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# The Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization

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**ABSTRACT:** Scholars have reviewed the role of media and political polarization; however, some key gaps remain unanswered. For example, Prior's Citation2013 review provides a persuasive perspective on the ways in which media can influence political polarization – suggesting the media may not significantly influence the average persons' polarization. However, this review fails to make a distinction between affective and ideological polarization, rather grouping both into the overarching umbrella of 'political polarization.' Further, the political climate has drastically changed in the U.S. since this review, with greater polarization (Pew Research Center, Citation2017), increased social media use (Pew Research Center, Citation2019), more partisan news (Jurkowitz et al., Citation2020), and growing animosity between political opponents (Finkel et al., Citation2020). Finally, the review solely examined the effect of media on political polarization in the U.S. context, ignoring research from across the world (e.g. Chile (Valenzuela et al., Citation2019), Germany (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., Citation2015), and Ghana (Conroy-Krutz & Moehler, Citation2015).

**KEYWORDS:** social media, political, polarization, impact, scholars, world

## I. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this study was to explore the impact of social media on political polarization. Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library. Findings: The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the impact of social media on political polarization. Preliminary empirical review revealed that social media significantly contributes to political polarization through mechanisms like filter bubbles and echo chambers. It emphasizes the need for media literacy programs and critical thinking to navigate these platforms effectively. The implications are substantial, impacting society and democracy. Future research should delve into individual characteristics and cross-cultural variations, while policymakers and social media companies should consider transparency and algorithmic adjustments. By addressing these challenges and promoting informed discourse, we can work towards a healthier democratic environment in the digital age. Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:[1,2,3] The Filter Bubble Theory, Spiral of Silence Theory and the Selective Exposure Theory may be used to anchor future studies on political polarization. The study offered four key recommendations. Firstly, there is a need to enhance digital media literacy programs to equip individuals with critical thinking skills to discern credible information on social media. Secondly, social media platforms should prioritize algorithmic transparency and accountability to avoid inadvertently exacerbating polarization. Thirdly, promoting civil and constructive online discourse, discouraging toxic behavior, and enforcing moderation policies can foster a more inclusive online environment. Lastly, supporting independent fact-checking and news verification initiatives can help combat the spread of misinformation and promote reliance on credible sources, thereby reducing the impact of misinformation on political polarization.

## II. DISCUSSION

Americans often overestimate the magnitude of political polarization in the United States (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). A recent survey found that Democrats and Republicans assume 55% of their rival partisans hold extreme views on policy issues, yet merely 30% do so in reality (Yudkin et al., 2019). As the (mis)perception of polarization may influence one's political attitudes and participation (Yang et al., 2016), there has been increasing attention from the field of communication to its antecedents, including news consumption (e.g., Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Yang et al., 2016). However, only a few studies have examined how social media use, such as exposure to uncivil comments and negative posts (Banks et al., 2021; Hwang et al., 2014), shapes perceived polarization, despite the prevalent position of social media in political communication.

Furthermore, perceived polarization is associated with individuals' inferences about others' political attitudes, which can be influenced by their assessment of others' political communication behaviors. Social media enable diverse forms



of political talk, including uncivil discussion which tends to be extreme and polarizing; although some users do not participate in these interactions, they may still assess others' engagement. Nonetheless, past research has insufficiently addressed what shapes perceptions of others' engagement in social media discussion and, subsequently, perceived polarization.[4,5,6]

Given these research gaps, we investigate the relationship between social media use and perceived polarization with a perceived affordances approach. Defined as perceived action possibilities, perceived affordances address the association between people's cognitions and the technological setting they interact with (Evans et al., 2017). This approach helps clarify which properties of social media technologies relate to perceived polarization (Flanagin, 2020), in contrast to the sole focus on social media content (e.g., uncivil comments) from previous research. We argue that users' perceptions of three affordances, namely, anonymity, privacy, and network association, influence (a) their self-participation in uncivil political discussion on social media and (b) perceptions of others' uncivil discussion engagement, which eventually shapes their perceptions of political polarization

Perceived affordances have an effect on online expression and communication, according to prior computer-mediated communication (CMC) research (Evans et al., 2017; Fox & McEwan, 2017). Applying this concept to the political context, we investigate how perceived affordances influence users' participation in uncivil political discussion on social media, which eventually shapes perceived polarization. Uncivil political discussion, characterized by insulting and disrespectful expressions targeting political opponents, potentially influences individuals to infer a more polarized opinion climate (Hwang et al., 2014). Moreover, users may expect others to leverage platform affordances for engagement in uncivil discussion (Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023; Toma et al., 2018). Individuals may perceive greater polarization if they think that others frequently join uncivil discussions, given the perceived polarizing effect of uncivil talk. Thus, we propose an indirect relationship between perceived affordances and perceived polarization mediated by both users' self-participation in uncivil political discussion and perceptions of others' engagement.

The analysis of US survey data provided support to our hypothesized model and revealed different paths from perceived affordances to perceived polarization. However, we found that perceptions of higher anonymity relate to higher self-participation in uncivil discussion, which is surprisingly associated with perceptions of less polarization. Our follow-up experimental study illustrated that those participants with more frequent engagement in uncivil discussion, irrespective of interacting with civil or uncivil comments, showed consistently higher levels of intrapersonal reflection, which reduces perceived polarization.

#### Perceived Affordances and Perceived Polarization

Perceived political polarization refers to the extent to which one perceives important differences between political opponents' positions on ideological or social issues (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Yang et al., 2016). On social media, users often encounter exemplars of different political ideologies and backgrounds (Rojas, 2015), especially during political discussions, which may influence their perceptions of polarization. However, these exemplars can be biased, as extreme partisans tend to be more active in social media discussions and even use uncivil language to criticize their opponents (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Rojas, 2015). The biased exemplars encountered through uncivil political discussion social media may contribute to (mis)perceptions of greater polarization (Hwang et al., 2014).

The conceptual divide among scholars regarding the definition of incivility is noteworthy. Some scholars emphasize the aspect of impoliteness and disrespectfulness, which encompasses speech acts, for example, name-calling, aspersions, and vulgarities (Coe et al., 2014; Muddiman, 2017), while others adopt a deliberative perspective, viewing incivility as the aversive speech involving threats and stereotypes (Papacharissi, 2004). Our study focuses on impolite and disrespectful expressions in the context of uncivil political discussion, as past empirical evidence shows that this type of expressions is more widespread online than speeches involving threats and stereotypes, and laypeople view name-calling and vulgarities as more uncivil than other forms of expressions (Masullo et al., 2023). More importantly, impolite and disrespectful political expressions have been found to reduce media trust (Masullo et al., 2023) and prosocial behaviors toward the derogated group (Ziegele et al., 2018), and we extend the research on their social implications by studying how uncivil political discussion on social media relates to perceived polarization.[7,8,9]

While uncivil political discussion on social media may influence perceived polarization, the underlying role of social media remains unclear. To better understand the relationship between social media use and perceived polarization, we argue for the need to take one step further to address the properties of social media, that is, affordances, which shape users' participation in uncivil discussion and eventually their perceptions of polarization.

CMC research has employed the concept of affordances to emphasize the unique effect of technologies, distinct from specific contents or user behaviors within mediated environments (Flanagin, 2020). An increasing number of CMC



scholars have adopted a relational perspective to define social media affordances as action possibilities shaped by the interaction between platform features and users' subjective interpretations (Evans et al., 2017).

While prior studies often manipulated affordances in experiments or simply theorized the role of affordances without measuring them, some scholars suggest the need to test how perceived affordances relate to divergent behavioral outcomes, given the varied perceptions of affordances among users (Evans et al., 2017; Fox & Holt, 2018; Fox & McEwan, 2017). For example, Fox and Holt (2018) found that perceptions of stronger network association on Facebook predict less self-censorship, as users feel empowered by their networks.

Borrowing from these insights, we apply a perceived affordance approach to examine the role of social media in (mis)perceptions of polarization and hypothesize that users' perceptions of affordances influence their participation in uncivil political discussion on social media, which eventually shapes their perceptions of polarization.

Moreover, we argue that perceptions of others' uncivil discussion engagement also mediate the relationship between perceived affordances and perceived polarization. Individuals expect that social media features enable or constrain not only their own actions, but also other users' activities (Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023; Toma et al., 2018). Therefore, perceived affordances potentially shape one's inference about others' uncivil political discussion on social media (Litt, 2012; Treem et al., 2020), which subsequently influences the assessment of others' political attitudes and the extent of polarization.

Given that the perceptions of affordances are context- and platform-specific, our study focuses on the United States and its most popular social network site—Facebook. For affordances, we consider perceived anonymity, privacy, and network association, which are highly relevant to uncivil political discussion (Jaidka et al., 2021; Neubaum & Weeks, 2023; Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023). 2 illustrates the model to be tested.[10,11,12]

#### Perceived Affordances and Participation in Uncivil Political Discussion

This section explains how the three perceived affordances considered relate to self-participation in uncivil political discussion on Facebook, the first key mediator in our model.

Perceived anonymity is the degree to which users perceive that their true identities can remain unknown in interactions (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Facebook presumably affords lower anonymity than other platforms (e.g., YouTube, Reddit) by encouraging registrations with real names and email accounts. However, some users may still feel anonymous, if they use fake identities or consider their online self as distinct from offline existence (Fox & Holt, 2018).

We hypothesize that perceptions of higher anonymity relate to greater participation in uncivil political discussion. The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation (SIDE; Spears et al., 2002) suggests that higher anonymity lowers an individual's perceived personal identity salience on the platform, causing them to view their behaviors as deindividuated and divorced from real-life consequences. Thus, users perceiving higher anonymity on Facebook would experience a reduced sense of personal responsibility, which may increase their likelihood of engaging in behaviors that deviate from social norms in face-to-face interactions, including participating in uncivil discussion (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). These users may feel more comfortable engaging in political discussion with personal attacks and inflammatory language, assuming they are less likely to be identified by their real-life contacts and held accountable for their uncivil expressions (Oz et al., 2018).

Perceived privacy refers to the belief that one's interactions will be kept private and not noticed or accessed by unintended audiences (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023). Facebook users can customize their privacy settings and specify the audience of each post they create.

We argue that perceptions of higher privacy encourage participation in uncivil political discussion, given previous empirical evidence showing that the sense of reduced publicness of one's interactions prompted by privacy management increases overall political engagement on Facebook (Mak et al., 2022). Users may worry about how unintended audiences, including acquaintances and professional contacts in their network, evaluate their uncivil online interactions which might be viewed as violating civil norms (Oz et al., 2018). Perceptions of high privacy may promote uncivil discussion by leading users to believe that their interactions are accessible to only a limited audience and are unlikely to be read by many real-life contacts from their weak-tie networks.

Perceived network association refers to one's perceived connectivity among users on a platform, specifically the ease to connect and interact with other members within the social media network (Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). On Facebook, users can easily join discussions by leaving comments on their friends' posts and see



who their friends are interacting with. However, some individuals may perceive low network association, as users can turn off comments and hide their friends' lists.

The extant literature suggests contradictory possibilities about the effect of perceived network association on participation in uncivil political discussions. Perceptions of stronger network association may intensify one's sense of context collapse on Facebook where audiences of different ideologies are brought together (Bayer et al., 2020; Fox & McEwan, 2017). This may increase users' concern over relationship dissolution, hindering their participation in uncivil discussion. However, Fox and Holt (2018) found that users perceiving stronger network association were less likely to self-censor on Facebook, as these users believed that like-minded others would support and defend them when needed. This perceived social support stemming from strong network association may mitigate concerns over participating in uncivil discussion (Walther, 2022), despite its social undesirability.

Based on the above arguments, we propose as follows:

H1: Perceptions of higher anonymity (H1a) and privacy (H1b) relate to greater self-participation in uncivil political discussion on Facebook.

RQ1: How do perceptions of network association relate to self-participation in uncivil political discussion on Facebook?

Perceived Affordances and Perceptions of Others' Uncivil Discussion Engagement

We argue that perceived affordances influence perceived polarization also through shaping perceptions of others' uncivil discussion engagement. This section explains how each perceived affordance relates to perceived others' uncivil discussion.[13,14]

We hypothesize that perceptions of higher anonymity predict perceptions of greater participation in uncivil discussion by others. Previous CMC studies suggested that individuals perceive others as more capable than themselves in leveraging platform affordances for socially undesirable expressions or behaviors, such as online deception (e.g., Toma et al., 2018), which aligns with the third-person effect (TPE) framework (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). Testing a similar hypothesis, recent research on online incivility found that individuals perceiving higher anonymity in the comment sections of news sites (Van Duyn & Muddiman, 2022) or on social media platforms (Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023) expect higher levels of incivility in those spaces. Based on these findings, we argue that users may assume that other users would take advantage of the anonymity affordance to engage in uncivil discussion, given the lower likelihood of being held accountable or offending their contacts.

We also posit a positive relationship between perceived network association and perceived others' uncivil discussion engagement. Those perceiving strong network association may assume that others can easily connect with different people and join various ongoing interactions on Facebook (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Based on the TPE framework (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996), individuals expect others, especially the strong partisans, to be more likely than themselves to leverage this strong network association to engage in uncivil discussions which are perceived to be socially undesirable. This assumption finds support in Sude and Dvir-Gvirsman's (2023) research, which showed a positive association between perceived network association and perceived incivility on social media. Sude and Dvir-Gvirsman further explained that individuals anticipate conflict interactions, including uncivil political discussions, to spread more easily within a closely connected network, as opposing users can easily participate by leaving comments on the posts concerned. Therefore, perceptions of stronger network association may lead to an overestimation of uncivil exchanges by others on Facebook.

The relationship between perceived privacy and perceived others' uncivil discussion engagement is debatable owing to the conflicting theoretical perspectives and insufficient empirical evidence. One perspective is that individuals perceiving higher privacy on Facebook may expect others to engage more actively in uncivil political discussion, as they might assume that others feel less concerned about offending their real-life contacts when uncivil interactions are visible to mostly like-minded network members (Neubaum & Weeks, 2023). Another opposing perspective is that perceived privacy affects one's evaluation of others' "opportunities" of encountering various forms of discourse, including uncivil political discussion; when the platform privacy is low, most user interactions are expected to be accessible to a wider audience rather than staying private (Treem et al., 2020). Users perceiving lower privacy may assume that others are more likely to be exposed to uncivil political discussions and subsequently join such interactions.



### III. RESULTS

Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook have become ingrained in the lives of countless individuals. With adolescents and young adults, particularly young women, being the primary users of such platforms, it is an important question whether social media use has an impact on self-concept, self-esteem, body image, and body dissatisfaction. Researchers have started to empirically investigate these questions, and recent studies show mixed results. The present article attempts to review these findings and offers possible explanations for effects of social media use on body dissatisfaction, with a focus on Instagram, Facebook, and other popular image-based platforms.

Social media is not real life,” stated Essena O’Neill, a 19-year-old Australian Internet star who quit social media in November of 2015 to prove the point that social media is just a means of fake self-promotion. Essena was a star on Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube, and other social media platforms, with over 600,000 followers on Instagram alone (McCluskey, 2016). As soon as she went silent, her fans and friends created an uproar. They called the Australian teen out and accused her of intentionally closing her social media accounts in an attempt to attract more fame and attention. Her fans, friends, and followers began posting blogs and videos in reaction to Essena quitting social media, with some going so far as sending death threats.

The same week Essena quit Instagram, The Guardian’s Mahita Gajanan (2015) asked other young women about their self-esteem and experiences with social media. Her findings were in line with Essena’s; most of the women that were interviewed felt insecure. Many young women reported obsessing over the number of “likes” they were getting, feared not looking beautiful in their photos, thought individuals would think they looked different on social media than in real life, and questioned what aspects of their life people would get a glimpse of. It was a common theme that women were dedicating extensive amounts of time to thinking about what image to upload, photoshopping it and regularly checking their personal page to see the updated “like” counts, which in turn increased their own insecurities. Even though many women were aware of these actions, they were consumed by their need to fit in on social media and struggled to disrupt their habits. Numerous young women reported that they lived their lives via social media and regarded media presence as more important than real life. This preoccupation with social media and the compulsive behaviors that follow may potentially contribute to body dissatisfaction. However, to this day, research findings have been mixed, and the exact relationship between social media behavior and body dissatisfaction is unclear. [15,16]

#### The Influence of Media

Social media usage in particular has increased dramatically over the last decade and continues at an incline. Pew Research Center indicates that 71% of 13- to 17-year-olds use Facebook, 52% use Instagram, and 41% use Snapchat in 2015. Teenage girls are also using image-based social media platforms more frequently than their male counterparts; 61% of girls use Instagram versus 44% of boys. This increase in usage of social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, may negatively affect adolescent girls and young women in regard to their self-confidence and body satisfaction (Lenhart, 2015).

Some researchers have portrayed links between body dissatisfaction and eating disorders with exposure to fashion magazines or television shows in women (Grabe et al., 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009). These studies examined exposure to media forms and body image to show that there may be a link between viewing images of thin bodies and personal body dissatisfaction. Another study by Becker and colleagues (2011) suggests that media effects can even take place indirectly. The authors studied whether direct and indirect exposure to mass media (i.e., television, videos, CD players, MP3 players, internet access, mobile phone access) were associated with eating pathology in Fijian adolescent girls. They found relationships between both direct mass media exposure (i.e., personal media exposure) and indirect mass media exposure (i.e., media exposure to the people in one’s peer group) with eating pathology in Fijian adolescent girls. Despite its limitations, such as the question of whether the findings can be generalized (Becker et al, 2011), the study suggests that at least in this case, social networks played an important role in the relationship between media and eating pathology, which may extend to a relationship between media and body dissatisfaction.

However, these findings must be taken with knowledge that some other researchers have found no link between viewing image based media and body dissatisfaction. Holmstrom (2004) conducted a meta-analysis on the pre-existing literature focusing on general media exposure and body dissatisfaction, body image and eating disorder pathology. Holmstrom focused on 34 studies that used media as the independent variable and a form of body image dissatisfaction as the dependent variable and the overall effect size was small. Surprisingly, the research showed that women reported feeling better about their bodies after viewing overweight images and had no change in body image after viewing thin bodies. These findings blur the potential relationship between body image and media and suggest a need to further investigate.



A more recent meta-analysis conducted by Ferguson (2013) extended the work of Holmstrom (2004), Grabe and colleagues (2008) and other researchers, and incorporated findings from 204 studies. A major point that Ferguson honed in on was publication bias; more specifically, that statistically significant results are more likely to be published and null findings are not, with meta-analyses being a collection of biased findings. Ferguson (2013) found little to no relationship between media and body dissatisfaction in males, however, there was a higher, but very small, prevalence in females, especially for those with a predisposition for body image issues. Overall, the meta-analysis encouraged researchers to be more conservative in their assertions of a relationship between social media and body dissatisfaction due to inflated effect sizes, study design limitations, and publication bias.

#### Social Media Usage

Social media offers a collaborative space for social interaction between seemingly infinite numbers of people. Several benefits have been identified in relation to the routine use of social media platforms. “The six key overarching benefits were identified as (1) increased interactions with others, (2) more available, shared, and tailored information, (3) increased accessibility and widening access to health information, (4) peer, social, emotional support, (5) public health surveillance, and (6) potential to influence health policy” (Moorhead et al., 2013, p. 8). Although there are several benefits associated with the use of social media, specifically image based social media, some uses of these platforms may lead to potentially unwanted effects. The primary image based social media platforms this review examines are Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook.

Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) suggest that adolescent girls and young women following fitness boards on Pinterest were more likely to report intentions to engage in extreme weight-loss behaviors, such as crash dieting or a radical exercise plan. In response to images viewed on the fitness boards on Pinterest, these adolescent girls and young women initiated a process of self-reflection, which increased intention to engage in extreme weight-loss behaviors. Overall, the results of this study revealed that social media environments might influence adolescent girls and young women to engage in social comparison leading to feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction (Alperstein, 2015). Furthermore, based on the results of this study and others, negative body image concerns appear to be higher for those who internalized negative messages and images (Alperstein, 2015; Bell, 2016).

Currently, studies link social media platforms with body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). In order to investigate the underlying processes, one study investigated over 100 seventh graders and found that adolescent girls who shared more photos online, such as selfies, and used more photoshop felt worse about their appearance and exhibited greater eating concerns (McLean et al., 2015). Specifically, some studies suggest greater usage of social media heighten body dissatisfaction due to an increase in appearance-related comments from friends (de Vries et al., 2015).

Using applications and other editing devices, such as Photoshop, to alter selfies is nothing new for many teens and women. Thanks to an array of free applications, people can alter the way their bodies look in photos with a swipe or a click. Teens can cover up blemishes, alter their facial shape, and manipulate their bodies to look thinner and more attractive (e.g., making their waists smaller or their breasts bigger). Even the popular socialites Kim and Khloe Kardashian have utilized Photoshop to post edited selfies for their Instagram accounts. As pointed out in an article by Mirror Magazine, many fans have criticized the sisters for unrealistic alterations to make themselves look thinner and more toned (Rutter & Strang, 2016).[17,18]

## IV. CONCLUSION

#### Instagram and Body Dissatisfaction

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms (Kharpal, 2015). It allows users to communicate solely through posting and sharing photos. Researchers have looked at the role of Instagram on body image with adolescent girls and young women, the most frequent users of the social media platform. Anecdotally, in an interview with Elle Magazine, Emily Bryngelson, an associate designer at Ann Taylor, who admitted to struggling with an eating disorder as a teenager, revealed that she deletes selfies if she doesn't receive enough “likes” (Fleming, 2014). She explains, “Instagram makes me so anxious. I'm always looking at other women thinking, ‘I wish I looked like that,’ or ‘I should get more in shape.’...I mean, young girls can now follow Victoria's Secret models and see what they look like in the ‘every day.’ ...That has got to make any woman, let alone a 13-year-old girl, feel unsure of herself.”

Studies on Instagram have mostly focused on fitspiration pictures and content in the young adult population. Fitspiration is a movement that promotes a healthy lifestyle, primarily through food and exercise. Despite its good intentions, researchers have suggested dysfunctional themes in the images and messages. For instance, when over 600 fitspiration images were studied, one major theme regarding the female body emerged: thin and toned (Tiggemann &



Zaccardo, 2016). In addition, most images were found to contain elements objectifying the female body. However, we must wonder whether the blogs themselves are problematic or if the viewers are construing the content in a negative way. In other words, are certain individuals viewing a toned or thin body, comparing themselves to it, and then feeling bad about their own body?

Furthermore, some researchers suggest that even the mere act of watching fitspiration on Instagram can lead to unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors in young adults (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). In one experiment where 130 female undergraduates were randomly exposed to either fitspiration or neutral travel images, scientists found that the appearance-based pictures of fitspiration had a negative impact on mood, body image, and self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). In other words, the college students who viewed fitspiration images felt worse about themselves and their bodies compared to the students who viewed neutral images. Limitations of these studies need to be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. Using travel photos as a control to fitspiration may not have isolated the variable of interest and resulted in inaccurate findings. We expect humans to socially compare themselves to other humans more than they do with landscape. Future studies should consider incorporating control photos featuring attractive, but average-sized women, for example, to produce more comparable results.

#### Facebook and Body Dissatisfaction

Alongside Pinterest and Instagram, Facebook is common among adolescent girls and is associated with body dissatisfaction (Kimbrough et al., 2013; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). For example, Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that teenage girls who used Facebook were more concerned with monitoring body appearance, idealizing thinness, and pursuing thinness, than were teenage girls who did not use Facebook. Furthermore, in comparison to viewing an appearance-neutral website (i.e., a home craft website), viewing Facebook was associated with more negative mood and body dissatisfaction for women who tend to compare their appearance with others (Fardouly et al., 2015). However, rather than the time spent on Facebook, the way people use it, such as interacting with photos, seems to explain the relationship with body dissatisfaction (Meier & Gray, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Kim & Chock, 2015). Meier and Gray (2014), for example, found that time spent on photo activity, rather than time spent on Facebook generally, was linked to thin-idealization, self-objectification, weight dissatisfaction, and pursuit of thinness.

Similarly, Kim and Chock (2015) found that “social grooming” behaviors such as “liking”, visiting, and commenting on friends’ posts and photos were linked to body image concerns. The researchers explained this link through the notion that “social grooming” activities lead to viewing other individuals’ profiles, particularly their photos. People tend to post attractive images of themselves on social media platforms (Manago et al., 2008), and increased exposure to these images may lead to a distorted and idealized conceptualization of body shapes. In October 2016, model and actress Gisele Bundchen posted a photo of herself on Facebook and within three weeks received 105,000 likes, 1,125 shares, and 1,437 comments such as “I want that bronzed skin!” and “Can I use it as a profile picture?” This type of social comparison has the potential to lead to poor body image, especially for adolescent girls and young women (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015).[19]

The popularity of media, particularly social media, in youth makes it a potentially influential force. The findings discussed above provide a foundation for future research and have opened up important discussions on how social media use may influence body dissatisfaction. However, many studies are correlational, and the causal mechanisms behind the potential relationships are still unknown. Much of the findings may be applicable to an individual and not generalizable to the general public. Much work is needed in the future to parse apart potential factors for causation such as peer pressure and photo editing capabilities. Scientists have identified specific areas to focus on, such as the need to clarify the construct being measured (i.e., whether the outcome is eating disorder pathology, body dissatisfaction, and so forth) and to design the overall experiment by addressing the limitations of past research (Holmstrom, 2004; Ferguson, 2013). All in all, despite the mixed findings and limitations of past studies, past research seems to suggest a relationship between social media and body dissatisfaction, although the exact nature and strength of the relationship remains unknown.[20]

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