

Article

“Social Media Makes It Inevitable to Feel Bad about Your Body”: Examining Self-Presentation and Body Image of Young Collegiate Females

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Abstract: The current study explored how young females who compete in aesthetic sports adopt self-presentation strategies on social media. Data from semi-structured interviews with 10 collegiate female trampolinists (aged 19–24 years) were analyzed through reflective thematic analysis, and six themes were generated; self-analysis, the best you, emotional consequences, judgment, social media perceptions, and acceptance. Framed around these themes, creative nonfiction techniques were employed to present the results as an ethnodrama. Findings illustrated how participants demonstrated a high need to present their “best self”, as failure to do so results in fear of judgment, extreme self-criticism, and, subsequently, post-prevention. Moreover, participants used upward social comparisons, and when they felt they did not match the ‘thin ideal’, often made negative associations between weight gain and attractiveness. This study contributes to body image literature by demonstrating a more detailed understanding of how social media influences one’s need to alter their self-presentation to fit in with highly pressured societal ideals. In addition, the ethnodrama provides an educational tool to stimulate reflection about the extremity of this issue in today’s modern world.



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1. Introduction

Social media is a modern-day catalyst for body image ideals and alterations to body image perceptions [1] with online platforms providing opportunities for individuals to adopt self-presentation strategies to portray themselves in a ‘desirable’ way. However, the pressure to conform to ideologies can contribute to unrealistic individual presentations online and increase negative associations with body image [2]. For instance, image-based platforms, such as Instagram, whereby 800 million images are being uploaded per day [3], expose hugely influential populations [4] to the quixotic message that it is idealistic to mirror some potentially unattainable appearances. Thus, it is important to explore the implications of engagement on these mediums on an individual’s body image and portrayal of their identity online.

Shreffler et al. [5] explored the self-presentation of 207 females with verified Twitter accounts by analyzing their profile pictures. Despite the sample comprising athletes, the focus remained on their body image and social media practices, not on the sporting context in which the data was collected. In contrast to previous research [6], females were more likely to portray themselves in a competent light; i.e., in their working environment. Similarly, Pedalino and Camerini [7] found that females posted more polished and ‘highly selective’ versions of themselves [8] in the hope of overriding the anticipated physical expectations that society has deemed preferable [9]. These presentations of self are in direct conflict with how females have traditionally been portrayed as sexualized beings in traditional media outlets [10]. This may suggest that if women have the opportunity to

control their image through social media, they can focus on their professional identities and perhaps enhance their perceptions of credibility. However, the reasons for self-presentation are yet to be thoroughly explored in this population. Therefore, a qualitative approach to discussing and exploring images in an effort to understand online behavior would seem appropriate.

In society, 'thinness' is often portrayed as the epitome of health and success, making females at risk for being overly self-critical due to the internalization of pressures regarding various aspects of their image, including weight and appearance. In an experimental study, Brown and Tiggemann [11] found that exposure to Instagram images that depict attractive and thin celebrities and peers was associated with higher body dissatisfaction levels, mediated by social comparison. Tiggemann and Anderberg [12] also found that comparisons with these idealized images lead to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, while comparisons with images portraying ideals and reality decreased dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, social media was found to be a powerful conveyor of cultural representation of female body image and identities (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003). Similarly, Fardouly and Vartanian [13] found that higher levels of usage on social media have a positive correlation with body image concerns and a drive to achieve a 'thin ideal', leading to a desire to change presentation tactics in order to conform to these ideals to protect self-esteem.

A deeply entrenched 'slim to win' ideology is now evident in not just female sports but the general population too [14]. McMahon et al. [15] investigated this ideology by presenting findings as an ethnodrama to explore the way in which three elite Australian swimmers presented themselves online. The ethnodrama was based on a collection of images that referred to the culture on Instagram and Twitter, with the addition of direct quotes made to the media. The females reproduced the ideology through a presentation of self, and no one appeared to negotiate or use context resisting tensions. However, while 'slim to win' was entrenched in self-presentation, diet pills and abuse of pharmaceutical drugs (e.g., laxatives) were also apparent, showing potential negative health implications for these individuals as a result of dominant thin ideologies portrayed on social media [16]. Yet, research still needs to examine how this 'thin ideal' impacts an individual's portrayal online, using youth female populations.

Research also needs to consider the age of participants, as literature [17] has shown that younger individuals are more likely to conform to external influences. As an example, Chua and Chung [8] explored engagement in self-presentation and peer comparison on social media by conducting 24 interviews with teenage girls. Here, teenage girls were found to negotiate their self-presentation efforts to achieve the standards of beauty projected by their peers, whereby likes and followers were used to measure approval of physical beauty and gain validation. This affirms that the meanings of beauty are socially constructed [18], increasing reception to emphasizing physical features such as thinness and flawless skin. The editable features on Instagram give females the flexibility to refine and alter their images to bring them closer to the cultural ideals of beauty and thus, deviate from their real-life appearances. Thus, this adds to existing literature [19] by revealing that tools, such as likes and followers, paired with exposure to ideals, impact the self-presentation strategies of teenage girls. However, while the effects of likes and comments on self-presentation strategies have been identified, further research is needed to examine other possible reasons for the adoption of these self-presentation techniques online.

Brodersen et al. [20] demonstrated the need to examine youth populations, highlighting how only one-third of studies investigating problematic smartphone use, address young individuals. Specifically, Brodersen and colleagues examined the impact of smartphone usage on the mental health of a sample of 13–21-year-old participants and found that high smartphone use was correlated to reduced mental health and wellbeing. Passive screen time was also suggested to encourage negative outcomes, although the authors were unsure whether social media engagement was responsible for this. Brodersen's work highlighted the lack of research using youth samples, suggesting the need for more research

considering how the use of social media can impact the mental health and wellbeing of younger participants.

It is evident that there has been an array of research investigating the effects of social media engagement on body image and self-presentation online, demonstrating the implications of societal ideals on the online behaviors of females. However, further research is needed to explain why females employ specific strategies to create hyper-idealized versions of themselves. The majority of research within the field has also adopted a quantitative approach [5,21–23], which may explain why it has failed to infer into this specific area of exploration. To add, limited literature has specifically investigated Instagram, suggesting that more examination into this medium is warranted, as this image-based platform could provide further insight into the self-presentation strategies employed by young, females online. Therefore, to address this research question, we aimed to develop an understanding of why young collegiate females used certain approaches to presenting themselves online (i.e., on Instagram). In turn, it is hoped that this research will educate both athletes and the young female population in understanding the potential impacts of social media and subsequently improve individuals' body image perceptions.

2. Method

2.1. Design and Philosophical Underpinning

We adopted a qualitative constructionist approach to examine young females' perceptions about the way they present themselves on social media. The research was underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism, with reality considered to be subjective and contextual. Thus, our focus was on interpreting participants body-related perceptions and the impact on the presentation of self, and their accompanying emotions and cognitions, which is an approach previously used to examine body image in later life for females (Bennett et al., 2019). In line with this philosophical underpinning, we used a qualitative approach (interviews) to collect data and used creative non-fiction techniques to present data as an ethnodrama. In taking this approach to conducting the research and presenting the findings in this way, we aimed to understand more about the experiences of each individual within a complex human world and their attempts to present themselves on social media. Such a constructivist approach also emphasizes the role of the researchers in constructing knowledge, including the role of researcher-participant relationships in the interview process and interactions with participants. Furthermore, this underpinning philosophy subsequently influenced the analysis and presentation of data in a creative manner, as well as guiding steps to enhance methodological rigor.

2.2. Participants

Ten women were purposefully sampled to allow us to gather rich information to address the aims of the study. The participants were young females, all competing in the sport of trampolining. All participants were second to third-year students with a mean age of 20.6 years ($SD = 1.28$; age range from 19–24 years). Each had a minimum of 3 years' experience in trampolining competitions, including at least a year's experience in BUCS (British Universities and Colleges Sport) competitions. Participants had a mean of 7.5 years ($SD = 3.74$; range from 2–14 years) in competitive sport and all participants self-identified as white British. The timing of the study exempted any first-year students, due to inexperience in University competitions. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, this sampling strategy was deemed the most appropriate as it only involved participants who understood the research question. This increases the appropriateness as it excluded any individuals who did not feel comfortable participating from the beginning, increasing the ability to build rapport and gain a richer depth of information. Furthermore, it was decided to specifically utilize female trampolinists for a handful of reasons. Indeed, aesthetic sports statistically demonstrate an increased awareness of body image, due to a high focus on one's "looks" paired with their athleticism [24]. This potentially raises individuals' concerns about how they present themselves online due to them being more

aware of their physicality. To add, the majority of online engagement is from females [8]. This increases the depth of internal impressionism on one's body image and, in turn, increases the frequency of physical comparisons, resulting in alterations to appearance to prevent deviation from societal norms. There is also a higher pressure on females to fit the definition of "beauty" through years of tradition and stereotypes [25], making it of interest to examine specifically why they alter how they present themselves online in today's highly digital world. It is important to note, that despite the sample including athletes, the focus remained on their body image and social media practices, not on the sporting context in which the data was collected.

2.3. Procedure

Participant recruitment began after University ethical approval had been obtained. First, the captain of the trampolining team was contacted and provided detailed information regarding the aims of the study. Next, the captain informed the squad about the research project, and those interested in participating made contact with the researcher. Before the interviews took place, the researcher immersed themselves in the individuals' environment (i.e., the University campus) for 3.5 weeks to both observe and develop an initial rapport with the participants, allowing a climate of trust to be fostered [26]. The researcher spoke to the participants during the observations to get to know them and to make them feel more comfortable before the interviews commenced. This was vital to the researcher due to the research was focused on discussing sensitive information. In addition, a pilot interview was conducted, which highlighted the need for more open early questions and for the interviewer to use more prompts and probes, both needed to encourage participants to speak more fully. Interviews were scheduled around the participants' schedules to ensure the timing was suitable for everyone. Interviews were carried out in a convenient and comfortable environment. Additionally, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.4. Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was created, with four main sections. The first stage of the interview started by reminding the participant about the purpose of the study, and ensuring their anonymity. Rapport was established by asking questions based on the progress of their University course and subject area. The second stage of the interview began by asking the participants to show their own Instagram profiles and they were asked the broad question; "can you talk about how you portray yourself online". The use of photographs to stimulate data collection followed similar approaches taken by Shreffler and colleagues [5] and Smith and Sanderson [27], which enabled visual self-presentation strategies used by the individuals, aiding stimulation of conversation and the ability to extract rich data. This stage also explored the participants' views on whether they thought social media impacted their desire to change their appearance for their "online self", (for example; have you ever felt inclined to alter your pictures before you posted them?). Such questions were based on the work of Vartanian [28] and Fardouly et al. [13], who examined the impact of media on body image. Follow-up questions were posed when necessary to promote elaboration. This included probes such as "can you give me an example" or "can you expand on that", to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' responses and thus develop a better understanding of the phenomenon. Based on the work of McMahon and colleagues [14,15], the third stage explored the participants' personal experiences and perspectives on how the media has influenced their body image, both physically and psychologically. For example, the participants were asked: "Can you talk to me about a time where you have felt self-conscious due to portrayals in the media?" and "What aspect of social media do you find the most impacting on your body image?". The last stage involved summarizing and concluding the interview, which included asking the participants; "If you could change how you present yourself online would you?", and if they had any additional questions or comments to make.

2.5. Data Analysis and Representation

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke [29]. First, the data was read numerous times by the first author, who highlighted and coded quotes that were particularly pertinent to the research aims concerning social media's influence on body image and online presentation. These codes were then grouped into provisional categories, and theme titles were developed to best represent the categories. In doing this, mind maps were developed to illustrate the links between the codes (examples of these mind maps can be seen in the supplementary file). Two critical friends [30] challenged the first author on both the organization of the data into themes and indeed the titles of the themes. This discussion resulted in six themes, (i) the best you; (ii) self-analysis; (iii) emotional consequences; (iv) judgement; (v) social media perceptions, and; (vi) acceptance.

Following a similar approach to McMahon et al. [14], creative analytical processes (CAP) were then used to present data as an ethnodrama. Using CAP allows the researcher to create a story, whereby vivid emotions and images can be seen by the reader [31], and also allows the researcher to increase ethical liability by protecting the identity of participants [32]. Prior to developing the ethnodrama, three characters were created by combining similar personality traits demonstrated by the respondents to ensure all participants had representation. These character descriptions were shared with the participants, who were all happy they were represented. As the participants were collegiate-level athletes, the plot of the ethnodrama was developed [33] to follow a day of traveling to a competition. Thus, the plot involved scenes set around getting on the coach, being on the coach, arriving at a competition, getting ready to compete, competing, and traveling back home. Such a setting was chosen as this was realistic for the lives of this specific sample. To reiterate, although the setting follows an athletic competition, the focus remains on the participants' body image in relation to social media, not the context of sport. The ethnodrama developed had six scenes, with each scene representing the six themes that were identified in the analysis. Presenting the findings in this manner enables the reader to understand the responses with greater clarity and potential relatability compared to that of a traditional thematic analysis [34].

2.6. Methodological Rigor

The term trustworthiness has been used by qualitative researchers to describe methods used to enhance quality and rigor in their research [31]. There were a number of steps taken in this study in an effort to establish trustworthiness. Initially, a pilot of the interview guide was carried out with an individual from a trampolining background to establish whether the questions were appropriate and relevant to the sample and to refine the overall process using the interview protocol, time-management, and overall running of the interviews [35]. Alterations were made for clarity purposes and participant understanding. Additionally, within this study, authenticity was enhanced by using the process of "critical friends" [36]; one from a collegiate background and another from a research background to provide contrasting perspectives and increase the credibility of the themes created. For example, "social media/ideals" was changed to "social media perceptions" as a result of the "critical friends" believing this was a truer representation of data. After a detailed discussion, the finalization of the themes was achieved through conversation with the critical friends. Additionally, member checks were carried out by returning data (interview transcripts) to the research participants and asking them to provide input on whether the data accurately reflected their experiences. This was seen as an opportunity for elaboration, affirmation, and potential disagreement. However, all of the participants confirmed data was accurate, supporting data credibility.

3. Results

After each scene of the ethnodrama, the critical commentary was presented, which discussed the key messages and ideas displayed within the writing, including considerations relevant to the literature.

Characters

Emily—shy, worries about likes and comments, feels more confident behind a phone

Sophie—has her insecurities and is aware Instagram makes them seem worse sometimes, but hates the idea of people thinking she looks different online

Monika—feminist, loves body positivity, sees Instagram for what it is, even though she had her insecurities with it in the past, petite

Scene 1: “The Best You”

(It’s 10 a.m., the trampolining team are in and out of the Student Union shop, looking for drinks and food, ready for traveling to Bristol for their competition. Grabbing their bags from outside the Student Union, Emily and Monika walk toward the coach. Sophie is a few steps behind, walking slowly, looking at her phone)

Sophie: “Look at this girl on Instagram, look how incredible she looks”

(Emily glances at the phone and sighs)

Emily: “God I wish I looked like that, I reckon she’s one of those annoyingly naturally beautiful people”

(Moving forward in the queue to get on the coach, Monika turns around to look at the photo)

Monika: “She does look great, but it’s probably edited”

(Rolling her eyes)

Emily: “Still, I wish I had that waist . . . let me look at her account . . . It’s so annoying, how do people look that great all the time?”

Monika: “Well, she probably has loads of people doing her hair and makeup all the time to look like that . . . it’s unrealistic”

(They get to the doors of the coach stepping on one by one. Sophie nods at Monika, agreeing with her point)

Emily: “I guess, but I wouldn’t be complaining if I looked like her”

(Emily realizes how busy the coach is, so she quickly locks her phone and puts it in her pocket)

(Stuffing bags in the overhead lockers, shuffling around getting seats next to each other, the girls sit down . . . Monika puts her hand into her bag and gets out her phone)

Monika: “Let’s take a selfie for my story”

(The girls adjust their positions and get ready for the photo to be taken, SNAP, bringing the phone closer to her eyesight, smiling and giggling to herself)

Monika: “That’s so funny . . . love it”

(Emily and Sophie lean over to look at the photo, as they see it, their eyes widen, and they start to frown)

Emily: “Please can we take it again but put a filter on it, I don’t want people seeing me like that”

Monika: “What are you talking about . . . you look great!” Sophie: “I don’t really look my best there either”

Monika: “We can take it again, but I think it’s funny”

Emily: “Let’s take a few so we can pick the best one to post”

(Moving her head to the side looking intrigued)

Monika: “Are you normally this particular?”

Sophie: “I’m super particular with what I post . . . especially if I am posting a picture of myself, I always want to put my best face out there”

(Emily looking at Sophie, nodding as if it’s a signal of agreement)

Emily: “I just feel what’s the point of posting something I don’t look good in . . . Instagram tends to be people’s first impressions of you”

Monika: “What’s made you feel like that though? Don’t forget social media just shows the best of peoples’ lives”

(Emily and Sophie begin nodding as if they know realistically Monika is talking sense)

Emily: “I think Instagram has become the place for you to show the best version of you . . . I wouldn’t dare to post a picture if I didn’t think I looked good . . . If I don’t like them, I’m not going to post them”

Sophie: “People always present the perfect image, so I feel I have to too . . . I’m more likely to post something on my story as I know it would go after 24 h but nothing goes on the main feed unless I look great”

Emily: “I’m having a bad skin day today so that’s why I probably don’t like that photo as much”

Sophie: “Yeah, I should have put some makeup on as I normally only post pictures when I do as I know I’ll look my best in them then”

Monika: “Don’t worry, I won’t post anything you aren’t happy with”

(Sophie and Emily sit back in their chairs with a sense of relief . . . Monika deletes the photo and puts her phone back in her bag)

(scene ends)

Critical Commentary (of Scene)

Characters within this scene discussed the notion of being the ‘best you’, particularly in relation to one’s weight. This supports previous literature [12] in that comparison to idealized images leads to higher body dissatisfaction. Unlike previous literature, the participants further discussed how this comparison impacted their self-presentation online; i.e., only posting when they ‘look [their] best’. Specifically, participants noted that if their bodies deviated from the ‘thin ideal’, then the frequency of posts would decrease. Such findings can be explained by Social Comparison Theory [37], whereby unreasonable comparisons to unrealistic individuals on Instagram impacts personal self-worth and anxiety; similarly found by Pedalino and Camerini [7]. In terms of this study, upward social comparisons were dominant. Yet, when an individual feels they do not match the ‘ideals’ that society has said are quintessential to embody, they often make negative associations towards their own appearance. In turn, the results presented herein suggest that participants are less likely to post to Instagram if they feel a deviation from this particular ‘image’. Furthermore, most of these comparisons are kept to themselves, explaining why the participants felt the pressures from Instagram are ‘always in the back of their heads’. This suggests that Instagram’s hosting of physical comparisons has resulted in an engrained stigma, which arises when posting a photo and prevents anything that is not deemed as ‘the best you’ to be posted.

Scene 2: Self-Analysis

(With still an hour to go, the girls get their phones out of their bags and go onto Instagram, just to pass some time . . . Emily comes across a picture of a girl from her course who is training to be a PT)

Emily: "Oh wow, she looks really good . . . god I need to get back in the gym"

(Sophie leans her head over to look at the picture)

Sophie: "Oh she does! I keep seeing loads of posts of people in the gym . . . it makes me feel like I should be doing it"

Emily: "Yes! Especially in January when everyone's talking about going to the gym or going on diets . . . it makes you feel like you're not doing enough"

Sophie: "Exactly, that's how I feel!"

(Monika overhears and looks over at them)

Monika: "I agree it does make you second guess yourself . . . but if you didn't see it all the time on Instagram, you wouldn't be thinking about it"

Emily: "It just makes me feel so disheartened and think I should be trying a bit harder like I could be better"

Sophie: "I think it's harder seeing people your own age, it just makes you think about your life, and the way you look is not what it should be . . . "

Emily: "I honestly think that's why I am a bit shy in groups . . . social media has made me, and I reckon a lot of other people, critical in most situations because we are constantly told that we need to be better or there is something we can change about ourselves"

(Monika and Sophie nod in agreement)

Sophie: "You go online and you see these beautiful girls and then you just completely doubt the way you look in the pictures you've posted"

Emily: "It's so hard!! I just post what I think is what people want to see on Instagram now, I feel like I can't even post what I actually want to post"

Sophie: "I just over-analyze everything, especially my pictures" **Monika:** "Who cares! Just post what you want, don't think about it"

Sophie: "I have got better, but my friend and I used to have a 6 p.m. rule so you could only post after 6 p.m."

Emily: "I still only post after 6 p.m. as I know people are more likely to be on their phones and then I would get more likes . . . if it hasn't got likes in the first 2 min, I'll take it down"

Monika: "Likes and comments don't define you!"

(Sophie looks down at her lap)

Sophie: "It is quite sad to think now but I used to think if I am not getting enough likes and comments it's because I'm not pretty enough"

Emily: "I guess it's because all the perfect girls on Instagram get loads of likes so you just associate the two"

Monika: "Would you take it down even if you liked the picture?"

Sophie: "I have done it before"

Emily: "I still do" **(Monika looks at them both to reassure them)**

Monika: "I do understand how someone can feel like that though don't worry"

Emily: “It was worse when I was younger, I have hated my skin for so long so when it’s bad I would never post anything that was really close up”

Sophie: “I was the same but when I did gain some weight, I literally didn’t post any pictures because I wasn’t happy with the way I looked”

Emily: “I remember when I was in Year 10 and I used an app to blur out all my spots on my face because I thought then it was unacceptable to post”

Sophie: “I did edit my pictures a couple of times when I was younger because I was self-conscious but then I thought why am I photoshopping a picture to the point where it doesn’t even look like me anymore?”

Monika: “Exactly! I still think it’s important to present yourself as who you are on social media”

Emily: “I actually think that sport has made me more aware of my body, and not in the best way!”

Monika: “It doesn’t help we have to wear really tight leotards that put your whole body on show to everyone”

Sophie: “I agree! I have played sport my whole life and still am so self-critical”

Emily: “I just rarely post pictures from competitions because I end up nick picking my body”

Monika: “I think social media has not been great for people’s body image full stop”

Emily: “Especially in the summer like there’s always loads of bikini pictures and you do think, oh I don’t look like that”

Sophie: “100%! I don’t know how people do it . . . but hopefully one day I can take a photo, be happy with it and post it because I want to”

Emily: “That would be the dream”

(Emily locks her phone and looks out the window . . . Monika and Sophie slouch back into their seats for the rest of the journey)

(scene ends)

Critical Commentary (of Scene)

Within this scene, the prevalent emotion the characters displayed was that of self-analysis. Here, participants were concerned about being perceived in a sub-optimal way, as well as being worried that people were going to create opinions based on one’s posts. Since Instagram provides its users with the opportunity to edit their content before posting it on their profiles, users tend to resort to self-presentation behaviors. Similar to Chua and Chang [8], participants felt they had to present a highly selective version of themselves to prevent external judgment. Despite this, participants were also concerned about an authentic portrayal. Although previous literature has commonly detailed females ‘needing’ to match the ideal [4], within this study, one participant explained they would be mortified if people thought they looked completely different compared to their Instagram photos. This demonstrates the highly toxic environment Instagram has created, as females experience fear of judgment if they post themselves not fitting the ‘norms’ but equally if they post something in which they are not authentic. This results in feelings of stress and anxiety when posting a photo on Instagram, as well as impacting body image and well-being [13]. Evidently, there is a difficult balancing act between presenting oneself as ‘ideal’ online and also self-presenting authentically.

Scene 3: Fear of Judgment

(It's midday and the coach pulls into Bristol Uni, a wave of clicking sounds fills the coach as everyone unclips their seat belts ... everyone moves to get up from their seat and grab their bags from above them ... one by one the team leaves the coach and walks toward the sports center)

(Emily, Sophie, and Monika are at the back of the crowd walking together)

Emily: "I didn't finish my story earlier! Remember, I said about blurring all my skin when I was in Year 10? I went to class and someone was like 'why did you blur all your spots? As you don't look like that in real life' ... I freaked out. I deleted my Instagram because I was thinking oh my god everyone thinks I am fake"

Sophie: "Honestly, I would find it mortifying if people thought I looked completely different in person compared to my Instagram photos ... you would definitely get judged if you did"

Monika: "That's why I never edit anything as you just look fake"

(They open the doors to the sports hall and walk in)

Sophie: "Especially because most of my followers are my friends so they know what I actually look like"

Emily: "But then also, I feel like if you don't post something that you look good in it's quite judgmental"

(The girls look around and then walk towards an empty space to put their bags down)

Sophie: "I know so many people that just won't post pictures of themselves because they think someone is going to judge them for it"

Monika: "That's why everyone is under so much pressure to look authentic 24/7 ... I just don't think people really understand what they do can impact how someone feels"

Emily: "I don't think it helps that Instagram forms someone's first impression of you ... you're then worrying what people are going to think of you based on your posts"

Sophie: "Exactly! How can we blame ourselves really? It just gives me that thought when I post something ... like what will other people be thinking when they see that picture?"

Emily: "It does terrify me, like putting myself out there, you don't know who is looking and I would worry people sit there and just think this and that about me and the way I look"

(Monika and Sophie look at Emily waiting for her to continue)

Emily: "I 'm so scared of being perceived in a certain way"

Sophie: "Same, like you think what do other people think of me posting that"

Monika: "It's in our own heads most of the time, we have all become so obsessed with it"

(With 5 min until they begin, the girls quickly run to the bathroom)

Emily: "I need to cover my face up more, people will see how bad my skin is, it will be so embarrassing"

Monika: "You don't have time, you're on in a few minutes"

Emily: "I can't go on there when everyone is staring at me ... I don't feel comfortable about it"

(Monika and Sophie back off)

Monika: “Let’s go, you’re going to miss your event”

(The girls walk out of the bathroom, Emily walks over to the trampoline . . . she quickly looks back)

Emily: “Don’t take pictures of me or put me on the Uni story, I know I won’t like them already”

(scene ends)

Critical Commentary (of Scene)

Evidently, fear of judgment is a prominent emotion/response elicited by the participants, when discussing how they present themselves on social media. Although studies have concluded social media has a negative effect on one’s mental wellbeing (i.e., causing high anxiety and poor self-esteem) [11,38], this notion of ‘fear’ is unspoken about. Specifically, within this scene, participants detailed that posting something you do not look good in creates a judgmental environment and subsequently affects the frequency of posts. This finding can be explained using the Self-Discrepancy Theory [39], which details there are two selves; the way an individual perceives themselves, and the way an individual views how others perceive them. When there is a discrepancy between the two ‘selves’, emotional consequences follow. Pedalino and Camerini [7] similarly found lower levels of body dissatisfaction to be mediated by upward social comparison on social media. For example, participants detailed that they remember crying due to fear of being perceived in a certain way. This feeling was palpable within individuals who felt their image was discrepant from ‘norms’ delineated on Instagram. Therefore, evidencing a disparity between one’s personal ideal and the perception of what Instagram portrays as an ideal, explaining feelings of dissatisfaction. This subsequently affects online presentation, as individuals feel they will be negatively judged for posting anything that deviates from these heavily entrenched ideals. Furthermore, one participant stated; “I don’t think it helps that Instagram forms someone’s first impression of you”. In today’s digital world, young generations are heavily reliant on social media to meet and interact with people. Therefore, there is likely a link between youthfulness and the level of negative impact from social media, however, this will need further investigation.

Scene 4: Acceptance

(It is 5 p.m., the competition has ended . . . the girls grab their bags and head towards the coach to go back home . . . as soon as they get to their seats they slouch down with a sense of relief after a long day)

(Sophie is sitting by the window and gets out her phone, Emily catches her screen in the reflection)

Emily: “What are you doing?”

Sophie: “I’m just currently unfollowing accounts that make me feel worse . . . out of sight, out of mind”

Monika: “Good idea! I did that a while ago . . . I just stopped following accounts if they were constantly posting about their supposed amazing life, I just realized it was all fake”

Emily: “Like I know what you see online is unrealistic and I should accept myself, but I think it’s harder than you think”

Sophie: “The less I spend time on it the better I feel about the way I look which I think says something”

(Monika nods her head)

Monika: “Less time on social media, less exposure”

(Emily rolls her eyes)

Emily: “I do think coming to Uni has helped me a little bit, like being exposed to different people highlights how unrealistic social media is ... you look around and see everyone is different”

Monika: “Exactly!” It just doesn’t make sense in my brain, why would you want to look like someone else ... but I’ve never really had people say bad things ... that sense of validation is what people need ... I’ve just learned to post what I want ... like that picture earlier, I know I didn’t look amazing, but it was funny ... I definitely wouldn’t change what I post, I am happy with who I am”

Emily: “I would love to be like that, and hopefully one day I will be! Small steps I think”

Sophie: “I am a lot happier with how I am online now, like I’m not being anything that I am not in person, like I do think it is helping that social media is heading in the right direction”

Emily: “It’s definitely more talked about than what it was ... ”

Monika: “At the end of the day you can control what influences you. You are in control of yourself, like yes those ideals are out there but you are in control of what you see, whether you let them affect you ... learning to accept yourself is such an empowering thing.”

(Sophie and Emily smile as they put their phones away)

(scene ends)

Critical Commentary (of Scene)

The main feeling experienced by participants within this scene was the feeling of acceptance. Here, participants previously disclosed how they felt likes and comments were key to them gaining positive affirmations regarding their online selves, as supported by Sociometer Theory [40,41]; whereby cues of inclusion and rejection calibrate self-esteem. Yet, a handful of participants stated that they no longer felt defined by likes and altered their use of Instagram accordingly. These participants explained that ‘growing up’ gaining experience of the online world, as well as becoming aware of the unrealistic affirmations on Instagram, led to this change in behavior. Participants who had lower self-presentation concerns attributed this to unfollowing accounts promoting unrealistic body perceptions, limiting their exposure and desire to develop similar attributes. As such, age and awareness may be considered potential influencing factors in the adoption of specific self-presentation strategies.

Scene 5: Social Media Perceptions

(Monika gets out her phone to check the time ... she goes on Instagram to fill some time left on the journey home when she sees a picture of the same celebrity looking completely different ... she turns her phone around)

Sophie: “God it’s just so difficult to see what’s real and what’s not anymore”

Monika: “It doesn’t help that social media has created these ideals of perfection that people think are realistic”

Emily: “I honestly think without the stigma social media has created, I think I would have a better body image and be more confident and post more photos”

Sophie: “I thought if I weighed less, I could post more as I fitted into that ideal ... everyone has to be skinny and small to be accepted”

Emily: “It’s that thin ideal isn’t it! Like I hate saying it but thin, toned stomach ... like I know myself and if I wake up and felt slim that day, I would feel better about myself and would be more likely to post something”

Monika: “I think social media makes it inevitable to feel bad about yourself and your body”

(Emily looks down)

Emily: “I agree, social media is the biggest thing that affects my body image”

Sophie: “Yeah, like social media made me feel like being bigger or having fat was bad”

Monika: “I have always been petite and slim framed so I am quite lucky . . . no one has questioned the way I look so I guess I have never had to question myself and my body . . . I guess if people were commenting negatively about the way I looked, it would be a different story . . . it would definitely affect what I posted”

Sophie: “If you look at those ideals it’s going to affect you less because I suppose you see yourself as the norm almost”

Emily: “Like I don’t love my legs, so I am less likely to post pictures with them in if I thought they looked too big . . . just because I don’t think that’s what people want to see”

Sophie: “It does have quite a big influence on you, what else are you meant to believe when you are constantly seeing people with similar bodies . . . seeing this constantly is triggering, it has affected my perception of the way I should look”

Monika: “It’s the freedom on social media that is dangerous, no wonder why people don’t feel like they can be themselves . . . more representation is needed . . . hopefully one day we will get there! Then people can post what they want when they want without overthinking”

(Emily goes to say something, but the coach driver announces they’re 10 min away from being back, so a sound of shuffling floods the coach as everyone starts to get their things together)

(scene ends)

Critical Commentary (of Scene)

The main prominent feeling within this scene was concern regarding ideals created by social media. Participants shared a lot of anxiety regarding unrealistic standards online and how this leads them to question themselves. Objectification Theory [42] can be used to explain the process by which females view social media images, internalize the messages, and subsequently develop behaviors that promote a drive to achieve specific ideals. Here, it is expected that females will view the ideals presented on Instagram and become judgmental of their own physique’s ability to emulate the idealized type and gain a sense of validation in society [42,43]. In this study, participants who experienced distress regarding their online portrayal, viewed and internalized the ideal images, explaining their increased desire to present their best selves. This concurs with extant literature [25] which suggests that the ‘thin ideals’ within the media lead to females changing how they present themselves online to prevent judgment for not conforming to rich archetypes.

Scene 6: Emotional Consequences

(With 5 min left before they arrive back to University, Emily looks at Monika and Sophie, with an urge to carry on their conversation)

Emily: “Obsessed . . . that’s definitely the word I would use, most of my head is just consumed with thoughts about what I look like and does it fit in with what social media is, etc.”

Sophie: “I agree, like unconsciously it’s always in the back of your head, and then when you go on Instagram or go to post a picture it’s like your brain is overtaken with all these negative thoughts”

Monika: “It’s because social media has created a stigma, and now the stigma is there it’s not going to go unless we change it”

(Sophie nods her head in agreement)

Sophie: “I just feel like it’s so easy to get consumed by it all, it’s like a black hole”

Emily: “Yeah, it’s like we have all been brainwashed into thinking we can only look a certain way and post ourselves a certain way”

Sophie: “I just feel what I look like is always a priority in my mind . . . I am so tired of constantly worrying about what people think of my appearance . . . stressing about what I am posting”

Emily: “Once, I literally overheard someone be like oh yeah I’m friends with the spotty girl . . . I remember crying . . . that comment hurt me so much”

Sophie: “I was the same when I had put a bit of weight on . . . I hated what I looked like, didn’t want photos taken of me, I just felt awful”

Monika: “That’s so awful! My body image has never been horrific, I do count myself as lucky, so these pictures on Instagram act as a motivation to post more pictures like that”

Sophie: “I would love to think like that! It is just sad to think about the amount of self-sabotaging thoughts I have had because of social media”

Emily: “I think it works the other way though like there’s that sense of guilt for feeling good about ourselves and the way we look . . . we can’t win”

Monika: “Don’t you feel empowered when you see body-positive posts on Instagram?”

Sophie: “Maybe for a split second but the majority of stuff on Instagram isn’t like that”

(The coach pulls up at the exact spot as this morning . . . as the doors open, the girls grab their bags and one by one step off of the coach . . . Emily turns around to look at Sophie and Monika)

Emily: “Like I know I still have a long way to go but I hope more of these body-positive accounts are made because I would love to just accept myself and post exactly who I am online”

Monika: “It will take time. I know that stigma is there, but we can choose to ignore it! I understand how hard it is in today’s world to do that, but life is too short to not be yourself!”

(Sophie and Emily smile at Monika . . . as they all walk towards the Student Union, they say goodbye and part ways as they make their way home)

(scene ends)

Critical Commentary (of Scene)

The prominent message displayed by the characters within this scene is the emotional ramifications caused by viewing unrealistic standards on social media. Participants openly elucidated how social media has encouraged the manifestation of negative internal thoughts about oneself and their appearance. This can be explained by the Social Comparison Theory [37], whereby unreasonable comparisons to unrealistic individuals on Instagram impacts personal self-worth and anxiety. For example, participants explained how self-sabotaging they have become, which has led to consistent worry, negative self-perception, and overthinking both on and offline. Yet, despite this, participants did demonstrate self-awareness in regards to why they feel this way. All of them were aware that social media is to blame for the stigma created within society in regards to appearance and self-presentation, however, the question that still needs answering is how can this stigma be changed.

4. General Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the presentation strategies used on Instagram by young females. The range of conversations shared by the characters highlighted an array of concerns and issues regarding the negative effects of social media on both one's appearance and how one presents themselves on an online platform. Despite previous literature [7,12] highlighting the link between Instagram use and body dissatisfaction, there remains a paucity of literature examining how this impacts self-presentation. Chua and Chung [8] found social media users attempted to match anticipated expectations and presented a "highly selective version of themselves" (p. 5), which was also found in this study. Specifically, participants within this study spoke about their need to post "the best" version of themselves to match online ideals as closely as possible. Here, weight seemed to be a particularly influential factor in the self-presentation strategies used. Specifically, individuals detailed that Instagram glorifies 'thin' bodies [44], thus being 'bigger' or having more 'fat' is negative. Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, participants noted that if their bodies deviated from this 'thin ideal', then the frequency of posts would decrease.

Social Comparison Theory [37] whereby unreasonable comparisons to unrealistic individuals on Instagram impacts personal self-worth and anxiety, explains this problem holistically. Here, the prevalence of carefully manicured Instagram profiles has only exacerbated concerns around social differentiation, exposing people to endless potential comparisons, many of which appear to define 'perfection'. In reference to this study, when an individual feels they do not match the 'thin ideal' that society has said is quintessential to embody, they often make negative associations between weight gain and attractiveness. Subsequently, individuals are less likely to post on Instagram if they 'feel bigger'. Interestingly, most of these comparisons are kept to oneself, explaining why the participants felt the pressures from Instagram are 'always in the back of their heads'. This suggests that Instagram's hosting of physical comparisons has resulted in an engrained stigma which proves problematic when posting a photo and prevents anything that is not deemed as 'the best you' from being posted.

Other research has suggested that social media environments (such as Instagram) may contribute to feelings of inadequacy [45,46]. Within this study, 'fear of judgment' was a prevalent factor in affecting females' portrayal on Instagram. Specifically, the participants stated that posting something 'not perfect' creates a judgmental environment and increases body dissatisfaction. These findings are in line with recent arguments that "highly visual social media" may have a negative impact on young females' body image [47,48]. Engeln et al. [46] stated that Instagram leads to more appearance-based thoughts due to being a highly appearance-based platform, compared to others (such as Facebook). With such a high focus on one's looks, there is no surprise that the participants exhibit fear when posting. The Self-Discrepancy Theory [39] describes this finding by separating the 'two selves'; the way an individual perceives themselves, and the way an individual views how others perceive them. A discrepancy between these results in emotional consequences ensuing, which may suggest why participants experienced adverse feelings in response to worrying about being perceived in a certain way.

Instagram also includes a volume of seemingly authentic pictures [7] and, in online settings, we frequently encounter profiles with little information, meaning photos are used to make inferences about individuals [49]. Within this study, participants were concerned about being perceived in a sub-optimal way, as well as being worried that people were going to create opinions based on one's posts. Thus, it is not surprising that previous research has suggested that females feel they must present themselves in the best way possible [8], to prevent damage to their self-esteem. However, participants were also concerned about an authentic portrayal. Here, one participant explained they would be mortified if people thought they looked completely different compared to their Instagram photos. Evidently, young females want their images to represent "perfection" or "body goals" [50], but, equally, they also see it as 'ideal' to post their true selves. However, trying

to mediate a balance between ideal and authentic proves confusing and challenging for these individuals.

Research [8,51] also suggests that ‘likes and comments’ are key aims for young social media users to gain positive affirmations regarding their online selves. In line with such research, a few participants disclosed how they do not post until after 6 p.m. as they know they will get more likes. A qualitative study by Kenny et al. [52] found that participants were more likely to ‘model’ others who received positive comments about their appearance and who got the highest number of “likes” on social media. Adding to this, the number of followers a user has, as well as the number of ‘likes’ and comments posted on images, provides additional information about the appreciation (or otherwise) of others [53]. This explains why those participants who feel their attractiveness is correlational to the number of likes they receive are more likely to change how they present themselves online in order to increase their self-esteem. Conversely, a few participants stated that they no longer felt their self-esteem and identity were defined by ‘likes’. These participants alluded that this change of perspective was due to age and having more experience with the online world. Through having a developed understanding of the negatives and reality of social media, these participants were able to realize the unrealistic nature of these messages, and subsequently learned how their self-presentation online should not be defined in correlation to these ideals. Therefore, youth populations seem to be at risk of experiencing negative body image through social media engagement and more work needs to be done to further examine this population to support positive body image amongst young females.

Our findings also suggest that high engagement in social media platforms increases the likelihood of lower levels of mental health and wellbeing in young females. For example, participants who found themselves with increased exposure to social media detailed a higher negative impact on their self-presentation on Instagram. This finding supports the study of Brodersen et al. [20] that found higher smartphone use, particularly with engagement in passive activities such as social media, led to poorer mental health outcomes in young individuals. This can be explained by the Uses and Gratifications Theory [54], which highlights that people consume media depending on their own personal needs and this can differ due to psychological and/or demographic characteristics. With this in mind, young individuals might be more likely to engage with the internet during the week for study purposes, which in turn may encourage passive usage on the weekends. Evidently, there are unique associations between mental health and social media use amongst young populations. However, it would be beneficial for future research to continue examining how social media engagement might impact the well-being of youth samples, to help determine effective ways in reducing long-term negative ramifications on mental health in this population.

This study examined the impacts of Instagram on the self-presentation of young collegiate females. Although the analysis of data was focused on the female’s body image and mental wellbeing, in the context of sport (i.e., trampolinists), body image dissatisfaction is more likely in aesthetic environments [55]. Thus, despite the context of the participants not being referenced in our analysis, we cannot say for certain that the participants’ background does not impact their presentation in an online setting. When paired with the suggestion that youth studies investigating social media are under-researched [20], it seems appropriate for future research to replicate this study with different age groups, particularly those with a non-aesthetic sporting background, to see if/how self-presentation strategies differ. Such further work will help to support the development and maintenance of a positive body image among young females.

Notwithstanding the need for additional research, this study was strengthened through analysis and discussion of the participants’ Instagram profiles within the interviews. Unlike previous qualitative studies [5,22,28] that have only viewed profile pictures, we were able to make comparisons between common presentation techniques that encouraged further discussion. Even though creative nonfiction provides an opportunity to display an array of findings in a unique manner, in addition to demonstrating potential theoret-

ical insights [56], there is no guarantee that the purpose behind the story is effectively translated to the reader [57]. Saying this, the presentation of data in this way should encourage engagement from the readers due to its creative nature. Thus, future research should acknowledge this and therefore look at the use of the ethnodrama as a way of disseminating knowledge. To add, future research could potentially look at presenting data in different formats, for example; video/audio [58], to see if engagement with the audience is affected positively.

Overall, little qualitative research has examined the reasons for specific self-presentation strategies adopted by young females on Instagram. This study used a range of examples to indicate why females feel they have to create an idealistic profile and the potential toxicity Instagram fumigates in society. It is hoped that this information will benefit young females in understanding the quixotic aspect of Instagram and subsequently improve individuals' body image perceptions. For instance, while images of femininity 'perfection' abound on the platform, users have the ability to alter their feeds to prevent consistent exposure. Yet, even exposure to a handful of these idealistic images of women can result in an engrained stigma in the subconscious mind, that consciously prevails when one is deciding to post a photograph of oneself. Therefore, these findings suggest that Instagram accommodates a stigma that is challenging to alter unless a new 'norm' is founded within society. Thus, future research should investigate the relationship between exposure levels and the adoption of self-presentation strategies used by youth populations.

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