The Effect of Snapchat Filters on Self-Image: A Study of Netflix's 'The Social Dilemma'

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ABSTRACT: The popularity of social media platforms among young girls, in particular, has given way to social media propaganda of body imaging. The constant pressure of fitting into a compartmentalized beauty standard raises unrealistic body and face shape related expectations in girls, which causes body dysmorphic disorder wherein a person obsesses over perceived defects or flaws in one's appearance. The in-built social media filters in Snapchat and Instagram intensifies this disorder. The young girls feel dissatisfied and unhappy with themselves and get into low self-esteem and poor body image. The culture promotes cosmetic procedures for achieving filter-like changes. This paper focuses on identifying the relationship between self-esteem, body image, and social media and the effect beautifying filters on Snapchat have on young girls. The paper studies the Netflix documentary 'The Social Dilemma' to gain insights into the repercussions caused by social media and its in-built filters by the method of Content Analysis. Additionally, various website articles and journal articles have been reviewed to get a holistic view of the phenomenon and prove the hypothesis – 'Snapchat filters create unrealistic beauty standards among young girls leading to low-esteem and image.' This issue needs recognition and research to enable a communication in a more body positive environment.

Keywords*: Social media, Self-esteem, Body image, Netflix, Snapchat, Body dysmorphia.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to identify if the use of social media has made us more aware of our appearance and how we present ourselves. With adolescents and young adults, particularly young women, being the primary targets of such superficial beauty standards, an important question this study aims to raise is: whether the use of social media has an impact on or perhaps a connection with a person's self-concept, self-esteem, body image, and body dissatisfaction (Makwana et al., 2018).

Social media refers to any website or application designed to allow people to share content quickly, efficiently, and in real-time; the original purpose of social media was to connect with people, but in today's time, it is commonly used to explore modern world trends. Social networking sites usually consist of a person's profile where users present themselves to others through text and pictures. They view and comment on the self-presentations of other users. They read the comments of others on their self-presentation. Most of these social media

platforms are image-based (De Vries et al., 2016). These image-based social networking websites provide exposure to image-heavy social media such as Instagram and Snapchat, which both only use, post, and share images.

Often, images are photoshopped, airbrushed, and altered to perfection, especially when they are celebrities or for commercial use. These images promote ideals based on women that do not even exist in real life because their bodies are drastically altered through Photoshop. Therefore, women are receiving and internalizing false standards based on images that do not accurately represent actual human bodies (Bell, 2016).

Many of the individuals that the media presents as having ideal bodies are models, actresses, and celebrities. Due to this, over time, mass media has developed this idea of what the picture-perfect female body should look like. All things from height, weight, body measurements, and body form have become a complex part of this ideal. Women are most often the goals of these ideal body illustrations and advertising. These vicious beauty standards have over the years changed from being an external factor such as social comparisons to internal built-in features within the social media app like beautifying filters. These filters force us to make a comparison between our very own real-life face and our reel life, supposedly more beautiful and socially acceptable version of ourselves (Bell, 2016).

These insanely high standards of beauty promoted by mass media can place young women at risk of body image disturbances; Body image is a person's perception of the aesthetics or attractiveness of their own body which may or may not correspond to society's standards (Perloff, 2014).

1.1 Problem Statement

Social media acts as a medium that sets unrealistic and false standards of beauty through various factors that include built-in features such as beautifying filters and external elements like social comparison. These aspects of social media indicate that unless you fit a specific mold, you are not beautiful. This type of exposure makes young women constantly dissatisfied with how they look and can cause severe negative body image. This constant dissatisfaction with one's body is a disease in itself called body dysmorphia disorder.

Body dysmorphia is a mental disorder when one obsesses over one or more perceived defects or flaws in one appearance. This flaw could be changed like weight or something that you cannot change whatsoever, like the height and shape of lips. When individuals have body dysmorphic disorder, they intensely overthink their appearance, repeatedly checking the mirror, grooming, or seeking validity from strangers, sometimes for many hours each day. The perceived flaw and the repetitive behaviors cause significant distress and influence the ability to function in one's daily life (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2019).

These factors contribute towards a further snowball effect that leads to call-for-action towards various disturbing activities regarding body image and self-esteem. Social media can be a toxic place for some people. Still, the real problem occurs when people, especially young women, start to take dangerous actions to achieve the desirable body. These actions include unhealthy dieting habits that could develop eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and muscle dysmorphic disorder, or mental disorders such as body

dysmorphic disorder (Vieira, 2006), cosmetic procedures like lip injections, Botox, and implants to enhance their features. These procedures may provide temporary satisfaction; a person with body dysmorphia will always feel like they have a flaw to perfect. These procedures can be costly and highly unhealthy in the long run.

Body dysmorphic disorder can also trigger mental disorders like obsessive-compulsive disorder. Other complications caused by or associated with body dysmorphia include suicidal thoughts, anxiety, eating disorders, skin picking, and drug abuse (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2019). All the issues mentioned above are a possible by-product of social media usage and exposure. While some say it is a possibility, statistics over the recent years show differently. This paper aims to dive further into the relation of body image and cosmetic procedures and explore the term "Snapchat Dysmorphia" to understand the rise of plastic surgery among young women over the past few years.

2. Literature review

The research mainly focuses on a particular built-in feature that started trending from Snapchat in 2015 and blew up all over social media platforms - filters. Although filtering or editing a picture to change the balance and saturation has been around for a very long time, that is not what these Snapchat filters were about. Buy Custom Geo filters (2021) highlights that these Snapchat filters, more commonly known as "lenses," initially began as a funny addition to pictures and videos purely designed for entertainment. These lenses could alter the structure of the face, lighting, add comic features to the look like bunny ears, colorful hair, big and round glasses. So, initially, the lens culture seemed innocent enough for more and more people to try.

These lenses were taken up on Instagram and Facebook, as well as many picture-editing apps. Lela London (2020) points that these filters have convinced a significant number of women to go through life-altering facial surgeries just so they like look like the Snapchat version of themselves. In 2018, the term "Snapchat dysmorphia" was coined after plastic surgeons reported an alarming rise in young women wanting to change the look of their face through plastic surgery.

Kendyl M. Klein (2013) highlights the impact of social media on the body image of females. There is a positive correlation between the disorderly eating pattern of women and social media. This is so because the content that women consume on social media creates unrealistic images of an ideal woman in them, which does more harm to them than advertising or any other media in general.

A comprehensive definition of social comparison can be stated as "people who stack or compare themselves to others to fulfill a basic human desire, to know about their abilities, successes, and personality." Stephen Garcia and Arnor Halldorsson (2021) states that we compare our own opinions and values to those of others when our self-evaluation is unclear. It is considered that we all compare ourselves to the others in the social world, whether it is to reach our looks to those of celebrities we see in the rising media or our talents to those of our co-workers (Cherry, 2020).

How does social comparison work? Kendra Cherry (2020) explains that social comparison comes out in two kinds; upward social comparison and downward social comparison. The upward social comparison is the comparison where we compare ourselves to those who we

believe are better in talents or appearance. This comparison mainly emphasizes our desire to improve our current selves to be better than or at least similar to the person we are comparing ourselves with. The downward social comparison is where we equate ourselves to those, we tend to believe worse off than ourselves. This is frequently pinpointed on making ourselves feel better about our abilities. The general idea of this type of comparison is, "We may or may not be prodigious at something, but at least we are better off than someone else".

Another aspect that has an enormous impact on self-esteem is Cyber-bullying. Kids Health (2020) describes Cyber-bullying as Harassing, embarrassing, targeting, and threatening people through the internet; in context with body image, cyberbullying can be intentional or unintentional. Teenagers who bully online by calling names or pointing out physical flaws might not have any personal prejudice against a person. Bullies tend to call out because they are overconfident about themselves or just simply because they feel amused by it without realizing the consequences of their actions. Another reason why people bully others is to compensate for their low self-esteem and insecurities.

Cyberbullying attacks victims where they are most vulnerable. As a result, cyberbullying targets often begin to doubt their value. Eating Disorder Hope (2019) points that when someone is a victim of weight or looks teasing online, for example, being called too thin or overweight or other words that trigger insecurities, developing a negative body image or Body dysmorphia disorder is inevitable. Many adolescents and young adults took this bullying to heart and began restricting and dieting or purging; for instance, if a girl is called fat, she can start a diet crash believing that if she lost some weight, the bullying would stop. Other times, victims will attempt to change their appearance or attitude to prevent further cyberbullying. If these extreme dietary measures are not eliminated, an eating disorder can develop (Gordon, 2021).

Kara L. Kimevski (2017) points the negative relationship between social media and the development of eating disorders. Both men and women are at risk of developing eating disorders due to the influence of social media as it creates dissatisfaction and negative feelings regarding one's body type.

Another less commonly talked about aspect of social media is Fake identities. Charles Seife (2015) highlights that while several stigmas attached to how making up fake identities on social media are morally wrong, people do not often realize that there could be a more significant reason behind this. Since you cannot physically see the person on the other side of the screen, some people take advantage of this to create a false identity that will represent them online. This persona represents who they wish they could be rather than who they are. One reason why a person would want to express themselves as someone else is that they are not satisfied with their selves. Although making a fake Id on social media is harmless as long as no illegal activity occurs, it is still deceiving and just one step away from getting involved in immoral activities like catfishing.

Catfishing is a phenomenon of predators fabricating their identities to lure victims into an emotional/romantic relationship (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). In a study conducted by Eric Vanman (2018), several self-identified catfishes were interviewed to determine the reason behind their actions. Simultaneously, 41% of the participants responded with loneliness, one-third of the population responded with body dissatisfaction. One respondent said: "I had lots of self-esteem problems … I consider myself ugly and unattractive … The only way I have had relationships has been online and with a false identity." Another participant responded with:

"If I try to send my real, unedited pictures to anyone that seems nice, they stop responding to me. It's a form of escapism, or a way of testing what life would be like if you were the same person but more physically attractive." The survey indicates that some catfish themselves aren't universally malicious but perhaps highly affected by their insecurities.

Hence, the review of literature examines the existence of a relationship between social media and body image. This paper aims at gauging the effect the beauty-filters of social media platforms have on young girls by assessing the documentary "The Social Dilemma".

3.   Research Methodology

The paper critically examines Netflix's documentary "The Social Dilemma" by the method of Content analysis. The paper aims to extract major takeaways from the documentary that highlights the relationship between self-esteem, body image, and social media. The data to substantiate the study has been collected from secondary sources as well, like – feature articles, news channels, newspapers, and magazines.

The criteria for inclusion criteria include anything related to "Snapchat dysmorphia". The idea of this research paper stems from the documentary – "The Social Dilemma" where the term "Snapchat dysmorphia" was first brought into focus. Even though this term has been trending since 2018, it came to attention on a broad spectrum only through the Netflix documentary. The term sparked an interest in researching the topic further and exploring the relationship between body image and social media. Personal observation of peers and friends and our regular usage of Snapchat filters played an essential part in deciding to explore the term. Taking up this subject made me question why and how often we use filters on our pictures. All the information is used to verify the phenomenon. To further read into what the doctors say about the phenomenon, articles from news outlets on Snapchat dysmorphia associated with the cosmetic procedure are reviewed. Since the term was discovered in 2018, only media content publishes in 2018 has been included.

3.1. Research Hypothesis

HI. Snapchat filters create unrealistic beauty standards among young girls leading to low-esteem and image.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

"The Social Dilemma" a Netflix documentary directed by Jeff Orlowski explains different aspects of social media, including social media rise, harmful effects like addiction, and exploitation of users by these social media platforms. The documentary explores these aspects with one-on-one interviews conducted with ex-employees of the social media platforms. They also created a fictional family to show these aspects in a symbolic form. The documentary focuses on various side effects of social media usage, including a call for action. The imaginary part of the documentary uses a rather radical approach in showing how these platforms control the activities of people through data collection and algorithms. These algorithms make sure that people keep coming back to the medium by providing push notifications that spike the interest of individuals.

This paper focuses on the effects of social media channels on body image and self-esteem, which is thoroughly explored in the documentary. Among the many factors that play into the development of one's body image, one of the most significant factors is what society presents to us as an "acceptable" body. Before the rise of social media, people, particularly women, had less exposure to these societal standards. When social media came into play, these standards were out in the world, which led to over-exposure. The Social Dilemma (2020) reports that since the introduction of social media in 2009, the world has seen an increase of 70% of suicide rates among teenagers ages between 15 to 19 while a 151% increase in girls between 10 to 14. Various factors contribute to this percentage, but it can easily be analyzed that a significant portion of it is related to body image and low self-esteem. Young girls between the age of 10-14 are more vulnerable to the negativity of social media since they are going through a confusing phase, about to hit puberty.

For many people that are unaware of it, this documentary introduces a reasonably new phenomenon called the "Snapchat dysmorphia," where individuals want to alter their features through plastic surgery and look like the Snapchat filtered version of themselves. This phenomenon came into existence after the launch of the first Snapchat filter in 2015. More and more individuals started seeking plastic surgeons for surgery. The term 'Snapchat dysmorphia' was coined by Tijion Esho in early 2018 and it gained popularity after publication for JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery from Boston University School of Medicine's Department of Dermatology. Many media outlets featured reports on the rise of plastic surgeries because of Snapchat. Many outlets opted for interviews with plastic surgeons to explore the phenomenon.

These Snapchat filters use beautifying techniques such as blurring of scars, making the face slimmer and lips fuller. This imposes the idea that to have a beautiful look, your face should be slim and smooth, but these features are at times physically impossible to achieve, which leads to people thinking that they are not beautiful enough or that there is a certain standard of beauty that they need to maintain. This type of psychology can disturb an individual and lead or low self-esteem and body dysmorphic disorder.

Another perspective described in the documentary is the perspective of maintaining real life, just like online life. People often feel the need to look exactly like their online selves because they fear someone will call them out or judge them in real life. This happens because social media platforms provide sources such as filters to transform into a different person. However, when it comes to real life, it is impossible, so people feel the need to go through plastic surgery to represent their online lives in real life. Even though social media platforms were created for people to express themselves and perhaps communicate their real lives online, it has become a platform that dictates our real-life actions over the years.

Most surgeons in the interviews confirmed that more and more people coming in for surgery have their edited pictures in hand for what they want to look like instead of before the Snapchat era when it used to be celebrities. Most surgeons seemed to show concern on the overall matter of Snapchat dysmorphia, while some said it is helping their cause as plastic surgeons. One of the co-authors of the article, Neelam Vashi, told The Washington Post that this dysmorphia is a consequence of the sources available to the people and that people could easily alter any imperfection.

The surgeons told Fox News, Everyday Health, and the Washington Post that they are in the process of implementing a stricter screening procedure when it comes to facial surgeries

to recognize the motive of the surgery, the complications involved, and the side effects. The surgeons believe that some of the requests made by patients are highly unsafe and unnecessary. These requests are a product of what they see online and how these filters present them in pictures.

Hence, the assessment of the documentary "The Social Dilemma" reveals that social media filters create a distorted image of oneself, leading to dilemmas related to self-image and self-esteem in young girls. It throws light upon the insecurities that pictures and videos circulated on social media create among girls, promoting unrealistic beauty standards. Failure to match the ideal standards might lead to an inferiority complex, catfishing, harassment, or cyberbullying, which could trigger suicidal tendencies among young girls. Internalization of such body and beauty standards creates the phenomenon of "Snapchat dysmorphia," whereinto fit girls undergo cosmetic surgery or adopt unhealthy crash dieting, which has harmful repercussions on health. The study focuses on this ongoing trend on social media as assessed in "The Social Dilemma." Thus, proving the hypothesis – "Snapchat filters create unrealistic beauty standards among young girls leading to low-esteem and image."

5. Conclusion

There is enough evidence in the literature to deduce that social media plays a significant role in developing body image and self-esteem. Many factors come in into play when it comes to associating one's body images to social media. Most of it comes from exposure to all the content that people have access to at all times, as opposed to before the age of social media, where people could only access information from very limited mediums. This tells us that the root cause of the problem is perhaps the medium itself.

The rate of social media usage has only inclined over the decade, which assures us that it will only ever incline in the future as well. While there are many people spreading body positivity through social media, the only way to come across these positive articles is through social media full of other things that trigger insecurities. It is a full circle, where, even to get to positive posts, you have to use social media and, as long as you use social media, you are exposed to the toxic side.

Personal observation and evidence in the literature indicate a new "normalizing" trend starting on social media wherein. Instead of condoning such features on social media, they are slowly normalizing plastic surgery and other medical procedures to reach their desired looks. Any phenomenon is new when one person does it, but it becomes common when many people follow through. Normalizing these things make them seem like an everyday act. This mentality can be especially dangerous because many young women do not even understand the severity and longtime effects of cosmetic procedures. They are under the impression that it is common for most girls to get them done.

Social media has been around since the beginning of 2009, so it makes sense that there is enough information on the general effects of social media on body image and self-esteem. However, the phenomenon at hand, "Snapchat dysmorphia," can only be considered a phenomenon and not coined as a proper term before more research is conducted on the issue. This term is described as a form of BDD. More research and statistical data should be analysed before associating this disease with a specific social media platform. This is even these filters

created to beautify people come from a particular standard of beauty that is already in media from before. These filters only further emphasize the need to look a certain way.

With that being said, this study concludes that social media does harm the body image of many young girls, especially those who are already vulnerable to body dysmorphic disorder. Ever since the beginning of the rise of social media, it has been affecting the minds of men and women and forcing them to change their outlook to fit society better. It can be deduced that it started with bullying and comparisons on social media, leading to crash dieting and BDD, but these things seemed reversible. However, it has reached a point where people, especially women, are seeking plastic surgery, which is **irreversible**, extremely dangerous, and risqué.

There is a pattern and a slow progression of the negative effect of social media on young girls' self-esteem, and it needs to be recognized and further researched to provide people with a system where they can still communicate their lives but in a safer and more body-positive environment.

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