

Microintervention Strategies on Social Media to Protect Women's Body Image: A Review & Future Research Directions

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Abstract: This review examines findings from 23 studies published between 2013 and 2023, offering a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media interventions, such as body-positive content, self-compassion messaging, and realistic portrayals of beauty. It evaluates how these strategies affect women's cognitive and emotional processes. It provides a detailed explanation of the visual inputs used, including various types of imagery or videos and their corresponding effects. Furthermore, it identifies significant research gaps, particularly concerning early adolescence—a critical period for body image development—and emphasizes the need for further exploration into the long-term impact of these interventions on a diverse range of demographics. The study serves as a useful resource for practitioners, delivering evidence-based insights into effective and harmful visuals. By doing so, it encourages a responsible approach to the visual content employed in marketing efforts, fostering the promotion of positive body image and emotional well-being in online environments.

Keywords: Social media, body image, beauty standards, social comparison, body satisfaction, body positivity

1. Introduction

The rise of social media platforms has created a dynamic landscape where content sharing, particularly visual images, exerts significant influence on users' perceptions of themselves and others (Cohen, Newton-John and Slater, 2018). This pervasive digital environment plays a profound role in shaping body image, emotional well-being, and social comparison behaviors, especially among women. In this context, the increasing exposure to idealized beauty standards has raised concerns about its negative effects, including heightened body dissatisfaction, self-objectification (*individuals evaluate themselves based on appearance rather than abilities or other qualities*) and appearance anxiety (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016). While traditional media has long been scrutinized for promoting unattainable body ideals, the interactive nature of social media intensifies these challenges by allowing users to curate their personas in comparison with others, amplifying the impact (Meier and Gray, 2014).

Existing literature provides ample evidence linking social media use with adverse body image outcomes. Numerous studies highlight that exposure to thin-ideal content and beauty-focused images correlates with negative emotions and psychological distress, particularly in younger female populations. However, these studies primarily focus on the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at countering these harmful effects, such as how body-positive (*embracing and accepting all body types*) messages and self-compassionate (*encourages being kind to oneself*) narratives.

This paper systematically reviews the effectiveness of various social media-based microinterventions that aim to protect women's body image. By analyzing interventions such as body-positive content, realistic portrayals of beauty, and self-compassion strategies, this review investigates their potential to reduce body dissatisfaction, social comparison (*evaluating oneself by comparing to others*), and appearance anxiety. Additionally, the study assesses whether these interventions foster positive emotional states and broaden individuals' conceptualizations of beauty.

The findings from this review contribute to the broader understanding of how social media content can either harm or protect women's body image. By evaluating the relative success of various intervention strategies, this paper identifies which approaches are most effective in fostering positive body image outcomes. Furthermore, it outlines critical areas for future research, such as the underrepresentation of early adolescence—a crucial period for body image formation—and the need for more diverse participant samples across age, gender, and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, the paper provides practical recommendations for improving the design and implementation of social media-based interventions. These include fostering media literacy, promoting realistic and diverse representations of beauty, and ensuring that content strategies are tailored to individual differences in susceptibility to social comparison. By offering these insights, this study aims to inform policymakers, educators, and content creators on how to effectively counter the negative impacts of social media on body image, paving the way for healthier online environments.

2. Methods

This systematic literature review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure a comprehensive and transparent selection process. The objective was to investigate the impact of social media on body image, specifically focusing on beauty ideals, across the past decade.

2.1 Eligibility Criteria

To be included in the review, studies had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) published between 2013 and 2023, (b) written in English, (c) focused on the relationship between social media and body image or beauty ideals, and (d) present as peer-reviewed journal articles. Studies were excluded if they were not directly relevant to the research question or if they employed the wrong study design.

2.2 Search Procedure and Study Selection

The article selection process involved three databases: PubMed, APA Psyc, and Scopus. For PubMed, a text-word search was conducted using the terms "social media," "body image," and "beauty," limited to studies published between 2013 and 2023. In APA Psyc, the same terms were applied within the field search function. A keyword search was conducted in Scopus, restricting results to journal articles within the same timeframe. Only English-language articles were included (see Figure 1 for the PRISMA flow diagram).

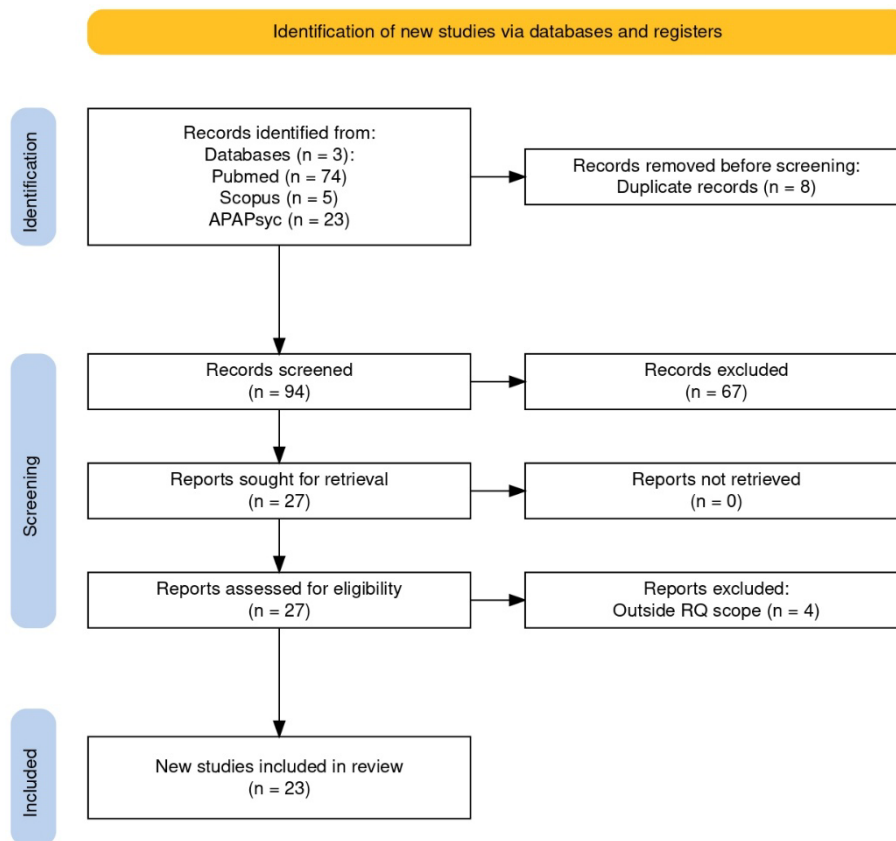


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

The study is guided by two key research questions emphasising the **cognitive** and **emotional** aspects of body image intervention through social media:

RQ1 (Cognitive aspect): *How do social media-based microinterventions influence women's cognitive perceptions of beauty standards?* This question explores how these interventions alter the way women process and internalize societal beauty ideals, particularly focusing on critical thinking, social comparison tendencies, and the development of broader conceptualizations of beauty.

RQ2 (Emotional aspect): To what extent do social media-based microinterventions mitigate the negative emotional effects of idealized content on women’s body image? This question examines the emotional outcomes of these interventions, such as changes in body dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety, and overall mood.

By addressing these questions, the study investigates the dual mechanisms through which social media interventions influence the cognitive frameworks and emotional well-being of women exposed to idealized beauty standards.

The initial search across the three databases yielded 102 records. After removing 8 duplicates, 94 unique studies were screened. Titles and abstracts were reviewed, leading to the exclusion of 67 studies primarily due to irrelevance to the research questions, such as focusing on unrelated topics or not addressing the impact of social media on body image or beauty ideals. Following this screening, 27 reports were retrieved for full-text assessment. All 27 were evaluated without retrieval issues. Four studies were excluded after full-text review: three were irrelevant to the research questions, and one had an unsuitable study design. In total, 23 studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the systematic review.

2.3 Data Extraction and Risk of Bias

Data extraction was conducted by the first author, reviewing each study for sample characteristics, research design, and outcomes. The American Dietetic Association Quality Criteria Checklist (QCC), consisting of 10 items assessing scientific validity (e.g., research question, unbiased sample selection, valid outcomes), was used to evaluate each study’s quality (Shagar et al., 2017). The quality assessment was carried out by the first author and their supervisor, an associate professor, to ensure objectivity.

The QCC assessed 23 studies, revealing that most had a defined research question aligned with their aims. Sample selection was often homogenous, relying on young, female university students, limiting generalizability. Random assignment was used in experimental studies, but not in all correlational studies. Participant withdrawal or response rates were commonly recorded, though exclusions were sometimes unclear. Blinding was rare due to the nature of social media exposure.

Data collection methods were well-defined, with most studies using online surveys or controlled social media exposures. Validated scales with strong internal consistency were used, and appropriate statistical methods (e.g., ANCOVAs, ANOVAs, mediation models) were applied, though some studies could benefit from more advanced techniques.

Results generally supported study conclusions, but cross-sectional designs limited causal interpretations. Most studies reported no commercial support or conflicts of interest, minimizing funding bias. Overall, the quality rating was excellent, though sample homogeneity, lack of blinding, and short-term interventions limited generalizability.

3. Types of Social Media-Based Microinterventions

A range of social media-based microinterventions has been employed in recent research to address the negative effects of appearance-related content on body image. These interventions aim to promote more inclusive and diverse conceptions of beauty while countering unrealistic portrayals commonly seen in media. **Table 1** provides a detailed summary of each intervention, including the author, intervention name, a brief description, and the corresponding effects, such as positive, negative, or no changes. The interventions are grouped into seven categories: ‘Body-Positive Content’, ‘Realistic or Non-Idealized Images’, ‘Self-Compassion’, ‘Parody and Humor’, ‘Media Literacy and Awareness’, ‘Contrasting Idealized and Realistic Content’ and ‘Sexualized Body-Positive Content’. The interventions are analyzed through two lenses, assessing their impact on both **cognitive** and **emotional** processes on the participants post-exposure to the intervention.

Table 1: Overview of Microintervention Strategies, Explanations and Effects

Nr.	Study	Strategies	Explanations	Effects
1	Arendt et al. (2017)	Awareness Intervention Video	A video showing how lighting, makeup, and editing transform an average woman into a glamorous model.	Reduced social comparison by promoting a more realistic ideal self.
2	Robinson et al. (2017)	Image Exposure to Thin, Athletic, and Muscular Ideals	Thin images showed slender women, athletic images featured toned women with moderate muscle, and	Thin and athletic ideal images increased body dissatisfaction, with athletic images

Nr.	Study	Strategies	Explanations	Effects
			muscular images depicted strong, defined physiques.	causing the most. Neither affected exercise behavior. Muscular images had no effect.
3	Slater et al. (2017)	Fitspiration and Self-Compassion Instagram Content	Three Instagram content types: fitspiration (toned body) images with motivational captions, self-compassion quotes on neutral backgrounds, and combined posts.	Fitspiration images reduced self-compassion without affecting body satisfaction or mood. Self-compassion images improved both. Combined images mitigated fitspiration's negative effects.
4	Fardouly & Rapee (2019)	No-Makeup and Idealized Makeup Selfies	A mix of no-makeup selfies showing natural features (e.g., blemishes) and idealized makeup selfies from Instagram makeup artists.	Reduced negative effects of idealized selfies on facial satisfaction and face, hair, and skin discrepancies but no impact on mood or overall satisfaction.
5	Tiggemann & Zinoviev (2019)	Enhancement-Free Images and Hashtags	Enhancement-free Instagram images (no makeup or edits) were compared to idealized images, some with hashtags like #nomakeup.	Enhancement-free images reduced facial dissatisfaction, but hashtags increased appearance focus. No effect on body dissatisfaction.
6	Cohen et al. (2019)	Body-Positive Instagram Posts	Featuring diverse women with captions promoting body acceptance, compared to thin-ideal and appearance-neutral posts.	Improved mood, body satisfaction, and appreciation (<i>positive attitude towards one's body, appreciation for its function and capabilities</i>) but increased self-objectification compared to appearance-neutral posts.
7	Slater et al. (2019)	Parody of Thin-Ideal Celebrity Images	Parody images of thin-ideal celebrity Instagram posts paired with originals, humorously highlighting their unrealistic nature.	Increased body satisfaction and happiness compared to thin-ideal posts but had no effect on appearance comparison or social media literacy.
8	Stevens & Griffith (2020)	Body Positivity (BoPo) Content	Examined Body Positivity (BoPo) exposure on social media, featuring diverse and realistic body portrayals promoting body acceptance and appreciation.	Improved body satisfaction, increased positive affect, and reduced negative affect, with Instagram being the primary platform.
9	Tiggemann et al. (2020)	Body Positive Captions	Instagram images of thin and average-sized women with captions promoting body positivity and self-acceptance.	Had no effect overall. Thin images increased dissatisfaction; average images improved appreciation for women with high thin-ideal internalization.
10	Tiggemann & Anderberg (2020)	Instagram vs. Reality	Side-by-side Instagram vs reality images, showing idealized depictions of women alongside more natural, unedited versions.	Reduced body dissatisfaction compared to idealized images but no effect on body appreciation. Social comparisons were less harmful.
11	Ogden et al. (2020)	Portrait Positive Campaign	Portrait Positive campaign images of women with visible facial and bodily differences in confident, celebratory portraits.	Increased body and face satisfaction, body compassion, and negative attitudes toward thin-ideal images. No effect on positive attitudes.
12	Selensky & Carels (2021)	Dove and Aerie Real Campaigns	Videos promoting body acceptance featuring diverse women without retouching, emphasizing empowerment, and challenging weight stigma.	Increased self-esteem and positive affect. No significant effect on weight bias, internalized weight bias, or body image.
13	Manning & Mulgrew (2021)	Diverse Body Positive Imagery and Captions	Instagram images of diverse women with and without body positive captions promoting self-love and acceptance.	Increased appearance satisfaction (greater with captions). Body appreciation and mood improved in all conditions. No effect on social comparisons.
14	Rattwatt & Mattacola (2021)	Fitspiration YouTube Content	Fitspiration videos on YouTube showcasing fitness tips, exercise routines, and appearance-focused advice emphasizing thin and toned bodies.	Promoted appearance-oriented goals and unhealthy behaviors like over-exercising. Viewers expressed body dissatisfaction and often replicated advice. No emphasis on health over appearance.

Nr.	Study	Strategies	Explanations	Effects
15	Vendemia et al. (2021)	3.1.1 Sexualized and Digitally Modified Body-Positive Images	Body-positive Instagram images, sexualized or digitally modified, compared to non-sexualized and unmodified versions.	Sexualized and modified images increased beauty ideal endorsement and self-objectification. Non-sexualized and unmodified images reduced these effects.
16	Danthinne et al. (2022)	Dove Real Beauty ID Video	Dove Real Beauty ID video, featuring Japanese high school girls transforming from dissatisfaction to confidence in their ID photos.	Increased body/face dissatisfaction and negative mood in participants with high thin ideal internalization, with no effect on social media exposure.
17	Klier et al. (2022)	Fitspiration Social Media Content	Sport-related social media content, specifically Fitspiration images, showcasing athletic and muscular body ideals from fitness influencers.	Increased body dissatisfaction and social comparison, especially among women, with emulation of idealized body types.
18	Lenne et al. (2022)	Non-Idealized Media Content on Various Platforms	Non-idealized content from Instagram influencers, companies, TV series, movies, and magazine articles.	Instagram influencers and magazine articles increased broad beauty conceptualization through inspiration. No effect from TV series or movies.
19	Cowles et al. (2022)	Body Positive vs. Thin-Ideal Instagram Posts	Body positive Instagram posts featuring diverse women and body acceptance messages.	Increased body satisfaction and improved mood, especially with images and captions. No effect on self-objectification or broad beauty concepts.
20	Rousseau (2023)	Body-Positive Social Media Exposure	Body-positive Instagram content, focusing on diverse body types and encouraging broader beauty ideals.	Increased body appreciation and decreased body surveillance, with positive outcomes linked to lower upward appearance comparisons (comparing oneself to others perceived as more attractive) and broader beauty conceptualization.
21	Michele et al. (2023)	Sexualized and Non-Sexualized Body-Positive Social Media Videos	Body-positive Instagram and TikTok videos with sexualized and non-sexualized portrayals of women, showing either sexualized beauty ideals or body-positive content.	Body-positive content improved body satisfaction and mood; sexualized beauty ideals reduced body satisfaction. No effect on self-objectification or surgery intentions.
22	Seekis & Lawrence (2023)	Body Neutrality Content on TikTok	Body neutrality (respecting and accepting the body for what it can do rather than how it looks) content on TikTok, focusing on body functionality and self-respect.	Increased body satisfaction and functionality appreciation, with higher positive mood and fewer upward comparisons compared to thin-ideal content.
23	Seekis & Kennedy (2023)	Beauty, and Self-Compassion TikTok Videos	Beauty TikTok videos with makeup tutorials and skincare routines, and self-compassion videos on self-care and managing appearance distress.	Beauty videos increased appearance shame, anxiety, and negative mood. Self-compassion videos improved self-compassion and reduced appearance shame.

3.1 Body-Positive Content

A substantial number of studies have explored the impact of body-positive content on social media (Cohen et al., 2019; Stevens & Griffith, 2020; Ogden et al., 2020; Michele et al., 2023; Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). This content promotes diverse body types and challenges narrow beauty standards by broadening viewers' perceptions of beauty. Exposure to such content has been shown to improve body satisfaction and appreciation, fostering a more inclusive and realistic understanding of beauty.

3.2 Realistic or Non-Idealized Images

Another common strategy involves the use of realistic or non-idealized images (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Lenne et al., 2022). These interventions, which feature natural, diverse appearances, aim to counter the heavily edited, idealized portrayals typically found on social media. They help normalize a broader range of body types and reduce the negative impact of comparison. Exposure to such content has been linked to reduced body

dissatisfaction and less harmful social comparisons, though there is no effect on body appreciation (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

3.3 Self-Compassion

Self-compassion strategies, seen in both Instagram posts (Slater et al., 2017) and TikTok videos (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023), focus on fostering kindness towards oneself, particularly in response to body dissatisfaction. These interventions aim to promote a more compassionate self-view, counteracting the negative emotional effects from exposure to idealized social media content. Research shows that self-compassion interventions lead to improved self-compassion, reduced appearance shame, and better body satisfaction and mood (Slater et al., 2017).

3.4 Parody and Humor

Slater et al. (2019) explored the use of parody and humor to mock unrealistic beauty standards. By exposing the absurdity of unattainable ideals, this strategy helps reduce body dissatisfaction and lessens the emotional burden of comparison. Parody encourages critical and less serious engagement with beauty-focused content. The results showed increased body satisfaction and happiness, with no effect on appearance comparisons (Slater et al., 2019).

3.5 Media Literacy and Awareness

Media literacy interventions, like the awareness video by Arendt et al. (2017), aim to educate participants about the artificial nature of much social media content. These interventions focus on enhancing critical thinking about digitally altered images and unattainable body ideals. By promoting a more realistic ideal self, media literacy interventions reduce social comparison and foster healthier social media engagement (Arendt et al., 2017).

3.6 Contrasting Idealized and Realistic Content

Studies such as Tiggemann & Anderberg (2020) have used the contrast between idealized and realistic content, often through "Instagram vs. reality" posts. This strategy juxtaposes highly curated, idealized images with more natural, unedited ones to highlight the distortion of beauty standards on social media. These interventions aim to reduce body dissatisfaction and mitigate the negative effects of idealized content by promoting less harmful comparisons (Slater et al., 2017).

3.7 Sexualized Body-Positive Content

Sexualized and digitally modified body-positive images (Vendemia et al., 2021), Sexualized and non-sexualized body-positive social media videos (Michele et al., 2023). Sexualized content increased beauty ideal endorsement and self-objectification, while non-sexualized body-positive content reduced these effects. Sexualized beauty ideals reduced body satisfaction, while body-positive content improved body satisfaction and mood.

4. Discussion

The findings from the reviewed studies offer substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness of social media-based microinterventions in improving body image and emotional well-being among women. Interventions that promote body-positive content, self-compassion, and realistic representations of beauty consistently led to reduced body dissatisfaction and lower levels of social comparison. Innovative strategies such as the use of humor, media literacy, and the juxtaposition of idealized and realistic content fostered a healthier conceptualization of beauty. However, prolonged exposure to thin-ideal content remains a critical factor in exacerbating body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and appearance anxiety, emphasizing the importance of limiting engagement with such content.

Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness and generalizability of these interventions across diverse populations. While many studies have centred on short-term outcomes, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustained impact of body-positive content and media literacy interventions. Notably, early adolescence, a developmental stage critical to body image formation, is underrepresented in existing studies. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how interventions can influence body image during formative years. Additionally, examining the role of influencers and content creators in promoting diverse beauty standards and investigating psychological mechanisms such as self-objectification and social comparison will deepen our understanding of how social media content affects body image and emotional well-being. Inclusive studies that consider demographic factors such as gender, age, and cultural background will also enable more broadly applicable interventions.

4.1 Short-Term vs. Long-Term Engagement

The duration of engagement with social media significantly influences psychological outcomes. Short-term exposure to body-positive content or self-compassionate messages often yields immediate benefits, such as improved body satisfaction and reduced self-objectification (Slater et al., 2019; Seekis & Lawrence, 2023). However, sustained engagement with supportive, body-positive content fosters more enduring improvements in body image and emotional resilience. Studies by Stevens & Griffiths (2020) and Cohen et al. (2019) demonstrate that consistent exposure to body-positive accounts creates a more affirming and diverse social media environment, leading to long-lasting enhancements in body satisfaction.

Conversely, prolonged interaction with idealized or thin-ideal content can compound negative effects. Participants engaging with this content over extended periods are more likely to experience worsened body image perception and heightened appearance anxiety (Robinson et al., 2017). These findings underscore the importance of content engagement duration in either mitigating or exacerbating the negative effects of appearance-based comparisons.

4.2 Cognitive Processes

Social media interventions influence key cognitive mechanisms, particularly social comparison and body image perception. Social comparison occurs when individuals evaluate their appearance relative to others, often in response to idealized content like thinspiration or fitspiration images. Studies by Slater et al. (2017) and Rattwatt & Mattacola (2021) reveal that such content increases social comparison, exacerbating body dissatisfaction. In contrast, interventions promoting self-compassion and media literacy (Seekis & Lawrence, 2023; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020) reduce social comparison by encouraging critical thinking and self-kindness.

Realistic portrayals of beauty, such as non-idealized images, contribute to a broader, more inclusive conceptualization of beauty (Ogden et al., 2020; Lenne et al., 2022). These portrayals help participants shift their cognitive framework away from narrow beauty ideals, fostering healthier self-perception. Fitspiration content, while occasionally inspiring, often fails to translate into behavior change, remaining limited to cognitive engagement without impacting actual actions.

4.3 Emotional Processes

The emotional impact of social media interventions is evident in changes to body dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety, and overall mood. Exposure to body-positive content, self-compassion messages, or realistic images reduces body dissatisfaction (Cohen et al., 2019; Manning & Mulgrew, 2021), while thin-ideal content increases dissatisfaction (Robinson et al., 2017; Vendemia et al., 2021). These emotional responses reflect how individuals feel about their bodies when confronted with unattainable beauty standards.

Appearance anxiety is another significant emotional outcome. Thin-ideal images often heighten anxiety about how individuals are perceived by others (Cohen et al., 2019; Selensky & Carels, 2021), whereas body-positive interventions alleviate this anxiety by promoting body acceptance. Furthermore, emotional well-being improves through body-positive and self-compassionate interventions (Slater et al., 2019; Seekis & Lawrence, 2023), which replace harmful ideals with affirming messages. Conversely, exposure to thinspiration or makeup-focused content can worsen mood and increase negative emotions like frustration and inadequacy (Robinson et al., 2017; Rousseau, 2023).

4.4 Implication

The findings of this review underscore the importance of social media-based microinterventions in mitigating the negative effects of idealized content on body image. These interventions, particularly those promoting body positivity, realistic portrayals of beauty, and self-compassion, consistently benefit body satisfaction, appearance anxiety, and social comparison. Media literacy plays a pivotal role in enabling individuals to critically engage with social media, countering the unrealistic beauty standards often perpetuated by platforms. However, intervention efficacy depends on factors such as engagement duration and individual differences in susceptibility to social comparison. Recognizing these nuances can guide the development of more effective strategies, fostering healthier online environments and promoting positive body image.

5. Future Research Directions

Several limitations in the reviewed studies highlight opportunities for future research:

- **Short-Term Focus:** Most studies focus on the short-term effects of social media interventions, leaving the long-term impact underexplored. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to assess sustainability.
- **Underrepresentation of Adolescents:** Early adolescence, a critical period for body image development, is largely absent in the studies. Addressing this gap is vital to understand intervention effectiveness during formative years.
- **Homogeneous Samples:** Participants are predominantly young, educated, and female from Western cultures, limiting generalizability. Future studies should include diverse populations across age groups, ethnicities, and genders.
- **Focus on Body-Positive Content:** While body-positive and self-compassion interventions are effective, other innovative approaches, such as engaging influencers or integrating societal changes, require further exploration.
- **Lack of Behavioral Outcomes:** Fitspiration content occasionally inspires motivation but rarely leads to actionable behavioral changes. Understanding these dynamics can enhance intervention outcomes.
- **Individual Differences:** Variations in body image concerns, media literacy levels, and susceptibility to social comparison may moderate intervention effectiveness. These individual factors need further investigation.

6. Conclusion

The review reveals that cognitive perceptions of beauty standards are positively influenced by interventions such as realistic portrayals and media literacy strategies, which help broaden conceptualizations of beauty and reduce harmful social comparisons. On the emotional front, the interventions effectively reduce body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety while fostering positive emotions such as self-acceptance. These findings underline the dual benefits of such micro-interventions in reducing the negative impact of idealized imagery. However, gaps remain in understanding their long-term impact and applicability to broader demographics. Future research should explore intervention sustainability, diversify participant profiles, and examine the role of influencers and content creators in fostering healthier beauty standards.

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