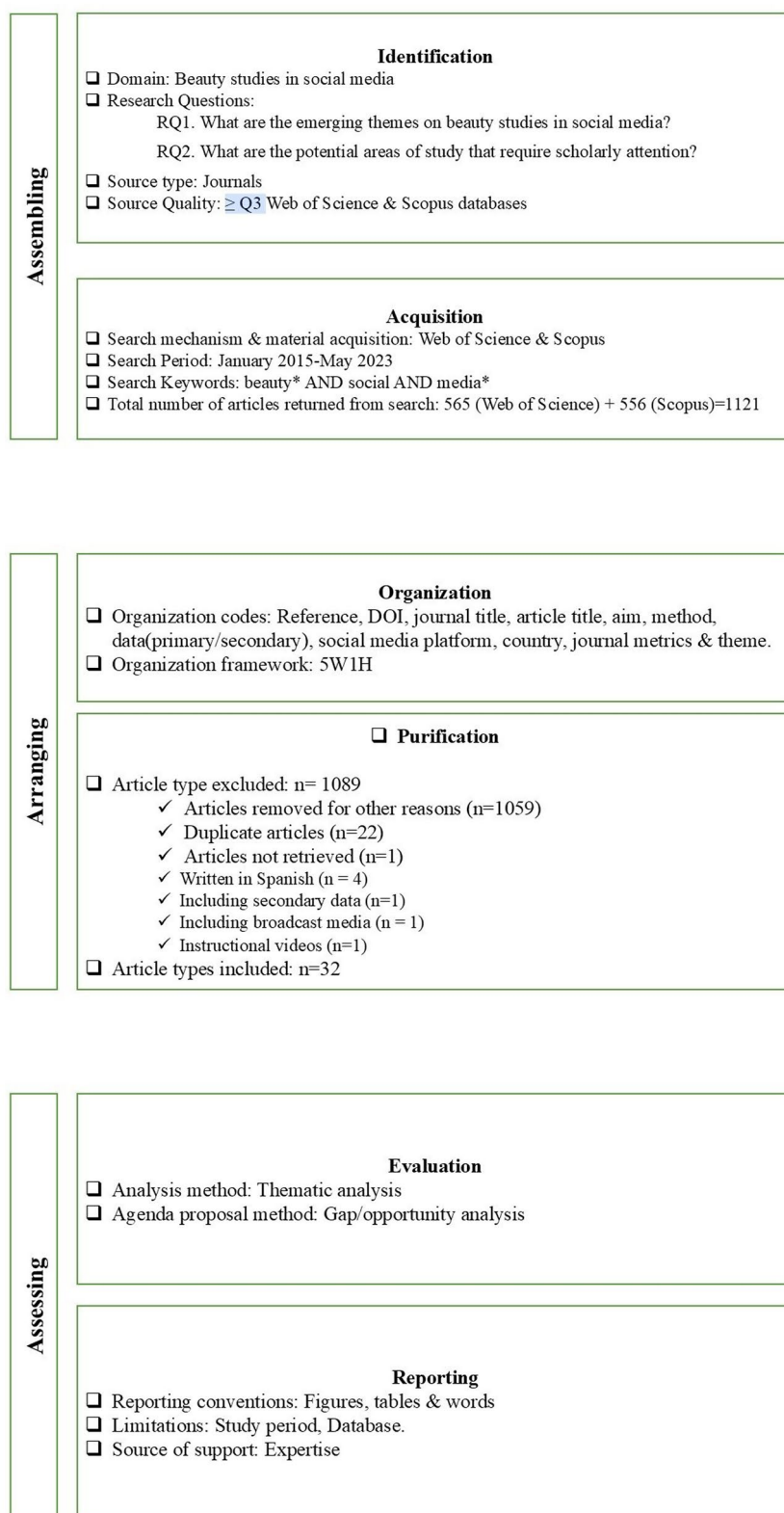


Figure 1. Spar4SLR protocol.

Mulgrew, 2022; Michele et al., 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2020). These results show that body-positive content is not only beneficial to the self-image of social media users but also improves their perception of other individuals. The portrayal of body positivity included posts with unedited images of various bodies in tight-fitting and sometimes revealing clothing (Lazuka et al., 2020). Such a representation is a clear

indication of progress in the inclusion of diverse bodies; sexy is a term that is not only restricted to describing thin bodies but can also be used to describe fat bodies. Although a display of varied sexualized bodies induces higher body satisfaction, non-sexualized body-positive content is especially helpful in lowering appearance comparisons (Michele et al., 2023). Results from two studies revealed that captions accompanying body-positive images had no significant effect on social appearance comparison, body satisfaction, or appreciation (Manning & Mulgrew, 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). These results affirm the potent nature of images compared to textual content on social media. Furthermore, research shows that visuals are presumed to be closer to reality, less intrusive than words, require less analytical processing, and have the power to generate stronger emotional and more rapid cues (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Interestingly, positive captions and posts from good-looking and thin women do not lead to body appreciation or satisfaction (Tiggemann et al., 2020). These results reveal that, for body-positive content to be effective, the modelled images need to be congruent with the intended message.

Negative effects of social media

Table 2 shows a detailed list of the negative effects of social media use on adolescents and youth.

Exposure to images and videos on social media has been linked to appearance comparison (eight studies), body dissatisfaction (seven studies), body image issues (six studies), desire for thinness (three studies), negative moods (two studies), sexual objectification (two studies), self-objectification (two studies), emotional eating that is externally driven (Luo et al., 2019), low self-esteem, shame, and anxiety (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023), altering the appearance of images through filters (Baker et al., 2019) and contemplation of cosmetic surgeries (Seekis & Barker, 2022). The portrayal of thin individuals has more potent effects on mood, self-objectification, and body dissatisfaction (Baker et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2020) than neutral or average body images (Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2020). These negative effects of social media can be further categorized into two: body effects and psychological effects. Body effects refer to the effect of social media on an individual's physical appearance, they include appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, body image issues, desire for thinness, altering the appearance of images using filters and contemplation for cosmetic surgery. On the other hand, psychological effects refer to the effect of exposure to social media on an individual's self-perception,

Table 1. Body positivity.

Concept	Method	Sample	References
Effect of captions attached to body positive posts	Experiment	384 women 18–30years	Tiggemann et al., 2020
Effect of sexualized vis-à-vis non-sexualized, body positive videos and images on body image	Experiment	672 participants 18–35years	Michele et al., 2023
Exposure to appearance neutral, thin ideal or body positive content on mood & body image	Experiment	195 women 18–30years	Cohen et al., 2019
Impact of unedited images with body positive captions	Survey	233 women	Manning & Mulgrew, 2022
Representation of body positive movement	Content analysis	246 posts	Lazuka et al., 2020

Table 2. Negative effects of social media use.

Theme	Negative effects of social media use	Authors
Body effects	Appearance comparison	Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023; Rafati et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2018; Seekis & Kennedy 2023; Piccoli et al., 2022; Seekis & Barker, 2022; Klier et al., 2022; Baker et al., 2019
Body effects	Body dissatisfaction	Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023; Piccoli et al., 2022; Rafati et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2018; Klier et al., 2022; Ratwatte & Mattacola 2021; Baker et al., 2019
Body effects	Altering appearance using filters	Baker et al., 2019
Body effects	Contemplation for cosmetic surgery	Seekis & Barker, 2022
Body effects	Desire for thinness	Piccoli et al., 2022; Rafati et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2018
Body effects	Body image	Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023; Baker et al., 2019, Cohen et al., 2019; Fardouly et al., 2018; Klier et al., 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020
Psychological effects	Negative moods	Cohen et al., 2019; Seekis & Kennedy 2023
Psychological effects	Sexual objectification	Lin et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2019
Psychological effects	Emotional eating	Luo et al., 2019
Psychological effects	Self-esteem, shame and anxiety	Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023; Seekis & Kennedy 2023
Psychological effects	Self-objectification	Fardouly et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2022

emotions, and attitudes such as sexual objectification, self-objectification, emotional eating, low self-esteem, shame, anxiety, and negative moods.

Activism

The systematic literature review established that only seven studies addressed social media content that challenged the Western portrayal of beauty, which promotes thin, toned, curvy/hourglass-shaped bodies with evenly shaped faces, high cheekbones, small delicate noses, and full lips (Baker et al., 2019; Seekis & Barker, 2022). A detailed list of these articles is presented in Table 3.

The fat acceptance movement challenges the minimal number of clothes available for fat people and the sexualization of certain body parts over others while showcasing beauty and style as achievable by fat women (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Webb et al., 2017). Similarly, black beauty culture highlights the exclusion of darker complexions in the makeup range and blackness as a fad to be investigated (Childs, 2022). On the other hand, the Black-lives-matter movement challenges the notion that a black woman is simply her hair colour, texture, and length of her hair (Canella, 2020) while Kim (2021) contests the stereotyped unattractive nature of Asians because of their flat faces and mono-lid eyes. Finally, Maddox (2019) contests unequal treatment of bodies and sexual objectification of muscular women, while Chen and Kanai (2022) showcase queer male influencers who are challenging femininity through a display of their hyper-sexualized bodies.

Makeup

Beauty work incorporates the use of non-invasive procedures, such as makeup routines, but also encompasses invasive procedures, such as plastic surgeries (Smith et al., 2021). Five studies indicate that social media is rife with the following: a display of makeup products (Childs, 2022; Weare & Feng, 2021), makeup routines (Kim, 2021; Tran et al., 2020) and images of individuals with makeup (Chen & Kanai, 2022; Tran et al., 2020). A detailed list of these articles is presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Activism.

Concept	Method	Sample	References
Exhibition of the Fat acceptance movement	Content analysis	4 bloggers	Afful & Ricciardelli 2015
Politics of black hair represented in the Black Lives matter	Feminist visual culture & Digital ethnography	300 images	Canella, 2020
Portrayal of femininity by gay influencers	Thematic analysis	200 images	Chen & Kanai, 2022
Representation of Asian beauty	Textual analysis semantic analysis of	45 videos 1708 comments	Kim, 2021
Representation of black beauty culture online	Critical discourse analysis	2 mega black beauty influencers & comments from every day black women on Beauty Blender posts.	Childs, 2022
Strategies used to encourage fat accepting lifestyle	Content analysis	400 images	Webb et al., 2017
Strength & toughness as mythical post-feminist beauty ideals	Critical discourse analysis	Memes & images with #StrongIsTheNewSkinny	Maddox, 2019

Table 4. Makeup.

Concept	Method	Sample	Reference
Effect of framing beauty work as self-expression on perception	Archival analysis Experiment	3723 posts 3223 participants	Smith et al., 2021
Makeup products, (<i>Limited shades of foundations for African women</i>)	Critical discourse analysis	2 mega black beauty influencers & comments from every day black women on Beauty Blender posts	Childs, 2022
Makeup as a tool for self-presentation (<i>femininity among gay influencers</i>)	Thematic analysis	200 images	Chen & Kanai, 2022
Make as a tool for self-presentation, (<i>Mono-lid & hooded eyes among Asian women</i>)	Textual analysis semantic analysis of	45 videos 1708 comments	Kim, 2021
Motivation & effect of makeup use on self-esteem	Thematic analysis	9 female Youtubers	Tran et al., 2020
Reinforced beauty standards & behaviour.	Thematic analysis	Healthy makeup pins	Weare & Feng, 2021

The benefits of using makeup include self-expression, allowing individuals to restore their appearance to their original state (Smith et al., 2021) and improved self-esteem (Tran et al., 2020). On the other hand, the negative effects of makeup use are low self-esteem due to external pressure and judgement (Tran et al., 2020), perceived inauthenticity, especially when makeup is deemed to hide or conceal flaws (Smith et al., 2021) and disparaging women of colour by encouraging skin lightening (Weare & Feng, 2021; Childs, 2022).

Advertising

The results of the systematic literature review revealed that only six studies have assessed social media advertising. A detailed list is presented in Table 5.

These studies revealed that beauty videos, mostly in the form of vlogs on YouTube, play a crucial role in improving product knowledge and providing a forum for sharing technical beauty skills regarding skin care, makeup, cosmetic procedures, hair, and nails (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021; Kaur & Kumar, 2022; M. Lee & H. Lee, 2021; Rahmi et al., 2017; Ramadanty et al., 2020). These beauty vlogs work like infomercials, as they involve product use demonstrations and build intimacy with the audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; M. Lee & H. Lee, 2021; Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021). However, there is no consensus on the effect of beauty vloggers' trustworthiness, credibility, attractiveness, and expertise on information acceptance and consumers' purchase intentions. Rahmi et al. (2017) found that consumers do not consider beauty vloggers to be more trustworthy than product ambassadors, which, in turn, has no direct effect on their purchase intention. However, in a study by Castillo-Abdul et al. (2021), an influencer's credibility was based on their personal experience with Botox, which boosted their credibility by featuring experts or mentions of training, which in turn led to a positive outlook towards Botox by social media users. Similarly, two studies found that beauty vloggers' credibility, attractiveness, and argument quality affected information acceptance, which in turn affected consumers' purchase intentions (Ramadanty et al., 2020; M. Lee & H. Lee, 2021).

The afore-mentioned themes are interrelated, and this is presented using a conceptual model (see Figure 2). Activism plays a crucial role in the promotion of body appreciation specifically through a display of fat as fashionable which is an integral part of body positivity. Although Asian influencers use make up to display diverse visualities of mono-lid and hooded eyes to contest the stereotyped portrayal of Asian women as unattractive, it also depicts a sense of body dissatisfaction where women of Asian descent are inclined to consider cosmetic procedures to change the size and folds on their eyelids. Makeup has also been used as a tool for self-expression hence providing gay influencers an opportunity to contest femininity. However, the minimal shades of foundations available for women of colour encourages skin lightening which in turn leads to low self esteem and body dissatisfaction. Lastly, beauty vloggers use vlogs to share beauty skills on makeup which plays a crucial role in self-presentation. However, these vlogs also encourage a consideration of cosmetic procedures such as Botox which in turn lead to body dissatisfaction.

Opportunities

This study also aims to highlight opportunities that require scholarly attention. The results revealed the following opportunities: culture and religion, gender, longitudinal studies, the need for more representative samples, and various social media platforms. The following section highlights the results in detail.

Table 5. Advertising.

Concept	Method	Sample	References
Gendered intimacy on beauty content	Case study	Zoe Sugg	Berryman & Kavka, 2017
Effect of parasocial relationships on purchase of beauty products.	Survey	318 women in their 20s.	M. Lee & H. Lee, 2021
Parasocial relationships & the effect of framing Botox.	Content analysis	50 videos	Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021
Social media advertising in the beauty industry.	Interviews	20 participants	Kaur & Kumar, 2022
The effect of beauty vloggers on information acceptance and purchase intention of beauty products.	Survey	400 women 15–25 years	Ramadanty et al., 2020
The influence of beauty vloggers on consumer purchase intention.	Experiment	98 women 18–34 years	Rahmi et al., 2017

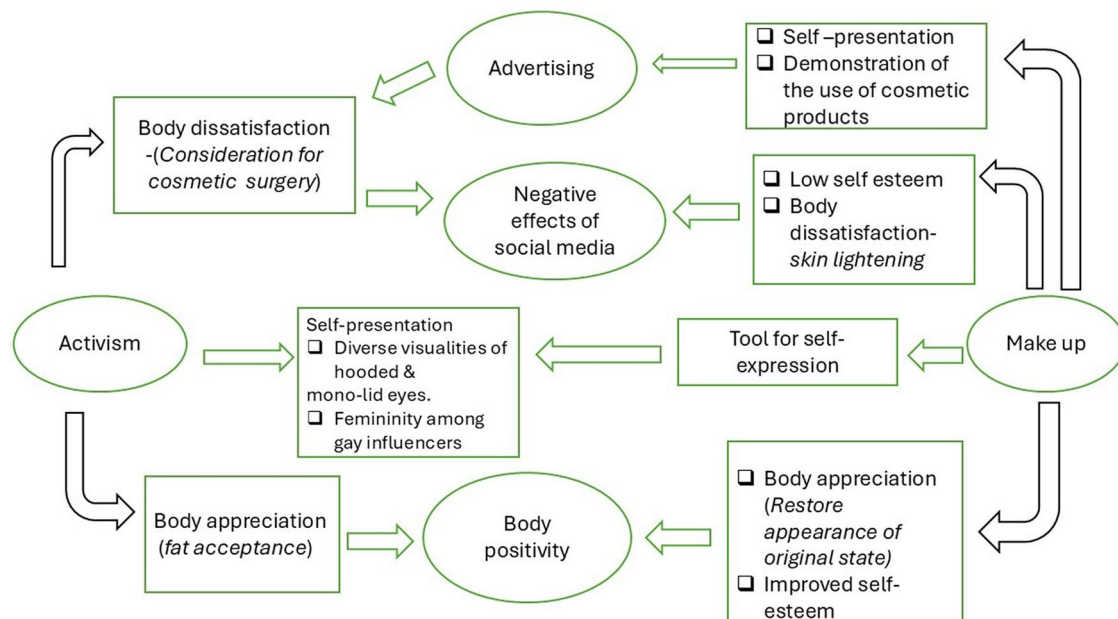


Figure 2. Conceptual model.

Culture and religion

Culture plays a significant role in the conceptualization of ideal beauty standards. In Western societies, which are more individualistic cultures, beauty is characterized by a thin and toned woman who has a symmetrical face, thin nose, full lips, and high cheek bones (Tolentino, 2019). In collectivist cultures such as Africans, Azawagh Arabs, and some Asian communities, beauty is characterized by small breasts, small waists, and large hips, where fatness and large hips are associated with womanhood and a sign of fertility (Popenoe, 2004; Waters, 2014). As we study beauty on social media across cultures, we need to factor in the role of culture and religion in the conceptualization of beauty. The impact of social media on body image issues for women of African descent will depend on how tightly or loosely they hold on to their Afrocentric beliefs. Thin women of African descent in communities that hold tightly on to African beliefs will struggle with body image issues because they do not fit the prescribed pear body shape. On the other hand, plus-size pear-shaped women of African descent, living within communities that hold on to more Western standards of beauty, will struggle with body image as they will compare themselves with the thin hourglass-shaped models.

Second, as we study beauty on social media across different cultures, we should be careful to acknowledge the uniqueness of different communities living in the same regions. While Asian communities may be characterized by flat faces and mono-lid or hooded eyes, the assumption that all Asians have small and slanted eyes should be avoided (Kim, 2021).

Third, more studies should be conducted to investigate the effects of social media on beauty standards across different cultures. This provides us with a perspective on the differences and similarities in the impact of social media across different cultures. This study found only two cross-cultural studies. First, Fardouly et al. (2018) investigated the impact of Instagram use on young women's body image concerns, social appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, and desire for thinness among research participants from the USA and Australia. Second, Kim (2021) investigated discussions about beauty practices and community building among Asian-American YouTubers of Korean, Chinese, and Malaysian origin.

Religion is also an important factor when investigating beauty among communities that hold on to religious values such as Christian and Muslim religions. This is because religion influences the outlook on beauty. For example, a common belief among Christians and Muslims is the need to dress modestly. Modesty is seen as a sign of good morals and is an important aspect of assessing beauty. One should not only have physical beauty, but also possess inner beauty. This can be observed in communities of African and Arabic descent whose cultures are heavily influenced by religion. This systematic literature review found only one article that investigated the impact of fitspiration content on Muslim hijabs wearing Iranian women, and the results revealed an effect on appearance comparison and desire for thinness, which in turn led to body

dissatisfaction even though these women wore loose fitting clothes that covered most parts of their bodies (Rafati et al. 2021). These results indicate that social media may have a stronger effect on women, than religious and cultural dispositions. However, more studies are needed to reach a conclusion on the potency of social media over culture and religion among communities in the Middle East, Africa, and South America. Finally, it is still not clear what role culture and religion play in the adoption of prevailing beauty standards.

Gender

Nineteen studies used only female samples to investigate the effect of social media use on body satisfaction, body image, and purchase intention, whereas only three studies used male and female samples (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023; Klier et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). Future studies should consider examining the effect of social media on body satisfaction, body image, and purchase intention for beauty products among men and women (Baker et al., 2019; Fardouly et al., 2018; Rafati et al., 2021; Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2021; Seekis & Barker, 2022; Tran et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that women struggle more with appearance comparisons (Klier et al., 2022), and they are more active on Instagram, a platform that promotes appearance comparisons (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023). However, there is evidence that there were no differences between men and women regarding an increase in perceived authenticity when it came to hair dyeing as a form of self-expression (Smith et al., 2021). Prior studies have also shown that both men and women have low body satisfaction when exposed to attractive Facebook profiles (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011), higher use of social media increases the desire for cosmetic surgery across genders (Vries & Peter, 2013) and men and women also suffer from body shame on social media (Manago et al., 2015). This will go a long way in addition to the body of knowledge on beauty ideals among men in the wake of social media, their role in propagating prevailing beauty standards in women, the effect of social media on men's well-being, and the development of interventions to alleviate the detrimental effects of social media use (Klier et al., 2022).

Longitudinal studies and experiments

The results of this study show that there were ten studies that carried out surveys while only six studies carried out experiments. However, one of the limitations of cross-sectional studies is that they are unable to provide results on causal relationships between social media use and variables such as body image concerns, vicarious experiences, conceptualization of beauty and consumer purchase intentions among others. The long-term effects of exposure to body-positive content on social media is also unknown. The average social media user spends at least 2.5 hours per day on different social media platforms, an average of 864 hours per year, which is equivalent to 36 days (Dixon, 2023). According to cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969, Gerbner et al., 2002) heavy TV viewers are more likely to see the world in ways that reflect reality, as portrayed by TV. Frequent exposure to certain themes and images makes these issues more salient and accessible in memory, which is in turn potent in decision-making (Shrum, 1995, Shrum & Bischak, 2001). Therefore, watching more positive body content, travel videos, and self-compassion videos could have long-term benefits for the overall well-being of individuals. We have a glimpse in the potential effects of a brief exposure lasting three minutes to body positive content, which led to an improvement in body satisfaction, body appreciation, and positive mood (Cohen et al., 2019). Additionally, the results of a study by Seekis and Kennedy (2023) on brief exposure to seven-minute TikTok videos on self-compassion and travel content reduced social appearance comparison, shame, and anxiety while simultaneously raising self-compassion among social media users. Researchers should consider carrying out longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of positive body content, travel videos, and self-compassion videos and hopefully establish interventions to counter the negative effects of social media use. They could also assess whether exposure to the afore-mentioned social media content over a long time eventually poses no benefits as social media users become desensitized to such content.

The need for more representative samples

Seven studies used student samples to investigate the effect of social media content and use on women's body image, body dissatisfaction, social appearance comparison, and consideration of cosmetic

surgery (Baker et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2022; Manning & Mulgrew, 2022; Rafati et al., 2021; Seekis & Barker, 2022; Seekis & Kennedy, 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2020).

In an exploratory study by Baker et al. (2019) that assessed female students' Instagram use and its effect on body image, the study included 27 undergraduate students aged 18-22 years from New England University. While these participants were appropriate for this study, they did not factor in female students who were older than 22 years and were active Instagram users. Similarly, in the article by Tiggemann et al. (2020), who assessed the impact of Instagram Body positive captioned posts on women, the study used a student sample of 384 female students from Flinders University whose ages ranged from 17-30 years. Likewise, in a study by Manning and Mulgrew (2022) that investigated the effects of unedited images and positive body captions on body image, the study used a sample of 233 female students aged between 18 and 30 years. The results indicate that for younger women, body-positive captions do not have as much effect as body-positive images (Manning & Mulgrew, 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Additionally, Seekis and Barker (2022) investigated the relationship between young women's interaction with beauty content on social media and their contemplation for cosmetic surgery using a sample of 399 first-year undergraduate women aged between 17 and 25 years. This study would have greatly benefitted from women with diverse income levels because the adoption of a behaviour is affected by many factors such as resources, attitudes, social norms, beliefs, and self-efficacy (Ajzen, 1991). Notably, all the above studies would greatly benefit from a varied sample of women, those younger than 17 years and those older than 30 years, who are in different seasons of their life, to aid in generalizing these results. According to Wong (2023), social media usage, although typically inclined to younger populations with 84% being those aged between 18 and 29 years and 81% being between 30 and 49 years, the older population ranging between 50 and 64 years make for 73% of active social media users. Second, although the majority of Instagram users are aged between 18 and 29 years (71%), those aged between 30 and 49 years make up 48% of active social media users, while those aged between 50 and 64 years make up 29% (Pew Research, 2021). This shows that a sample that includes women older than 30 years would be beneficial to provide a broader perspective on the impact of social media on women's body image.

Lin et al. (2022) examined teenage girls' self-objectification and their online interpersonal sexual objectification using a sample of 771 female undergraduate students, aged between 18 and 23 years, attending a course on psychological health education at a public university. Teenagers are also referred to as adolescents (John Hopkins Medicine Health 2023). According to the United Nations, adolescents include individuals aged between the age of 10 and 19 years while youth are between 15 and 24 years. This sample shows that the study had mixed age groups and did not provide the experiences of those younger than 18 years who may be in high school and middle school and whose experiences may differ from those already at the university. Broadening the sample to include those aged between 10 and 19 years who are at different levels of education and stages of life would provide an extensive understanding of online interpersonal sexual objectification. Similarly, in a study by Rafati et al. (2021) that investigated Iranian women's Instagram use and Instagram's effect on their body image, a sample of 214 female students from the faculties of Midwifery, Nursing, Medicine, and Health, whose ages ranged from 18-31 years. Additionally, Seekis and Kennedy (2023) investigated the effect of exposure to self-compassion, travel, and beauty TikTok videos on young women's body image using a sample of 115 undergraduate women aged - 17-25 years attending a psychology course. These studies would benefit greatly from the varied sample sizes of both younger and older women to provide more generalizable results. Second, since the sampled students in these three articles were taking medical-related courses, they were more privileged in grasping implicit and explicit aspects of self-objectification, sexual objectification, and body image related issues compared to those pursuing other non-medical related courses.

Social media platforms

Five studies addressing body positivity on social media assessed body positive posts on Instagram (Cohen et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020; Manning & Mulgrew, 2022; Michele et al., 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Only one study on body-positive posts compared posts on Instagram and TikTok (Michele et al., 2023). This may have been informed by their research participants' age, who were between the ages of 18-35 years, whose favourite social media platform is Instagram (Kepios, 2023). However, body-positive

posts can also be found on other social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Be Real, Pinterest, and Snapchat. Future studies should assess body positivity on social media platforms other than Instagram. An assessment of the portrayal of body positivity across different social media platforms and their effect on diverse age groups, genders, and individuals from different cultural backgrounds would be beneficial in addition to the body of knowledge on beauty studies and possibly highlight potential mitigation strategies for the adverse effects of social media use.

Similarly, 6 out of 12 studies assessing the adverse impact of social media use on body image related issues analysed data from Instagram. The other six studies analysed data from other social media platforms such as Qzone and We Chat (Linnet et al., 2022), QQ (Luo et al., 2019), YouTube (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2021), TikTok (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023) and various social media platforms (Klier et al., 2022; Seekis & Barker 2022). These results indicate that Instagram is the preferred source for data collection. However, all social media platforms have the potential to adversely affect social media use. Additionally, global statistics on social media use reveal that Facebook is the leading social media platform with 3.03 billion active monthly users, YouTube is in second place with over 2.4 billion active monthly users, WhatsApp is in third place with 2 billion active monthly users, and Instagram is in fourth place with over 1.6 billion active monthly users (Kepios, 2023). Future studies should investigate the negative effects of using diverse social media platforms on social media users.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has established that beauty studies on social media, whose focus was on body positivity, mainly assessed the portrayal and effect of body-positive Instagram posts on social media users. The results of these studies highlight the potency of images over captions and the need to maintain congruence between the message and the model for body positive content to be effective. However, the long-term effects of positive body content remain unclear. Second, studies that assessed the negative effects of social media use found that exposure to social media posts had detrimental effects on social media users' body image and overall well-being. These studies primarily assessed Instagram posts; however, all social media platforms had a potential negative impact on social media users. This can be remedied by future beauty studies extending investigations to other social media platforms, whose effects may be unknown. Third, studies that addressed makeup assessed the portrayal and effect of makeup on social media users. The results from these studies highlight the advantages and disadvantages of makeup use. However, there are opportunities to investigate the portrayals of green/natural beauty products vis-à-vis chemical/synthetic beauty products on social media and their effects on social media users. Fourth, studies that investigated social media posts that contest Western standards of beauty as analogous to ideal beauty parades diverse issues ranging from colour, body size, facial features, hair, race, and gender. On the other hand, studies that assessed the advertising effects of beauty vlogs mainly focused on YouTube posts, the characteristics of beauty vloggers, and their effect on consumer purchase intention. Finally, opportunities for scholarly attention lie in expanding beauty studies to include a) diverse age groups in study samples, b) assessment of the effect of using diverse social media platforms on social media users, c) adoption of cultural and religious worldviews to assess social media effects, d) inclusion of male participants in studies that assess social media effects on body image, e) longitudinal studies to establish long-term effects of body positive content, and f) using experiments to establish causal relationships between social media use and body image as well as parasocial relationships and consumer purchase intention of beauty products.

Limitations

Nevertheless, this study had several limitations. The studies presented here are articles from only two databases: Scopus and the Web of Science. It is also possible to find similar studies on other databases, such as EBSCO and Google Scholar, among others. Similarly, as this subject area is still growing, articles that had not been published at the time of data collection were not included in the current study.

Author contributions

Zipporah. Mwangi was involved in the conception and design; data acquisition, analysis and interpretation of the data, risk of bias assessment, drafting and revising of the paper to reflect critical intellectual changes. Dr. Ágnes Buvár made a substantial contribution in the interpretation of data, risk of bias assessment, reviewing the paper critically for intellectual content, and the final approval of the version to be published. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data availability statement

Data used for this study has been provided in the results and discussion, reference and appendix sections of the article. Authors agree to make data and materials supporting the results or analyses presented in this paper available upon reasonable request.

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