

Investigating the Relationship between Frequent use of Instagram and Body Image Issues in Young Women

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Abstract

Body image is a subjective mental representation that an individual creates about themselves. It may be an unlikely representation of reality. The study aimed to investigate if there is a relationship between frequent use of Instagram and body image issues among young Maldivian women. An online survey questionnaire was shared with 100 Maldivian women aged 19 to 25 who used Instagram. The findings revealed a strong relationship between the use of Instagram and Body image issues $r(98) = .765, p < .001$. Additionally, analysis of Body Checking Questionnaire subscales: idiosyncratic checking rituals, checking specific body parts, comparing overall appearance and frequency of Instagram use showed a positive relationship between all three variables and frequency of Instagram use. The study's findings suggest that frequent use of Instagram negatively impacts the body image of young Maldivian women. Data also showed that usage of Instagram at an addictive level was exceedingly high, at 57%. The study findings have serious implications since international research demonstrates that viewing and uploading edited photos on Instagram can harm young people's perceptions of their body image. Once beauty ideals have been internalised, women self-objectify themselves, focusing on the aesthetics of their body image, for an outside observer, instead of attending to the functionality of their body. The study also highlights the need for understanding the pervasive and complex ways social media influences emerging adults' health and wellbeing and identifies the need for policy intervention to develop young people's awareness of the impact of social media posting habits on self-image.

Keywords: Instagram use, body-image issues, social comparison, young females

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Introduction

With approximately 2 billion active users, Instagram is one of the most popular photo and video sharing social media applications (Statista, 2022). Among the most viewed are athletes, actors, musicians, and other media influencers and celebrities, mainly focusing on appearance and endorsing prevailing beauty ideals. 50% of posts of self by young people are digitally modified before or after posting (Broz, 2022). With the growing popularity of Instagram use by young people, there is an increasing body of research concerning the relationship between Instagram consumption and psychological wellbeing of adolescents and young adults. The research demonstrates a link between Instagram viewing and body objectification of self and others (Alberga et al., 2018).

Some of the Instagram posts are designed to promote body-positivity, develop body confidence and body appreciation by women, and to subvert dominant beauty ideals. Viewing and uploading sexually objectified and digitally modified selfies lead to body surveillance, body dissatisfaction, and wider acceptance of cosmetic surgery for social reasons (Schettino et al., 2023). Research evidence also links disordered eating attitudes by young women with body image, body dissatisfaction, body desired to achieve, and social media use (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019).

There are many positive aspects of Instagram, allowing young Maldivians to connect with others, make friends, and share their creative work with a wider audience. Instagram is the most popular visual social media platform Maldivians use to upload and view photos and videos. Instagram and Facebook are also used by Maldivian micro, small, and medium enterprises to market their products and services (Rasheed & Nafiz, 2022; Akram & Shahid, 2020). However, research on the negative aspects of social media use in the Maldives is unavailable. We did not find any local research publication on Instagram use and its effect on body image issues and related mental health concerns, which are on the rise, especially among children and young adults.

Instagram is the most popular visual social media application Maldivians use to upload and view images and videos. 65% of Maldivian Instagram users are young adults aged 18 to 34, of which 25% are 18- to 25-year-olds (NapoleonCat, December 2022). Hence, the objective of this research was to investigate the relationship between the use of Instagram and body image issues in Maldivian emerging adult women

Literature Review

Body image

Body image is a multidimensional construct based on an individual's perception and attitude towards their body. It refers to how we see our body size, and shape, how we feel towards these perceptions, and how these feelings shape our behaviours (Robinson et al., 2017). Body image disturbance is theorised as an intricate subject with perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral components (Banfield & McCabe., 2002).

Individual and sociocultural differences moderate the impact of exposure to idealised images on body image, including an individual's body orientation and body appreciation. An individual's tendency to compare themselves to others can cause body dissatisfaction (Mills, Shannon, & Hogue, 2017). A meta-analysis by Grabe et al. (2008) of over 90 experimental studies demonstrated that exposure to media images caused body dissatisfaction and internalisation of the thin ideal among viewers. Furthermore, in a bi-directional impact of social media, people who are unhappy with their appearance turn to social media to view the thin-ideal type models for advice, and information and to see advertising products that can help them to be more beautiful (Cragg, Mulgrew & Kannis-Dymand, 2017). Women tend to view content through social media apps, such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, which leads them to compare themselves with others, diminishing their self-esteem as they scroll through the images (Burnette et al. 2017). Several studies demonstrate how both young women and girls are more likely to seek appearance related gratification through social media than boys and men. Studies confirm that social media influences how females perceive body image and that they can lead to body image distortions. These studies also highlight how viewing photos of attractive peers on social media sets unrealistic expectations on how females should perceive beauty (Engeln et al., 2020; Hogue & Mills, 2019; Perloff, 2014; Choukas et al., 2019).

Television and other visual media such as Instagram and Snapchat put unrealistic expectations on how women should look that would be considered attractive and desirable to others. Families, peers, and romantic partners reinforce these beauty ideals, leading to body objectification, body surveillance, body dissatisfaction, and body shame by adolescents and young adults (Burnette et al., 2017). Body objectification can lead to self-regulated food restriction and other psychological problems, which, once internalised

can cause life-long health issues and unhealthy behaviours such as bulimic tendencies and extreme exercising (Alleva et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2017). The negative impact of body image has now been identified as a significant health concern worldwide due to its high prevalence (Sharifi et al., 2016).

Fashion, health, and beauty industries thrive off social media platforms, in which they can enforce body ideals (Cataldo et al., 2021). By comparing themselves with others' photographs and videos, young viewers identify flaws they find undesirable in themselves and modify their own images to be socially acceptable and on par with the ideals set by consumer society (Perloff, 2014).

Cultivating and promoting consumer behaviours through Instagram photos and videos

Instagram is designed to appear to fulfil basic human desire to connect, to belong, and to be loved (Dumas et al., 2017). It also develops a desire for acceptance and recognition by others (Tiggemann & Velissaris, 2020). Through Instagram, millions of photographs of the self are shared daily and regularly inspected to see how many likes, shares, endorsements, or comments are posted by followers and friends. This puts psychological pressure on young people to post images that will be liked and commented on, compared to the feedback on their friends' posts. They can also view social media influencers' and celebrities' photos taken by professionals, engineered to fit certain body ideals and beauty standards, and designed to market certain types of fashion and beauty products. Advertising on social media websites causes internalisation and normalisation of unrealistic beauty ideals (Calado et al., 2010).

Additional to uploading images that have been edited through Photoshop, Instagram users can manipulate images to make them more appealing and idealised by using a wide range of filters (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). This type of manipulation can be seen through Instagram influencers who promote extremely unrealistic beauty standards. Additionally, rich people's luxury possessions and lavish lifestyles; foodies' fine dining experiences and gourmet food; fashionistas' high fashion items; are all presented through glamorous photos of young people with attractive and desirable bodies (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Peer pressure and unrealistic beauty standards set by fashion and beauty industry tend to change how individuals present themselves. When these unrealistic beauty standards are portrayed to the public, this influences unsuspecting viewers of these ideals, causing them to become more conscious of their bodies. Since deceptive photos of the self are uploaded to match unrealistic beauty standards, this causes users to become increasingly

unsatisfied with their body image. Thus, Instagram can immensely impact an individual's self-esteem due to the correlation between photo activity and body image distortions. Research shows a negative relationship between body shame and the intensity of Instagram use (Burns, 2018).

Instagram has a feature that allows posters to showcase 'fitspiration' photos in which individuals upload images to inspire people to strive for a healthier lifestyle. Women who upload photos associated with fitspiration tend to have a fixation on having an athletic body comprising a muscular upper body, toned abdomen and firm lower body. They may also have compulsive and unhealthy routines to achieve their ideal body goals (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). While these posts strive to put out a positive message, they focus mainly on having slim, toned bodies and on only certain body parts, such as toned abdomens and firm slim legs. This causes individuals to practice certain routines/ activities that would allow them to reach the thin and slim ideal body represented in the media. According to Jiang and Ngien (2020), young women are the main demographic most impacted by these ideals.

Effects of Instagram use and body image distortions

Fardouly et al. (2018) state how the images in 'fitspiration' photos focus on the ideal body image set by visual media standards. These body images are unachievable by most individuals. Their research showed that women tend to frequently compare themselves with others due to exposure to images on Instagram. The more time they spend viewing fitspiration content, the more dissatisfied they become with themselves. 'Fitspiration' images that are uploaded through the hashtag feature on Instagram are readily available to view. Jerónimo, & Carraça (2022), in a systematic review of research in the last two decades, demonstrated that exposure to fitspiration increases individuals' body dissatisfaction, physical appearance comparisons and negative mood, especially among young adults.

Jin and Ryu (2022) used structural equation modelling to show associations among appearance-related self-confidence, appearance-related actual-ideal self-discrepancy, materialism, and Instagram consumption. They also confirmed relationships among weight status perception, self-esteem, eating disorder, malicious envy, and Instagram consumption intensity. One of the three surveys they conducted demonstrated dynamic associations among eating disorders, perceived mate value, narcissistic grandiosity, envy, social comparison, intrasexual competition for mates, and frequency of posting selfies/groupies on Instagram.

Theoretical background

Two core theories that conceptualise body image issues are the sociocultural theory (Tiggemann, 2012) and social comparison theory (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). The sociocultural theory states how social media, such as Instagram, convey the importance of an individual's appearance and causes young adults to feel immense pressure to fit the standard set by social media. The sociocultural theory focuses on comparing an individual's physical appearance to understand how society influences individuals to perceive a certain standard of an ideal body causing individuals to have body image concerns (Rodgers, 2016). For instance, Evens et al. (2021) emphasise how social media presents images that have been modified and look unrealistic as the ideal body image, which is realistically unattainable but causes immense dissatisfaction to young adults who view such images. Therefore, body image comparison plays an important factor in the sociocultural influence on the impacts of dissatisfaction on an individual's body. This theory conceptualises how comparison of likes among different body types in which the thinner body image receives more likes through Instagram may cause them to be more vulnerable to body image issues.

Social comparison theory conceptualises how comparison of likes among different body types in which the thinner body image receives more likes through Instagram may cause thin people to be more vulnerable to body image issues. The revisions to social comparison theory assert that social comparison may occur between unsimilar people and can occur on dimensions such as others' physical appearance and eating habits. While the media portrays women as thin and fit, young people's weight is increasing as they adopt sedentary lifestyles with reduced physical activity. Upward comparison of self to someone better off on the body dimension of interest can cause body dissatisfaction. While upward comparison intends to modify behaviour to fit societal and media promoted expectations, it can have negative affective consequences leading to psychological and physiological harm (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

Methodology

This research aimed to investigate the frequency of Instagram use by young Maldivian women and to study how Instagram use influences body checking behaviours. Random sampling was used to recruit 100 Maldivian women within the age range of 19-25 years of age who used Instagram and had Instagram accounts. This age group was chosen since women aged 20-24 are more encompassed by media where body ideals are enforced (Cataldo et al., 2021). Data was collected between September and December of 2022.

Measures

In order to assess an individual's use of Instagram, the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) by Shahnawaz and Rehman (2020) was used, which consists of 21 questions on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree. The questionnaire was designed to assess if individuals suffer from social network addiction. The score ranges from 21 to 147, where a total of 84 and above demonstrates addiction at three sub-levels mild, moderate, and severe.

The Body Checking Questionnaire (BCQ) by Reas et al. (2002) contains 23 questions where individuals self-report on three subscales to assess checking for overall physical appearance, checking of specific body parts and idiosyncratic checking rituals. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert-type score ranging from 1 = never to 5= very often.

The questionnaires were shared through Instagram, Viber, Telegram and Snapchat. Participants were also told to focus on using Instagram when answering the SNAS questionnaire.

The Cronbach's Alpha of BCQ was .982 and .987 in SNAS.

Normality Test

A normality test was done to ensure whether the correlation should be non-parametric or parametric. The q-q plot test showed that the results are not normally distributed. In this table, Instagram use and the three subscales were checked for normality. That is; Instagram use: $W(100) = .907$ $p < 0.05$, overall appearance checking scale $W(100) = .935$ $p < 0.05$, idiosyncratic checking rituals scale: $W(100) = .941$ $p < 0.05$ and specific body parts checking scale: $W(100) = .922$ $p < 0.05$. The results indicated that the data are not normally distributed

as the p values are less than 0.05. Findings for the normality test of SNAS and BCQ show a Sig. of .000, indicating that the results are not normally distributed. SNAS: $W(100) = .907$ $p < 0.05$ and $W(100) = .889$ $p < 0.05$.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data in which the frequency of Instagram use and body checking behaviours were measured. A correlational quantitative design was used as it helps to determine the relationship between variables. Spearman's rho was used to analyse the relationship between variables.

Results

Instagram

Results on the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) showed that out of the 100 participants, 57 scored above 84, indicating addictive levels of Instagram use. This study used this score as a cut-off point to group Instagram users as frequent and non-frequent users. 67% of the nine respondents were aged 19, and a similar percentage of 20-year-old respondents used Instagram frequently. 68% of the 19 respondents aged 22 used Instagram frequently, while 72% of the 24-year-olds used Instagram frequently. The results indicated that 57% of the Maldivian emerging adult women who participated in this study, who have Instagram accounts and use Instagram, do so often. The frequency of Instagram use is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Results for Instagram Use Across the Age Distribution

Age	Uses Frequently	Does not use Frequently	Total
19 Years	6	3	9
20 Years	10	5	15
21 Years	7	9	16
22 Years	13	6	19
23 Years	9	9	18
24 Years	8	3	11
25 Years	4	8	12
Total	57	43	100

Instagram Use

The results indicate that out of the 100 Instagram users in this study, 96 of the respondents stated they enjoyed using Instagram, while 4 of the respondents stated they did not enjoy using Instagram though they used it, 3 of whom did not use Instagram frequently.

Relationship between Instagram use and the three subscales of the BCQ

Instagram use and Idiosyncratic Checking Rituals Subscale

The Idiosyncratic checking rituals subscale measures engagement in behaviours such as checking fatness of thighs, wrists, cheeks, and fingers and checking for a double chin. Findings suggest that 48% of Instagram users in this study check and measure the fatness of their specific body parts, while 80% of frequent users tended to engage in these behaviours. Fifty-two respondents reported not checking for fatness in every body part. Only 7% responded that they checked the diameter of their wrist often, whereas 29% of the participants indicated that they never engaged in this behaviour. 18% of the participants indicated they often pinch their cheeks to measure fatness, whereas 38% indicated they do not engage in this behaviour. 27% of the participants indicated touching underneath the chin to ensure they do not have a double chin. 95% of respondents who do not use Instagram often did not frequently engage in idiosyncratic checking rituals. Table 2 below presents the findings for Instagram use and the Idiosyncratic checking rituals subscale on the BCQ.

Table 2: Descriptive Results for Instagram use and Idiosyncratic Checking Rituals Subscale

Age	Engage in specified behaviours often	Do not engage in specified behaviours often	Total
Frequently Use Instagram	46	11	57
Does not Frequently use Instagram	2	41	43
Total	48	52	100

Instagram use and overall appearance checking subscale

The overall appearance checking subscale focuses on comparing the body with others and checking to see how the body looks as a whole. These include behaviours such as sucking in the stomach to see if it is flat, looking in the mirror to see how their bottom looks, eliciting comments from others about how their body looks, and more. The results revealed that all 57 respondents who frequently use Instagram tend to engage in these behaviours often, and 32 out of the 43 respondents that do not frequently use Instagram do not often engage in these behaviours. Table 3 illustrates the findings of Instagram use and the Overall Appearance Checking subScale.

Table 3: Descriptive Results for Instagram Use and Overall Appearance Checking Subscale

Age	Engage in specified behaviours often	Do not engage in specified behaviours often	Total
Frequently Use Instagram	57	0	57
Does not Frequently use Instagram	11	32	43
Total	68	32	100

Instagram use and checking of specific body parts subscale

The checking of specific body parts subscale focuses on body parts such as the stomach, upper arms, and thighs and how individuals measure and observe these parts. 65% of the respondents reported sucking in the stomach to see its flatness, 49% reported pinching the stomach to check fatness often, and 61% checked their bottom in the mirror. 41% checked the fatness of their thighs often. The results revealed that 54 of the 57 respondents that frequently use Instagram tended to practice these behaviours, whereas only 5 of the 43 infrequent users of Instagram engaged in these behaviours often. Table 4 illustrates the results of the respondents for the specific body parts checking the subscale and Instagram use.

Table 4: Descriptive Results for Instagram Use and Specific Body Parts Checking Subscale

Age	Engage in these behaviours often	Do not engage in these behaviours often	Total
Frequently Use Instagram	54	3	57
Does not Frequently use Instagram	5	38	43
Total	59	41	100

Instagram use and body image

The results on Instagram use and body image issues indicate that 61 participants have body image issues; out of these 61 participants, 55 are frequent users of Instagram. 39 of the 43 participants who do not frequently use Instagram did not indicate having body image issues. Only 2 participants who are frequent Instagram users reported having no body image issues. Figure 1 illustrates this finding visually.

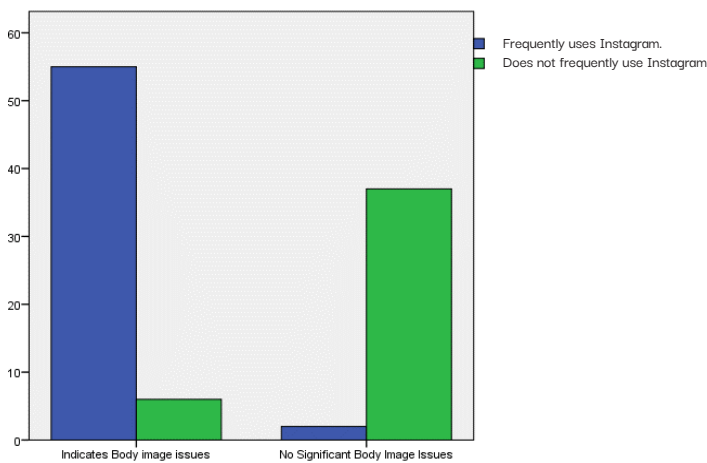


Figure 1: Patterns in relationship between Instagram Use Frequency and Body Image Issues

Relationship between the use of Instagram and body image issues

Results of Spearman correlation of Instagram use and idiosyncratic checking rituals subscale revealed a correlation coefficient of .764 ($r(98) = .764, p < .001$), which indicates that there is a strong positive relationship between frequent use of Instagram and idiosyncratic checking rituals. The correlation between Instagram use and the overall appearance checking subscale indicates a strong positive correlation: $r(98) = .757, p < .001$. The correlation between Instagram use and specific body parts checking subscale indicates a strong positive correlation: $r(98) = .732, p < .001$. Therefore, all three subscales of the BCQ show a strong positive correlation between the frequent use of Instagram and its negative impact on the body. Table 5 illustrates the association between Instagram use and Body image subscales.

Table 5: Correlation of Instagram use and the Idiosyncratic Scale

Variables	1
1. Instagram Use	-
2. Idiosyncratic Scale	.764**
3. Overall appearance scale	.757**
4. Specific body parts scale	.732**
5. Body image issues	.765**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The total score of the BCQ and Instagram use reveals that the correlation coefficient is .765, indicating that there is a strong positive correlation between frequent use of Instagram and negative impact on body image; $r(98) = .765, p < .001$

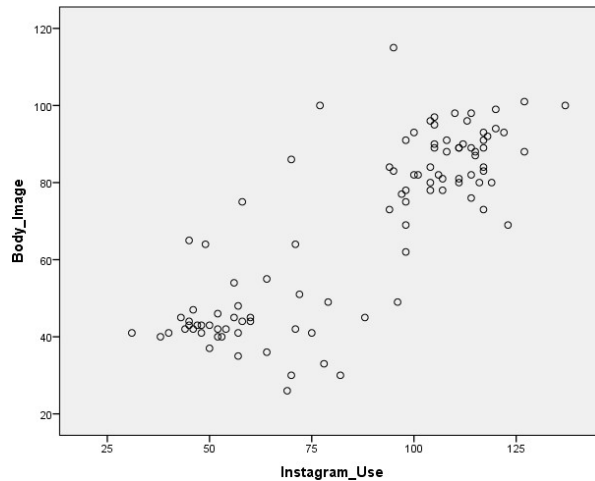


Figure 2: Scatter plot for relationship between body image issues and Instagram use

Figure 2 presents the correlation between BCQ and SNAS in a scatter graph. The results go from the bottom left of the graph to the top right of the graph, which shows that as the use of Instagram increase, the score of BCQ also increases, indicating that if individuals use Instagram frequently, then there tends to be a negative impact on the body. The scores presented fall into a positive slope. The results show a strong relationship between the variables.

Spearman's correlation coefficient for all three subscales was higher than 0.7, which indicates that individuals who frequently use Instagram tend to engage in these behaviours.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that while 67% of the participants had body image issues, only 14% of them were normal users of Instagram. The findings corroborate with Shahnawaz and Rehman (2020), where it was reported that among 57% of the participants who used Instagram at addictive levels, 96% had body image issues. The addictive level usage among participants in this study is exceedingly high compared to social networking addiction prevalence rates worldwide, between 14 and 31% (Cheng et al., 2021).

The total BCQ and Instagram use score has a correlation coefficient of .765. Social media applications such as Instagram are easily accessible and increase the chance of exposure to content that focuses on body image more frequently (Sharifi et al., 2016). This study showed that 44% of the participants often tend

to check their reflection and 28% very often compared themselves to models on magazines or television, indicating they compare themselves to beauty standards in media.

Robinson et al. (2017) stated that content viewed through Instagram causes individuals to show signs of body dissatisfaction. Fardouly et al. (2018) emphasise how women compare themselves with others due to the images presented on Instagram. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) state that constant exposure to images on Instagram makes individuals more dissatisfied with their bodies and causes lower self-esteem. Similarly, the findings of the overall appearance checking subscale of BCQ revealed that participants tended to compare their body size with others and frequently checked how their specific body parts looked.

When asked if participants compare their body size with others, 48% said they often engage in this behaviour. In contrast, only 7% of participants said they never engaged in such behaviours. The positive correlational findings of the subscales imply that they seem to have lower body image due to constantly checking these aspects of their body. 65% of the respondents stated that they often check the flatness of their stomach as they suck in, while only 7% reported never or rarely doing it. Recent studies demonstrate the fact that females are heavily influenced by media images of thin, fit women who are socially deemed as attractive, that it causes body dissatisfaction among the viewers, which further leads to eating disorders and other psychological problems (Alleva et al., 2015; Rodgers, 2016; Burnette et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2018; Evens et al. 2021; Jin & Ryu, 2022).

Evens et al. (2021) focus on how the representation of images on Instagram in which unattainable images are presented causes immense dissatisfaction among younger adults who view such images. The results of the correlation between increased use of Instagram and specific body parts checking subscale show that there is a strong relationship between these two variables.

The sociocultural theory asserts a set beauty standard of fit, toned, slim female bodies are used in media to promote consumer behaviours and lifestyle desires. Women viewing these images compare themselves to these airbrushed, stereotypical, sexist images of women, which are unrealistic, unhealthy, and unpractical. Viewing these images influences individuals to adopt such standards and the inability to do so leads to body dissatisfaction (Rodgers, 2016) and overlooking of women's real health problems. Therefore, the study's results which emphasises the constant checking of these body parts

to assess how well they would fit into society, show the impact that Instagram has on an individual's body image. The images presented on Instagram as more socially acceptable tend to cause increasing body image issues, which may lead individuals to partake in unhealthy behaviors such as extreme exercising as well as developing bulimic tendencies in order to attain a more idealised body image (Alleva et al., 2015).

The strong correlation of .765 between the overall results of the BCQ and SNAS supports the literature review, which state how Instagram focuses primarily on the importance of appearance, thus causing individuals to feel immense pressure to fit into the standard set by this application which thereby causes them to focus on their body image and to become increasingly dissatisfied with their own body image (Tiggemann, 2012; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Viewing content with the ideal body image has a negative impact on women's body image (Cataldo et al., 2021). This study suggests that frequent Instagram users constantly pick apart different aspects of their bodies.

Since the study shows that young Maldivian women who frequently use Instagram have body image issues more than those who do not view Instagram posts that frequently, it is important to develop interventions to promote healthy behaviours and attitudes, such as internal body orientation and body appreciation for its functionality. Young people must be aware that social media images are edited to represent certain ideals set by consumer society. Frequent viewing of modified images can cause internalisation of these beauty ideals, causing body objectification and associated health and wellbeing concerns.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

This study was an undergraduate research project of short duration and therefore focused on a smaller dynamic to explore the relationship between Instagram use and body image issues. Although the study yields important findings, sociocultural perceptions of fitness, beauty, and body image may not be fully addressed since the questionnaires were not modified or adapted to fit the Maldivian context. The scales used were for social networking addiction as a whole and did not solely focus on visual media such as Instagram and Snapchat. Hence, some questions may have been targeted at other social media users, such as Facebook. Therefore, when answering the questionnaire, participants can go along with the available responses but are not necessarily applicable. In addition, this study did not check for what purpose the users used Instagram. Modifying, uploading, and viewing content to compare themselves with others and obtain positive feedback from others on their uploaded images

can negatively impact individuals. It is therefore important to focus further research on how young women engage with Instagram content. This can be a multiple perspectives, mixed method, or a longitudinal study to understand how visual media portrays Maldivian women, what types of visual media images are viewed and posted, and their impact on the health and wellbeing of adolescents and emerging adults in the Maldivian context.

This research evidence can be used to help provide adolescents, emerging adults and their parents with psychoeducation on how social media works and how it affects an individual. Some psychoeducation methods include focusing on other things that would allow individuals to appreciate themselves more, develop an internal body orientation which focuses on personal health and wellbeing, and identify that social comparison can be harmful to self. In extreme cases of social networking addiction, professional help is needed, similar to other damaging addictive behaviour (Baker, 2018).

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