

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS, SELF-ESTEEM AND BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of social media influencers on the self-esteem and body image perception of undergraduates in Anambra State by analyzing the impact of idealized body standards, body positivity messages, and social media comparison on body image perception and self-esteem in female and male undergraduates. The study tries to discover the ideal body image presented by social media influencers and how it affects audience body preference, perception, and self-esteem. The study utilized a survey method, with a sample population of 66,590 from the 9 universities in Anambra State and a sample size of 400. A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument of data collection by the researcher. The study employed the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings of the study revealed that although they are social media influencers hold a significant sway over people's self-esteem and body image perception, undergraduates do not feel pressured to conform to specific body images, compare themselves to social media influencers, or experience low self-esteem; instead, they expressed positive feelings towards body positivity. Recommendations are proposed for influencers, universities, the government, and social media platform owners to embrace.

Keywords: Body image perception, Social Media, Influencers, Self-esteem

Introduction

In this era of technological advancement and an increase in the access and usage of technology, social media has become a reliable tool for sharing information, entertainment, marketing, and connecting with family and friends. It is like a personal companion to its users, particularly in the younger generation. Currently, a new form of celebrity has emerged, known as microcelebrities, or social media influencers. According to Hermant (2023), influencers are

individuals who have amassed a large following on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, and are able to influence their followers' opinions and behaviours. Through their daily posts, they tend to dominate and set the pace for discourses both online and offline.

One of such discourses championed by social media influencers is ideal body standards and images. Constantly, social media platforms are inundated with images of people who are considered to be the 'perfect' body, and as engagement thrives on social media, it has become easier for individuals to compare themselves with others online, which has influenced the evaluation process of one's body image and given rise to body dissatisfaction. (Nordmann, 2022). Furthermore, Nghaimesh, To, Sultan, and Eidan (2023) noted that these images create unrealistic body standards and can lead to individuals feeling insecure about their bodies. In another vein, Ormsby, Owen, and Bhogal (2019) have demonstrated that there is a strong link between body esteem and self-esteem, highlighting the fact that body esteem and ideal body images are predictors of low self-esteem. This present study therefore sought to investigate whether social media influencers' posts on ideal body image influence undergraduates' self-esteem as well as their perception of ideal body image. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions guided the research: What is the ideal body image presented by social media influencers? What is the audience perception of the ideal body image presented by social media influencers? In what ways do social media influencers influence their body image preferences? Does the ideal body image presented by social media influencers affect their self-esteem?

Literature review

The concept of self-esteem and body image

Self-esteem refers to an individual's perception or subjective appraisal of one's own self-worth (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). It refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth, or the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes, or like him or herself (Abhishek, 2014). The construct of self-esteem has a long, checkered history in psychology. William James (1890), one of the first psychologists, first proposed that people develop high self-regard when they consistently meet their personally important goals or standards in life (Hepper, 2016).

Abhishek (2014) defines self-esteem as a general evaluation of the components of the self-concept, a broader representation of the self that includes cognitive and behavioural aspects as well as evaluative ones; therefore, it can be referred to as a global evaluation of self-worth (Hepper, 2016). In their research work,

Anamika, Aarti, and Tamanna (2021) stated that self-esteem is the subjective appraisal of one's own worth and can be in a negative or positive manner. Many early theories suggested that self-esteem is a basic human motivation or need (Anamika, Aarti & Tamanna, 2021). Branden (2021) refers to the desire for self-esteem as a basic need, and it is also regarded as important in every sphere of life (Abhishek, 2014). Hepper (2016) illustrates the need for self-esteem according to the "sociometer theory," which implies that self-esteem exists because of human beings' fundamental need to belong; therefore, when low will motivate us to re-establish belonging, for example, by trying to 'fit in.'

There are two different forms of self-esteem according to Anamika, Aarti and Tamanna (2021): the need for respect from others and the need for self-respect or inner self-esteem. Signals of social acceptance raise one's self-esteem, whereas signals of rejection lower one's self-esteem (Hepper, 2016). In the same light, a large amount of self-esteem and self-concept is built mainly on how one feels internally, but other people's assessments play a major role in impacting both the concept of body image and self-esteem (Anamika, Aarti & Tamanna, 2021).

Several studies (Crocker & Park, 2004; Paula & Campbell, 2002; etc.) have found that individuals with high self-esteem are more persistent in the face of failure than individuals with low self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem also appear more effective at self-regulating goal-directed behaviour, while people with low self-esteem experience feelings of worthlessness, inferiority, and emotional instability, which can lead to dissatisfaction with life (Abdel-Khalek, 2016).

In conclusion, self-esteem refers to how much one likes themselves and how they recognize and appreciate their character, qualities, skills, and accomplishments.

Body image

The concept of body image has been explored by psychologists and other scholars for many years, but the term "body image" itself has a somewhat unclear history. One possibility is that the term "body image" was first used by the Austrian neurologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder in his 1935 book "The Image and Appearance of the Human Body." In this book, Schilder discusses the psychological and emotional significance of the body and the role of the mind in shaping our perception of our bodies (Nghaimesh, To, & N. Sultan Eidan, 2023). Schilder studied neurological problems and discovered that body attitudes towards one's own body influenced behaviour. He acknowledged that body

image was a multidimensional concept and opened the door for the concept of body image to be studied outside of neurology. Moreover, he was the first researcher to show it was possible to apply body image concepts to everyday people. (Cardosi, 2006)

Another possibility is that the term "body image" was coined by the American psychologist John Money in the 1950s or 1960s. Money is known for his work on the psychological and social aspects of body image. (Nghaimesh, To, & N. Sultan Eidan, 2023).

With the foundation laid by Paul Schilder and John Money, many attempts were made by different scholars to explain the concept of body image. Anamika, Aarti, and Tamanna (2021) define body image as a multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially, but not exclusively, one's physical appearance. They further emphasize that "body image is body images," which encompasses one's body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours. Body image refers to the figure that individuals form of their bodies in their minds. Alanazi et al. (2019) describe body image as the individual's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about their body, including their weight, shape, size, and other physical characteristics. (Nghaimesh, To, & N. Sultan Eidan, 2023). Brown (2017) refers to body image as the feelings, perceptions, emotions, and beliefs about our bodies, the way we see and feel about our bodies. Rossi (2022) describes the term body image as the subjective and thus internal evaluation and perception of one's own body; conversely, Cardosi (2006) sees it as a socio-culturally derived entity that is shaped by the self and others' opinions of the self. Huebsche (2010), in his study of the relationship between body image and self-esteem, explains body image as an evaluative element of how a person values, supports, approves, or disapproves him or herself.

Caddel (2018) explains "body image" as the mental representation that individuals have regarding the look and aesthetics of their body appearance, shape, and size. She also noted that the perceptual image that a person has does not always match the reality of their body type; for instance, a person might appear thin and emaciated, but feel as though they are overweight. Caddel (2018) noted that the development of body image occurs early in a child's life, usually between the ages of 4 and 6 years of age, around the time of preschool. In her research, she further explained that 4 to 6-year-old girls often participate in social comparison and exhibit signs of overweight bias, which can plant the seeds for early experiences with body dissatisfaction. Huebsche (2010) explains that adolescence and puberty bring a variety of physical, social, and emotional changes. However, boys who are considerably underweight or overweight and

do not gain the muscle bulk during puberty experience considerable body-image concerns, but they usually don't experience as much influence from the media and family as females.

Summarily, body image can be defined as a mental representation that individuals have regarding the look of their body appearance; it includes their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about their body. For instance, their weight, shape, size, and other physical characteristics. The body image of a person can equally be shaped by the opinion of others (society and media) and at times does not truly reflect the reality of their body type.

Body dissatisfaction

Body dissatisfaction is an indispensable term that is widely used in the literature of body image and self-esteem. It refers to a situation whereby an individual regards their body as extremely unsatisfactory compared to their ideal body type or individual standard. Body dissatisfaction is a term used to define a state in which a person has negative thoughts and/or feelings regarding their own body (Rossi, 2022).

Heider, Spruyt, and De Houwer (2018) explain body dissatisfaction as the negative attitude towards one's own body resulting from a perceived discrepancy between the actual body image (i.e., perception, thoughts, and feelings concerning one's actual physical appearance) and the ideal body image (i.e., internalized ideals about one's physical appearance).

Benedict and Formella (2023), in their study of self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction among the citizens of Nigeria, noted that body dissatisfaction is a common psychological problem that refers to the negative subjective evaluation of one's physical body, such as figure, weight, stomach, and hips. Julia Wallis, in her study on the effects of social media on the body satisfaction of adolescents and young adults (2015), explains that body dissatisfaction is the experience of negative thoughts and esteem about one's body or the degree of satisfaction with one's current physical self (i.e. shape, size, and general appearance).

Caddel (2018) noted that the feelings that are associated with body image impact the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction that people experience and play a key role in health for adolescent and young adult women (Wallis, 2015). Brown (2017) concurs with this idea, stating that body image and feeling dissatisfied with one's body is so common.

As argued above, body dissatisfaction depends on beliefs about the actual and the ideal body image. Specifically, beliefs about the actual state of one's body involve a descriptive relation (e.g., 'I am thin'), whereas beliefs about the ideal state involve a relation of desirability (e.g., 'I want to be thin'). Heider, Spruyt, & De Houwer (2018). Wallis (2015) states that Low body image can lead to appearance-management behaviours, which include attempting to alter the body through behaviours such as restriction of food intake, exercise, choice in clothing, makeup products, and, in more severe cases, cosmetic surgery; and can also affect subsequent cognitions and behaviours (Caddel, 2018)

One of the most common influences on dissatisfaction with our bodies stems from awareness of what society and our personal cohort of friends, colleagues, and contemporaries view as norms for attractiveness and flawlessness (Janelle, Camille, Seth, & Krista, 2020). Despite the fact, it is nearly impossible to attain such an ideal figure; many aspire to the ideal body, which results in body disappointment (Alanazi, Alotaibi, Alojan, Zaidi, & Rao, 2019).

Many women struggle with this dissatisfaction on a daily basis (Brown, 2017). To confirm this claim, Alanazi, Alotaibi, Alojan, Zaidi, & Rao (2019) noted in their work that teenage girls experienced greater degrees of body dissatisfaction as compared to their male participants. Brown (2017) further explained that people feel ashamed, guilty, and discouraged about their bodies, and feeling dissatisfied and unhappy with their body can actually start to feel normal for many people and may even seem abnormal not to feel some degree of dissatisfaction with your body.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey method in eliciting responses from respondents, as the primary data for the paper were sourced from people's views (Ohaja 2003, p.74 as cited by Edogor, Jonah & Ojo, 2015, p.144). The total population of the study was 66, 590, comprising undergraduates from the 9 universities in Anambra State, which include: Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University; Madonna University, Okija; Paul University, Awka; Tansian University, Umunya; Legacy University, Okija; Peter University, Achina-Onneh; University of the Niger, Umunya; and Shanahan University, Onitsha. This is tabulated below:

Table 1: Student population of universities in Anambra State

S/N	NAME OF UNIVERSITY	EST. POPULATION.
1	Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) Awka	49,615
2	Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University	30,000
3	Madonna University, Okija	5999
4	Paul University, Awka	447
5	Tansian University, Umunya	2000
6	Legacy University, Okija	1200
7	Peter University, Achina-Onneh	2000
8	University on the Niger, Umunya	1000
9	Shanahan University, Onitsha.	2000
		94,261

Source: Schools' Directories, NUC, 2024

Furthermore, the multi-stage sampling technique was utilized at different stages. At the first stage, UNIZIK, Paul University, and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University were randomly selected, making the population of the study 80,062. At the second stage, faculties of Art, Social Sciences, Engineering, Management Sciences, Environmental Sciences, Law, Education, Agriculture, and Natural and Applied Sciences were selected from the three schools and thereafter to departments and levels to reach the sample size of 400 for the study.

Data presentation, analysis and interpretation

The study had a 100% response rate as all copies of the questionnaire were filled and returned. This was because the researcher was on the ground to administer and receive the copies of the questionnaire.

Demographic Variables.

Table 2: Respondents' Demographic Variables

Age		Gender		Marital Status	
14-18	39	Male	129	Single	356
19-23	254	Female	271	Married	44
24 & Above	107				
Total	400		400		400

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

Table 3: Usage of social media

Responses	No. of Respondents	Frequency (%)
Daily	300	75
Few times a week	78	19.50
Rarely	22	5.50
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

Statistics from the survey show that the majority of the respondents use social media daily.

Table 4: Most used social media platform

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Instagram	47	11.75
TikTok	70	17.50
Facebook	59	14.75
X (Twitter)	23	5.75
YouTube	22	5.50
WhatsApp	165	41.25
Others	14	3.50
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

Findings from this study show that the most used social media platform is WhatsApp

Table 5: Respondents' followership of social media influencers

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	347	86.75
No	53	13.25
Total	400	100%

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

This data indicates that the majority of the respondents follow social media influencers.

Table 6: Social media influencers followed by respondents'

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Lifestyle	111	27.50
Fashion	79	19.75
Beauty	35	8.75
Fitness	42	10.50
Others	80	33.25
Total	347	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

This data reveals that the majority of the respondents follow lifestyle social media influencers.

Table 7: Names of social media influencers followed by respondents'

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Stankovic	16	4
Beautygoddess	72	18
Mercy Eke	36	9
Akin Faminu	15	3.75
Ebuka BBN	42	10.50
Others	166	54.75
Total	347	100

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2026

Data from the table above indicate that the majority of the respondents follow social media influencers other than those listed in the questionnaire.

Table 8: Respondents' view of posts on ideal body types on social media

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Yes	334	83.50
No	66	16.5
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

This data indicates that the majority of the respondents have come across posts about ideal body types on the pages of social media influencers.

Table 9: Ideal body type often promoted or portrayed by social media influencers?

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Curvy & Thick	215	53.75
Slim	65	16.50
Fit & Muscle-built	85	21.25
Others	35	8.75
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

This data indicates that the majority of the ideal body type promoted on social media is curvy & thick.

Table 10: Do you feel pressured to look a certain way because of social media influencers?

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Yes	139	34.75
No	198	49.50
Sometimes	63	15.50
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

This data implies that the majority of the respondents do not feel pressured to look a certain way because of social media influencers.

Table 11: Respondents' body comparison to those of social media influencers

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Yes	149	37.25
No	212	53
Sometimes	39	9.75
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

Findings from the study indicate that the majority of the respondents do not compare their bodies to those of social media influencers.

Table 12: Do you deliberately skip meals, take supplements, work out, or try other means to look like social media influencers?

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Yes	115	28.75
No	253	63.25
Sometimes	32	8
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

These data indicate that the majority of the respondents do not deliberately skip meals, take supplements, work out, or try other means to look like social media influencers.

Table 12: Have you ever disliked your body because it doesn't look like that of social media influencers?

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Yes	117	29.25
No	247	61.75
Sometimes	36	9
Total	400	100%

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

The data from the table above reveals that the majority of the respondents do not dislike their bodies because they do not look like social media influencers.

Table 13: Influence of social media influencers on respondents' self-esteem

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage %)
Yes	131	32.75
No	243	60.75
Maybe	35	8.75
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

This data indicates that the majority of the respondents do not develop a sense of low self-esteem as a result of following social media influencers.

Table 14: Respondents' feelings towards body image positivity posts by social media influencers

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	274	68.50
No	60	15
Sometimes	66	16.50
Total	400	100

Source: Researcher's field survey 2026

Data from the table above show that the majority of the respondents feel good seeing body image positivity posts by social media influencers.

Discussion of research findings

The findings of this study reveal that respondents use social media platforms daily, and they spend most of their time on WhatsApp. The respondents also follow social media influencers on social media platforms; they follow other types of social media influencers rather than Lifestyle Influencers, Fashion Influencers, Beauty Influencers, and Fitness Influencers; they also follow other social media influencers rather than Stankovic, Beauty goddess, Mercy Eke, Akin Faminu, and Ebuka BBN. The respondents have come across posts about ideal body types on the pages of social media influencers, and the most promoted Ideal body type by social media influencers is Curvy and thick, as against a slim figure, a muscle-and-fit build, and any other body type. Hence, the most prominently promoted ideal body by social media Influencers is Curvy and Thick. This finding lends credence to the study conducted by Jemisenia, Ugochukwu, Adejoh, & Oniwon (2019), who noted that Nigerian society has a unique preference for both plumpness and thinness, and in the sub-culture, plumpness is regarded as attractive, especially in women.

Additionally, findings from this research revealed that the respondents do not feel pressured to look a certain way because of social media influencers, and the respondents do not compare their bodies to the bodies of social media influencers.

The findings also reveal that respondents do not deliberately skip meals, take supplements, work out, or try other means to look like social media influencers; they do not dislike their bodies because it does not look like those of social media influencers. To support these findings, Onkwalaony, Onwude, & Esinwoke (2022) found out that female undergraduates in Enugu State did not adopt any drastic measures like surgeries and enhancement products to develop a sexy female body image.

The findings also revealed that respondents do not develop a sense of low self-esteem as a result of not having a body type that fits into the ideal body promoted by social media influencers; they also feel happy to see posts about body image positivity on the pages of social media Influencers. Thus, body positivity messages act as an intervening variable in the influence of social media influencers on respondents. This assertion is supported by Jaiswal & Kumar (2023), who stated that exposure to body positivity and self-love messages can have favourable outcomes for young women's mental health, physical appearance, and self-esteem.

Conclusion

The media does not just inform us about the happenings in the world, but also affects every person in one way or the other, and social media platforms as well as social media influencers play a role in the dissemination of Information to people. However, despite the large followings social media influencers enjoy, it does not translate to changing undergraduates' perception of ideal body image, nor does it make them skip meals or take supplements to achieve the ideal body image. Nonetheless, what appears to be the intervening variable in this research (body positivity messages) was also disseminated by social media influencers. Thus, what comes into play in this research is that the respondents choose which messages or posts to be affected by; this is in line with the selective perception and retention theories.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that body positivity campaigns should be carried out on campuses to improve students' self-esteem and body image, as well as media literacy campaigns that would imbue students with the knowledge of how to critically analyse social media content.

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