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# **Social Media and Body Image: It's Complicated**

A thesis

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of the requirements for the degree

of

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## Abstract

Body image is an important dimension of life, and in a media-saturated world, we are supposedly surrounded by images of 'idealised' physical body types that are harmful to people's body image. Many theories have been put forward to account for the growing idealisation of 'thin' and 'toned' women and 'lean' and 'muscular' men. Historically, psychological body image research has reliably linked exposure to 'ideal' bodies in mainstream 'traditional' media (along with moderating processes of internalisation, self-comparison, and objectification) and experiences of body image dissatisfaction, for increasingly diverse populations of women and men across the lifespan. In recent years, researchers have turned their attention to social media's impact on body image. Some quantitative and correlational studies suggest that social media use is associated with body image dissatisfaction and, in some instances, further intensifies its scope and scale. Findings also contend that social media can promote body image satisfaction by enabling the distribution and consumption of alternative, 'realistic' body types and body positive content.

This thesis suggests inconsistent and binary findings come from the limited and partial ways research often conceptualises and analyses the relationship between social media and body image. Studies are typically based on singular aspects of social media (i.e. exposure to particular pages or technological affordances) and often overemphasise body image as a static, cross-situational trait, ignoring its complex and situational-specific nature. The current study counters this by bringing together the critical psychological view that body image is complex, multidimensional, and fluid, and contemporary Screen and Media scholarship that emphasises how people can simultaneously be users of and used by social media. I combine these two perspectives to critically explore how people experience their body image through social media in ambivalent ways and how social media can enable and challenge the process of developing positive body image experiences.

Specifically, I take a Critical Realist informed, qualitative approach to exploring how the social and technological affordances of social media ('Facebook' and 'Instagram') shape attitudinal body image (thoughts, feelings and behaviours relating to research respondents' physical appearance and embodiment) of adult New Zealand and Australian women and men who are actively using social media to improve their body image. The research findings draw from an online survey of 552 respondents and 30 semi-structured interviews that highlight the simultaneous risks, rewards, and ever-present tensions - which, I argue, are inherently characteristic of the reflexive relationship between particularly situated individuals, social media, and body image.

## Preface and Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Abandon the urge to simplify everything, to look for formulas and easy answers, and to begin to think multidimensionally, to glory in the mystery and paradoxes of life, not to be dismayed by the multitude of causes and consequences that are inherent in each experience - to appreciate the fact that life is complex (Peck, 1993, p. 14)

I have written this thesis during a time of considerable tension and ambivalence surrounding social media, the body, and body image. Parts of society are welcoming 'fat', non-normative bodies into the spotlight – not for commercial gain, amusement, or public shaming (Raisborough, 2016; Linder, 2011), but to rightly celebrate them for who they are (Cooper, 2021). There is a rise in physical and digital body positive spaces (Edwards, 2022; Sturgess & Stinson, 2022; Brownell, Puhl, Schwartz, & Rudd, 2005), along with a growing critique of those that exclude, stigmatise, and bully individuals who do not reflect the 'corporeal mirage' of 'idealised' appearance (Riley, Evans, & Robson, 2022; Rich & Mansfield, 2019). Conversely, it is also a time where 'fatness' is vilified, degraded (Gailey, 2022; Rinaldi, Rice, Kotow, & Lind, 2020) and accompanied by intense social, cultural, and political pressures toward normalising 'thin' and 'toned' heteronormative bodies (Badr, 2022; Goodman & Lu, 2021). Importantly, it is within these complex and contradictory discursive flows circulating across various contexts, platforms, and increasingly mediated relationships, that people construct and make sense of themselves, their bodies, and body image (Riley et al., 2022).

Body image is defined as a person's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours about their body (Grogan, 2017). Body image is typically described as a complex, multidimensional, and fluid phenomenon shaped by, but not limited to, shiftingly articulated social, cultural, political, historical, and physiological influences (Piran & Teall, 2012; Cash, 2008). Contemporary critical psychologists emphasise body image as a 'process' characterised by a series of interwoven and reflexive, yet at times fragmented, judgements, perceptions, beliefs, experiences, feelings, and reflections concerning the multiple influences (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). However, in research, body image is often treated as an individual, internal, reified, socially mediated product of perception, relatively fixed schema, and understood to be separate from social, cultural, and political contexts and processes (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Polivy & Herman, 2004).



Research that positions body image as a static and fixed schema understood separately from embedded contexts is particularly relevant in research exploring the relationship between (social) media and body image. This research is often based on outdated conceptualisations of 'media effects' (Riley et al., 2022; Wykes & Gunter, 2005), in which (social) media can exert determining 'effects' on bodily attitudes and behaviour and consequently have a single, uni-directional influence on body image. Perspectives such as these have been extensively critiqued (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Carter & Weaver, 2003), not least for treating the meanings of body representations as socially shared rather than idiosyncratic, an assumption of audiences as passive and its lack of insight about the processes through which media influence works (Couldry, 2012). Such views reflect dystopian and utopian arguments – which typically dominate conversations about 'new' media; that is to say, a view of media power as either totalising, overbearing domination or a view of media audiences as active, free, and entirely autonomous (boyd, 2014). Many critical psychologists have recognised these methodological shortcomings and are deconstructing these taken-for-granted, binary, and singular categories of people and body image experiences (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). These researchers often employ critical, interdisciplinary, and qualitative approaches to illustrate that bodies, body image, (social) media and society are not separate entities that act upon one another. Instead, these phenomena are reflexively entwined and embedded within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Orientating research in this way helps to showcase that body image is a fluid process, a medley of embodied experiences that can often be fractured, contradictory, or only partially formed (Jarman, McLean, Griffiths, Teague, Rodgers, Paxton, Austen, Harris, Steward, Shatte, Le, Anwar, Mihalopoulos, Parker, Yager, & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2022; Coleman, 2008). Jarman et al. (2022, p. 225) have called for 'big picture' thinking about the relationship between social media and body image that leverages and combines the strengths of different research methodologies, theories, and findings to produce a "more comprehensive, nuanced, and robust picture of the positive and negative impacts of social media". Despite critical psychologists opening up the topic of body image, much of this work still remains siloed – a problem that has plagued body image research.

### **The Orientation of this Thesis**

Due to the prevalent methodological shortcomings across the body image field, I have orientated this thesis to:

1. Build on the critical and qualitative research that illustrates how body image is complex, multidimensional, and fluid

2. Draw from contemporary Screen and Media scholarship to produce research that emphasises the complexity of social media and its limited and conditional 'effects', and highlight how people can simultaneously be users of and used by social media in liberating and constraining ways.

To do this, I have developed the 'Critical Body Image Model'. The 'Critical Body Image Model' – which is informed by Critical Realism – attempts to subvert the gap between the individual and society, common in mainstream psychology, and explore how body image experiences and social media practices reflexively shape one another and are embedded within and inseparable from broader social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. It is important to note that the 'Critical Body Image Model' is indeed limited. While it is designed to connect isolated research areas and consider them alongside the findings outlined in this research to highlight the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of the relationship between social media and body image, the model is an abstraction of incredibly complicated phenomena. As such, the 'Critical Body Image Model' is not designed to be used mechanistically, is not exhaustive, and cannot encompass all potential influences and relationships shaping body image experiences. More detail about the 'Critical Body Image Model' and how it is used in this thesis is provided in Chapter 2.

There is considerable quantitative research examining the association between social media and body image; however, qualitative research on social media and body image is scarce, which is a detriment to the field. This point is raised by Webb, Thomas, Rogers, Clark, Hartsell, and Putz (2019, p. 154), who argue body image research would benefit from an increase in “qualitative investigation with actual digital media users”. Moreover, the majority of research examining social media and body image (along with body image research more broadly) has come from American and European research. Very little research has been carried out within Aotearoa/New Zealand.

As such, this thesis is based on Australians and New Zealanders who are actively using social media to improve their body image. The current research is centred on the social media platforms 'Facebook' and 'Instagram'. These platforms are widely used by various demographically diverse users who readily engage with the sites, in many cases multiple times over a day (Bright, Kleiser, & Grau, 2015). The methodology comprises a two-part sequential process that gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data established a framework of responses that the qualitative data could build upon. Consequently, the qualitative data holds the most significant weight in reporting the research findings because it is better suited to explore the complexities, contradictions, and fluidity of

the relationship between social media and body image. In this thesis, body image will be explored in relation to the particular thoughts, feelings and behaviours about physical appearance – particularly weight and shape – along with ideas of bodily function, self-care and mastery. These aspects were not pre-determined; instead, thematic analysis of the questionnaire and interview data revealed the body image dimensions most salient to respondents.

To explore all of the potential body image influences and compare how they interact together alongside social media (which in itself has a number of dimensions to consider) would extend beyond the time and word limitations constraining this piece of work. Thus, it is crucial to outline the particular research questions of this thesis, which help set the research parameters before embarking any further on this journey.

### **The Research Questions**

This thesis, in particular, aims to contribute to understanding the role of social media in shaping body image experiences. This will be done by taking the Screen and Media perspective as it intersects with psychology, with the specific goal of addressing the aim through an exploration of the experiences of people actively seeking to use social media to improve their body image. While this thesis is guided by more than one research question, they are not exhaustive. Answering them, however, will help illustrate the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of the relationship between social media and body image, and highlight how social media can enable and challenge the process of developing a positive body image. The research questions directing this thesis are not intended to cover all possible relationships concerning social media and body image. Such a task is nearly impossible because "no unitary tradition and no one question can bear the weight of audience research" (Livingstone, 1998a, p. 14). As such, the following questions guided the current empirical study:

1. In what ways do people experience their body image through social media – how does social media enable and challenge the process of developing a positive body image, and what solutions can be employed to address these challenges? What can these findings tell us more broadly about the relationship between social media and body image?

While the overarching aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between social media and body image, four sub-questions are required to derive a thorough analysis of the different dimensions comprising (social) media. These questions were informed by Couldry's (2012) 'media research pyramid' which outlined four distinct, but interconnected areas that comprise media research: 1)

media texts and representation; 2) the political economy and ‘power’ of media production, distribution, and reception; 3) the social affordances and practices that comprise media use; and 4) the technical properties of the media. Thus, each of the four analytics chapters will also answer one of the below sub-questions.

1.1) What type of body **representations** (media texts) do people primarily engage with on social media?

1.2) What are the limitations and conditions of social media’s **power** (political economy) in shaping people’s body image-related exercise and self-representation behaviours?

1.3) How do the **social affordances** (social uses) of social media shape people’s social media practices; and, in turn, body image?

1.4) How do the **technological affordances** (technical properties) of social media shape people’s social media practices; and, in turn, body image?

As noted above, this thesis will use the ‘Critical Body Image Model’ to bring together siloed areas of body image research to better illustrate the complex, multidimensional relationship between social media and body image. Therefore, this thesis is guided by the second research question:

2. Can a Critical Realist-informed body image model (the Critical Body Image Model) be a helpful way to frame the complex, multidimensional, and fluid relationship between social media and body image?

A section in the concluding chapter will evaluate whether the model is a useful tool for understanding the relationships between social media and body image and, from that, what future research might be suggested.

### **A Couple of Caveats**

A quick note on terminology – in this thesis I refer to ‘ideal’ and ‘realistic’ bodies in quote marks. This is because these terms can be highly subjective, confusing and indeed slippery. For instance, what is ‘ideal’ and ‘realistic’ will undoubtedly vary from one individual to the next; and potentially from one life stage to the next (Evens, Stutterheim, & Alleva, 2021). As such, the use of these terms is not intended to construct a dominant definition of what is considered ‘ideal’ or ‘realistic’. Rather, they reflect what particular respondents of this research viewed as being ‘ideal’ or ‘realistic’. The same can

also be said for terms such as 'fat', 'lean', 'skinny', 'toned' and 'muscular' which are also frequently used throughout this thesis.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to respondents as 'women' or 'men'; at times, I use the terms 'female' and 'male'. While I use these terms interchangeably, and this thesis deals primarily with 'traditional' and hegemonic notions of gender, I acknowledge that gender is fluid, diverse, complex and does not trace on to particular sexes (Darwin, 2020; Scarborough, 2018). I recognise there are various interpretations of the terms gender and sex across academia and the public sphere. For instance, some scholars contend that gender is a fluid, performative act rather than a fixed aspect of one's identity — one that is defined, and redefined by social and cultural scripts (Restar, Sherwood, Edeza, Collins, & Operario, 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021; Vijlbrief, Saharso, & Ghorashi, 2020; Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987). I made this terminological choice through expediency and in response to how the respondents defined themselves and used these terms. It is important to acknowledge that bodies and body image can — and should be — analysed outside such gender binaries.

## **Chapter Overview**

This thesis begins in **Chapter 1** with the literature review. In this chapter, the reader is provided with an overview of how the term body image has evolved and a brief outline of the long and rich lineage of body image research findings and key theorists. The relative merits and shortfalls of existing research are outlined, which provides a clearer view of the conceptual and theoretical gaps in the literature this thesis seeks to fill. This paves the way for a review of the contemporary research literature which focuses on social media's influence on body image.

**Chapter 2** provides a theoretical frame for this thesis. The chapter begins with a brief but critical overview of body image research and highlights some of its shortcomings. This overview offers an argument for why there is a need for a Critical Realist informed model that can more readily frame and capture the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of the relationship between social media and body image. An in-depth outline of the 'Critical Body Image Model' is provided, along with how Critical Realism theoretically informs it.

In **Chapter 3**, I outline the research methods implemented in this thesis and explain why a mixed methods approach was used, along with the justification for qualitative data being primarily used in this thesis. The data gathering process is delineated along with a review of the successes and failures of the research process. This chapter culminates with a reflection on the research process and outlines

some challenges faced and how they were dealt with. I also outline how my subjectivities, experiences, and beliefs may have shaped the analysis process and conclusions.

In **Chapter 4**, I begin the data analysis and set the scene for the proceeding chapters to explore how the respondents experience their body image through social media. The chapter centres on the first research sub-question that focuses on the type of body representations respondents engage with on social media. I use the 'Critical Body Image Model' to highlight how multiple influences converge to make 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies meaningful in complex and contradictory ways.

In **Chapter 5**, I answer the second research sub-question that explores the limitations and conditions of social media's power in shaping body image experiences – particularly exercise and self-representation practices. Here I focus on the conflicting positive and negative bodily meanings of 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies to illustrate that body image is complex, multidimensional, and fluid, and that no single influence has determinate 'effects' on body image.

In **Chapter 6**, closer attention is paid to the mediated nature of social media to answer the third research sub-question that centres on how the social affordances of social media shape respondents' social media practices; and, in turn, body image. I explore how different contexts and situations can shape social media practices in ways that trigger body image dissatisfaction, along with helpful strategies that can be implemented to counter these adverse influences.

In **Chapter 7**, social media properties are put under the spotlight. This is where the technological affordances of social media are analysed to answer the fourth research sub-question: How do the technological affordances of social media shape respondents' social media practices; and, in turn, body image? This chapter highlights that social media is not a neutral space, but one where respondents were simultaneously users of and used by social media in ways that both helped and hindered their process of developing a positive body image.

Finally, in **Chapter 8** I reflect on the research findings, provide some final concluding thoughts, and consider how well I answered them across the analytical chapters. I also address the limitations of this thesis and offer some concluding reflections on my growth as a researcher. The thesis is brought to a close with a final word on the findings and how they may shape research on social media and body image in the future.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review

## 1.1: Introduction

This opening chapter has been designed to provide a backdrop for the later chapters by introducing the reader to a range of concepts, perspectives, and influences contributing to the relationship between social media and body image. The literature review is divided into three sections: The first section introduces the reader to the term 'body image'. It explores how it has been defined and researched in both historical and contemporary periods. This leads to an overview of how body image is typically experienced and what internal and external factors have been shown to influence people's body image experiences. The second section provides a brief history of Screen and Media theory. I give particular emphasis to illustrating the field's transition from viewing the media's influence as uni-directional and highly powerful to a view that acknowledges media influence as being limited and conditional. The third section explores contemporary psychological research where body image and social media overlap. Where relevant, I include research from Critical Psychology to highlight the limitations in how 'traditional' psychology often positions body image and social media. Consequently, the literature review will provide the reader with a more transparent view of why there is a need to critically research the relationship between social media and body image.

## 1.2: What is Body Image?

While modern body image research has become increasingly prominent and a 'popular' topic of debate and discussion in the 21st century, it comes from varied beginnings. The complexity of the field was aptly highlighted over 50 years ago by prominent body image researchers Seymour Fisher and Sidney Cleveland. The authors opened their book 'Body Image and Personality' (1958, p. 3) by stating, "the body image concept is difficult to trace in a historical sense because it has found application in such a diverse number of disciplines and levels of thought. It is striking over how wide a range the concept has been evaluated as a potential frame of reference". In this introductory section I will outline how the term 'body image' has evolved.

### 1.2.2: Body Image Definitions

From the field's conception to the present, defining body image has been an endless source of contention and confusion (see Krawczyk, Menzel, & Thompson, 2012; Bergstrom & Neighbors, 2006; Hsu & Sobkiewicz, 1991; Cash & Brown, 1987). The research area has been criticised as being overpowering when first confronted. Blood (2004, p. 5) contends that an initial problem faced when engaging with the literature is that "the phrase 'body image research' misleadingly suggests a comprehensive body of work founded on agreed-upon ontological and epistemological assumptions". This is echoed by Atkinson, Stock, Alleva, Jankowski, Piran, Riley, and Williamson (2020, p. 53), who contend: "we drown newcomers to the field in a ridiculous plethora of constructs. Not only that, but...we talk about very similar things, but we call them by different names". In the next section, I take a closer look at how body image has been, and is currently, defined along with how body image definitions have been increasingly critiqued.

When research was still in its infancy, body image was conceptualised as a unidimensional construct. According to Schilder (1950, p. 11) body image was "the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves". However, as the field developed, researchers began to acknowledge the multidimensional and conditional nature of body image (Piran, 2019). As such, there was a growing recognition that body image could not be pigeonholed into one term alone. At present, the commonly used definition of body image is the particular thoughts, feelings, and perceptions an individual has about their body and the behaviours they engage in as a result (Cash, 2008). Body image is often defined as an open construct in the sense it can refer to both negative and positive experiences (Piran, 2019; Dorian & Garfinkel, 2002). While body image is typically described theoretically in terms of complexity and multidimensionality, and as



a conscious and unconscious human experience informed by historical, cultural, social, individual, and biological factors (e.g. Taleporas & McCabe, 2002), in research, it is still often treated as a reified, relatively fixed schema, which influences people's behaviour. Problems may arise because the term 'body image' can imply a singular view of the body and one that is primarily focused on appearance. Cash and Pruzinsky (2002, p. 7) tried using the "plural version of the term body image..." body images"...The plural usage was intended to convey the complexity and multidimensionality of body image". The term 'body images' is indeed strange; however, because body image can encompass the way one experiences their broader embodiment, it is understandable such a term was at least tried to be used and implemented. Another layer of confusion arose because discrete body image aspects were often independently investigated but presented under the rough runic of 'body image' more broadly (Fisher, 1990). These terms range from 'weight satisfaction', 'body checking', 'size perception', 'size accuracy', 'appearance evaluation', 'appearance schemas', 'fear of fatness', to 'drive for thinness' or 'drive for muscularity among others'<sup>1</sup>. While these simplistic notions of body image are not central to the theory, it is the core assumption that underpins research that attempts to understand people's body image experiences.

There has been, and continues to be, a growing number of body image researchers, particularly critical psychologists, who are challenging studies that present body image in simplistic, reified ways (Riley et al., 2022). A limited but growing number of studies that use reflexive, qualitative, and experiential paradigms are beginning to develop and unite the concept of body image in more complex and dynamic ways. For instance, Trujillo (2017, p. 204) argues, "the ways in which 'body image' is used popularly are often reductive and unhelpful in the project of (a) helping us to understand and talk about lived experience, especially when it comes to the intersectional aspects of our embodied lives, and (b) attempting to create interventions with which to help people understand and live their often complicated and difficult relationships with their bodies". The author goes on to say: "it might be necessary for a new corporeal vocabulary—whether from academia, activist movements or popular culture—to supersede 'body image' altogether". The question then, what should this vocabulary be?

Gleeson and Frith (2006, p. 88) argue it is more fruitful to consider body image as a "process, an activity, rather than a product" whereby people's particular body image experiences are made up of

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<sup>1</sup> Further confusion can arise as these terms are often used interchangeably or defined differently from one researcher to another. As a result of so much terminological variability, Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, and Tantleff-Dunn (1999, p. 10) make the point that terms such as these "are almost useless without a specification...whether the foci are specific body sites or a more global aspect of overall appearance". Therefore, in order to understand body image, research requires cross-examination and contextualisation of research findings. These reasons may play a part in body image research being overwhelming when first confronted and why Blood (2004) argues body image research misleadingly suggests a comprehensive body of work.

a series of judgements, perceptions, contests, and reflections based on the complexity of the multiple negotiations that individuals engage in while experiencing their embodiment. Such a conceptualisation is similar to the notion of 'becoming'. According to Coleman (2008, p.168), "becomings are transformations—not of forms transforming into another or different form but of constantly processual, constantly transforming relations". Notably, some empirical research illustrates the similarities between body image and the notions of 'process' or 'becoming' (Piran, 2016).

Gill (2008) found profound ambivalences between different men and, significantly, in individuals' accounts of decoding images of men's 'ideal' bodies. For instance, one respondent fluidly moved from criticising the 'uniformity' of 'ideal' bodies to how this makes him feel ugly; to finding them 'sexy'; before concluding that they are 'just boring'. The mixed meanings and contradictions of men's bodies is also illustrated by Gilman (2004, p. 6) who outlines how the 'fat' body can be a representation of "maternal softness" and also "a solid, patriarchal gigantism". These findings are also shown in Frith and Gleeson's (2004) work on men, clothing, and embodiment. Research findings showed that respondents' body image was "fluid, contradictory, and constantly renegotiated". Respondents' body image and clothing choices would shift as they subjectively experienced "fat days" and "thin days" (p.45). By thinking about the body image as a 'process' or of being in a continual state of 'becoming', researchers can imagine possibilities for bodies beyond physical appearance and people's approximation to 'ideal' bodies.

Importantly, this means bringing corporeal differences to the forefront of analysis. Trujillo (2017, p. 216) makes the point a new corporeal vocabulary: "should be explicitly inclusive of different aspects of embodiment (e.g. bodily functions and aptitudes, (dis)ability, sensations, mental health and appearance), without systematically privileging one over the others. It should also be intersectional, taking into account the multiple ways that embodiment is socially constructed". For body image research to progress, it is essential for researchers to no longer look at the individual constituent parts of body image in isolation. I agree with Boero and Mason (2020, p. 22), who argue when analysing the body, researchers cannot ignore or 'cordon off' particular bodily domains so readily: "empirically engaging with the body makes it virtually impossible to ignore that...every body has characteristics that signify membership in a racial group; every body has a particular size, height, skin tone...And these features of every body carry consequences for the ways we are received by others, for our own sense of identity, and for the physical and social spaces we can access". Researching and understanding body image from a holistic perspective is all the more important, considering "body image is elastic and open to change through new information" (Grogan, 2017, p.6). If body image researchers only explore

a singular aspect, there is the very real possibility that it may change as more information is introduced. Such a thought gives more weight to the need to research and understand body image with the widest lens possible to truly grasp how people experience their embodiment.

There is, however, an ever-present tension in making statements about including more and more attributes to definitions and research paradigms. While it is crucial to bring together all relevant attributes that shape people's embodied experiences, it is necessary to remain pragmatic. With a topic such as body image, where there is an exhaustive list of attributes that can potentially shape one's embodiment, there is the risk that any possible definition or research project will ultimately collapse under the weight of expectation. Or render any embodiment exploration encyclopaedic in length and out of date before any meaningful analysis can be completed.

The limitations of the term 'body image' are readily highlighted in the following section, which explores body image experiences – mainly body image dissatisfaction and body image satisfaction. As the reader will see, body image experiences are typically researched and understood in isolation from one another. In doing so, research findings can once again lose sight of the complexity, multidimensionality and fluidity of body image experiences.

### 1.2.3: Body Image Experiences

Body image is an important construct because it plays an integral part in how people experience their embodiment. According to Piran (2019, p. 4), "embodiment is the overarching construct that subsumes positive body image and negative body image". At best, body image dissatisfaction can be unpleasant and distracting from the goal of being healthy and happy. At worst, it can lead to social anxiety, depression, and severe mental health problems like body dysmorphic disorder or eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia nervosa (Bordo, 2009; Cash, 2008). On the other hand, body image satisfaction helps people feel 'at home' and "appreciate, respect, celebrate, and honour their bodies" (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015, p. 118).

Body image dissatisfaction typically refers to negative evaluations of one's "size, shape, muscularity, muscle tone and weight, and it usually involves a perceived discrepancy between a person's evaluation of his or her body and his or her ideal body" (Grogan, 2017, p. 4). Research has dominantly

focused on body image dissatisfaction<sup>2</sup>; however, nearly twenty years ago, Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) highlighted the need to study the development and experience of body image satisfaction.

Over the past decade, researchers have refined the concept of body image satisfaction or positive body image. Positive body image is regarded as multifaceted, holistic, stable, and malleable phenomenon (Piran, 2019). A positive body image is unique from a negative body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), that is to say body image is its own construction; it is distinct from negative body image. Positive body image is not on the same continuum as negative body image, nor should it be represented as low levels of negative body image. Perhaps one reason why research on positive body image research began slowly was that it was conceptualised as one endpoint along a body image continuum, with negative body image anchored at the opposite endpoint (Tylka, 2011).

More specifically, according to Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010, p. 112) body image satisfaction encompasses:

An overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealised images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a “glow”; (d) emphasise their body’s assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; and (e) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalised and most negative information is rejected or reframed.

This definition provided a base from which body image scholars and clinicians could understand the construct of positive body image. Notably, most aspects of this definition emerged through interviews with diverse participants who have positive body image, including samples of adolescent girls and boys from Sweden (Holmqvist & Frisé, 2012; Frisé & Holmqvist, 2010), African American girls from the United States (Pope, Corona, & Belgrave, 2014), Aboriginal girls from Canada (McHugh, Coppola,

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<sup>2</sup> Historically, the vast majority of body image research has focused on body image dissatisfaction. Researchers have argued this bias has occurred because body image research developed from a single problem point of view. This happened because the foundations of body image research have been built on an effort to understand body image among individuals, especially women with weight concerns and eating disorders (Cash, 2004). This area of research has been incredibly fruitful and, indeed, a critical area to understand to rectify. Eating disorders lead to a significant number of fatalities each year and cause havoc in those who suffer, along with their friends and family (Bertelli, Ferrara, Di Modica, Terzoni, Bergamelli, Gambini, & Destrebecq, 2021; Santomauro, Melen, Mitchison, Vos, Whiteford, & Ferrari, 2021). The focus on eating disorders has inadvertently limited the theoretical scope of body image research.

& Sabiston, 2014), and Canadian residents with spinal cord injuries (Bailey, Gammage, van Ingen, & Ditor, 2015).

### **Simultaneously Dissatisfied and Satisfied**

The arrival of positive body image research has helped reinvigorate the fact that body image is a multi-dimensional phenomenon<sup>3</sup>. As noted above, body image dissatisfaction and body image satisfaction are two distinct experiences (Piran, 2019). This means people can be simultaneously dissatisfied and satisfied with aspects of their bodies. This is to say, for instance, an individual who is generally discontent with their weight is not constantly thinking or feeling upset about it. Certain situations or events activate their thoughts and emotions, while other times, these body image experiences are either absent or much more benign.

Sugar (1993, p. 63) importantly contends that body image is a “plastic, constantly changing concept, continuously being modified by bodily growth, trauma, or decline, and significantly influenced by the ever-changing interaction with the social- environment”. This point presents some conflicts over the terms body image dissatisfaction and body image satisfaction, and how body image experiences are classified. For instance, because body image dissatisfaction and satisfaction are independent constructs, if an individual simultaneously thinks they are physically larger than they are, which incites body image dissatisfaction, but has a great appreciation for their bodily functionality, which generates body image satisfaction, how is their body image defined? It is certainly not limited to either negative or positive. The increasing recognition of the multiple influences shaping body image has incited some researchers to turn to embodiment as a better term for capturing the complexity of body image. I believe the term ‘embodiment’ is useful because it highlights the need for “understanding the dynamic interplay of person variables (e.g., body image traits, physical characteristics, and personality attributes) and contextual events is crucial to our appreciation of body image fluidity in everyday life” (Cash, 2002, p. 169). With these points considered, it makes sense why prominent body image researcher Cash (2008, p. 13) contends that body image is as “unique as a fingerprint”.

It is important to note that “the relative importance of physical appearance to males and females may vary depending on the social context considered” (Davison, 2012, p. 247). The term “multiply situated bodies” used by Boero and Mason, (2020, p. 7) helps recognise “that bodies inhabit and display

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that some body image scholars have “lamented the scientific neglect of body image as a fluid and dynamic person-situation interaction” and placed an “overemphasis on body image as a static, cross-situational trait” (Cash, 2002, p. 164). Cash (2002) goes on to comment that “nearly all assessments of body image focus on stable and dispositional or trait-like characteristics; they measure how people usually think, feel or act. However, they seldom take into consideration the situational and temporal variations of body image experiences within individuals” (Cash, 2002, p. 164).

numerous, intersecting group memberships at once". Thus, body image will be simultaneously shaped by multiple forces in incredibly complex ways. The complexity of body image has led some researchers to contend we may never fully grasp body image. According to Pearson, Macera, and Follette (2010, p. 9), "any number of factors, alone or in combination, many explain preoccupation with the body and dislike of appearance. It is likely not possible to determine the specific etiology of preoccupation with the body, dissatisfaction and associated features. We know that certain risk factors exist...and that their effect is additive". Any given individual may be part of a population that has a greater propensity to becoming body image dissatisfied, i.e. athletic (Kong & Harris, 2015; Galli & Reel, 2009; Hausenblas & Downs, 2001) or gay populations (Kane, 2010); however, as people and bodies are multiply situated, such individuals may also have a psychological disposition (high autonomy) or historical experiences which act as a protective filter (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Judge, 2021; Barnes & Caltabiano, 2017). Therefore, studying aspects of body image in isolation could understandably lead to a partial and incorrect view of people's body image. This highlights why it is essential to research body image holistically and approach this topic in an interdisciplinary way.

The body image implications for people being multiply situated in their bodies mean body image (dis)satisfaction will be "differently experienced but shared across distinctions of privilege and positionalities related to gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, body size, shape and ability" (Riley et al., 2022, p.13). This point is demonstrated by the work of Grogan, Evans, Wright, and Hunter (2004) on female bodybuilders. The authors conducted interviews with female bodybuilders who described the 'balancing act' they performed between muscularity and femininity to meet the complex demands of those within and outside the bodybuilding community. This finding of body image ambivalence was also shown in Frith and Gleeson's (2004) work on men's subjective experience of their body image, where different aspects of the body may become salient – that is to say, there were times when these men might emphasise parts of the body of which they feel proud and hide aspects of the body of which they feel ashamed. Findings such as these are essential to acknowledge, heed, and integrate into body image research. It further highlights how simple labels of body image dissatisfaction or satisfaction can be ineffective in capturing the complexity of people's body image experiences (Trujillo, 2017).

Body image research will benefit from more readily treating bodies and body image as being reflexively embedded and intertwined within complex and contradictory discursive flows that influence body image experiences in various ways for different people at different times. As such, it may be more beneficial to consider body image as a process, rather than a product, because body image is constituted and reconstituted as people move through their daily lives where bodily

expectations, impositions and desires change (Gattario & Frisén, 2019). Doing so may help ensure the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of body image remain at the forefront of research.

### 1.3: (Social) Media Theory

Research exploring the relationship between body image and social media would benefit from integrating contemporary Screen and Media scholarship. In the following section, I briefly outline the history of Screen and Media research and theory to demonstrate how the field has moved from simple and deterministic views of media influences to a perspective that foregrounds complexity, conditionality, and temporality. The research outlined below will provide the reader with a current view of media influence which will then be used across the analysis chapters to identify shortfalls in how psychological body image researchers understand and position the social media and, consequently, the limitations of conclusions drawn.

#### **Defining Social Media**

Social media has been defined by boyd and Ellison (2008, p.211) as: "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". There are many competing, contradictory and overlapping conceptualisations regarding the social possibilities that social media enables. For instance, social media can facilitate sharing memes (Journell & Clark, 2019) and trolling known and unknown others for one's own 'amusement' (Hannan, 2018; De Seta, 2017; Van Dijk, 2005). According to Van Dijk (2013, p. 8), social media sites "primarily promote interpersonal contact, whether between individuals or groups; they forge personal, professional, or geographical connections". Turkle (2017) proposes the opposite and contends that social media is unsettling and warping the relationships we form with our friends, family and spouses. On the other hand, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013, p. 3) suggest that "the affordances of digital media provide a catalyst for reconceptualising other aspects of culture, requiring the rethinking of social relations, the reimagining of cultural and political participation, the revision of economic expectations, and the reconfiguration of legal structures". Jenkins (2009, p. 1) has also been an advocate of using digital technologies such as social media to "participate fully in public, community, [creative] and economic life". Such participation is illustrated with social media users who can organise and mobilise global protest movements (Couldry, 2019) and have the ability to "influence alternative political perspectives" (Jenkins, Thorburn, & Seawell, 2004, p. 4). However, Buckingham (2019, p.27), stands in the 'middle ground' and reminds us that "seeing media use in terms of a binary distinction between risk and benefit ignores the genuine complexity and diversity of people's everyday practices".



The comments above illustrate that there are competing and contradicting conceptualisations of social media. However, Tifentales and Manovich's (2015, p.117) comment that social media is an "archive in the process of becoming... [an] unfinished, live and living archive" may help encapsulate the above notions and highlight that, for good or for ill, social media cannot be easily 'pinned' down. This point highlights why "it's important to understand how technology introduces new social possibilities and how these challenge assumptions people have about everyday interactions" (boyd, 2014, p. 10). Our contemporary media environment will continue to evolve, and body image researchers must keep in stride with these developments and explore how these changes may introduce new possibilities for body image experiences. While the future mediascape may bring affordances, for better or worse, yet unseen with it, issues of power will likely remain a dominant feature (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014).

### **(Social) Media, Power and the Audience**

Issues of media, power, and its perceived ability to shape the minds and behaviours of audiences have a long history within Screen and Media studies (Fowler, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2004). Most theories of media manipulation and domination, which were prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, have origins dating back to the 1920s (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013; Macnamara, 2010). The media effects tradition begins with the 'hypodermic needle' model (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994), which assumed the media were an all-powerful force of social control that imposed a dominant ideology on mass audiences. While such theories have now largely been discredited (Gauntlett, 2008); there is still a tendency for some parts of academia and public and political institutions to position social media as having deterministic effects on many aspects of life, including on body image (Goodyear & Armour, 2018).

Theories of media 'effects' came into prominence with the development of mass media technologies, such as radio and film. These technologies were credited with an almost irresistible power to mould an audience's beliefs, cognition, and behaviours according to the communicators' will (Bennett, 2005; Stewart, 2000). The basic assumption of strong media 'effects' theory was that audiences were passive and homogeneous (Hall, 1997). This assumption was not based on empirical evidence but on assumptions of human nature. Media 'effects' research was often carried out under controlled experimental conditions, through a positivist lens, positioning the social world as there to be measured to identify the power media has to shape audiences' behaviour and way of thinking. This, in turn, produced an inflexible method that cannot capture the subtleties and nuances of media

meanings. Media theorists such as Lewin (1991) and Gauntlett (1998, 2008) have argued that the problem with media 'effects' research is that it assumes the world is driven by distinct forces that can be identified and studied in isolation from one another.

The media 'effects' tradition began to unravel with the publication of Cantril's (1940) 'The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic'. This study was based on audience reactions to Orson Welles' 'The War of the Worlds' broadcast where the subjective nature of audience responses to media content was highlighted. While the broadcast began with a warning 'the following content is fictitious' a large portion of the audience took it as fact. Qualitative interviews revealed a more holistic model of media reception. The meaning audience members took from the broadcast was based on other factors defining particular audience members' social, cultural, and political standings. With these findings Cantril concluded the hypodermic needle model "puts a false emphasis on the problem by assuming that a social stimulus is essentially a series of discrete elements to which people have somehow learned to react. The enormously important possibility which our approach has so far overlooked is that social stimulus situation have their own characteristics and unique qualities" (1940, p. 74).

In 1960, Joseph Klapper suggested media research needed a shift away from the tendency to regard mass communication as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience 'effects' toward a view of the media as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation. Contemporary media theorists typically adopt a more rigorous and critical approach to exploring the influence of the media on different aspects of social life (Kreiss, 2014; Kwon, Kim, Cho, & Yang, 2013; Laughey, 2007). Studying media influences means looking at how audiences are targeted and measured, and how media are circulated and distributed; at the assumptions media producers make about their audiences and how they seek to engage them; and at the different ways in which individuals and social groups use, interpret, and respond to media (Couldry, 2019). While contemporary media theorists emphasise the limited and conditional impact of the media, this is not to suggest that media platform owners or industries do not put much time, money, and effort into trying to shape audiences' perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about different topics.

Social media platforms have a long history of positioning themselves as open and impartial platforms. This may derive from a motivation perhaps to avoid issues surrounding liability and regulation, but also because platform owners may fundamentally believe it to be true (McGowan, 2017; Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Couldry & Van Dijck, 2015; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Shepherd & Landry, 2013; Baym & boyd, 2012). While perspectives may differ, social media platforms are certainly not neutral. It is

evident they are designed to shape participation in particular ways for specific reasons (Couldry, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011). This includes how social media platforms organise data through algorithmic sorting, privileging certain types of content over others; the type of participation they try to facilitate, and the pressures applied by revenue goals<sup>4</sup> (Couldry, 2019).

The technological advances of the last century — from the first radio broadcasts to today’s high-speed mobile Internet devices — have made it possible for individual communicators to access unprecedented numbers of potential message recipients and become recipients of a constant barrage of information. Billions of dollars are spent worldwide each year in attempts to change people’s attitudes about political candidates, consumer products, health and safety practices, and charitable causes (Soules, 2015; Shrum, 2012). In most of these instances, the ultimate goal is to influence people’s behaviour so that they will vote for certain politicians or referenda, purchase specific goods, engage in safer driving, eating, and sexual activities, and donate money to various religious, environmental, and educational organisations and institutions. However, despite media platform owners or industries best efforts, the media does not have deterministic influences; people are not passive victims of media forces and do not helplessly follow fashions and fads driven by marketing forces (Lange, 2007). Media audiences can, and often are, critical of the media messages they view. For instance, Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2013) have shown that children as young as eight years old can critically evaluate media messages. Girls were aware that celebrities’ looks were enhanced by designers and make-up, which had the potential to make viewers feel bad about their own looks. Similarly, boys noted that sportspeople’s endorsement of sugar-filled sports drinks was at odds with the pursuit of fitness and health.

Paquette and Raine (2004, n.p.) have argued that body image researchers should move their focus beyond the media’s industrial power and explore “the social ties, practices and conventions in everyday relationships”. This is a topic that prominent media theorist Marshal McLuhan was interested in. In the middle of the 20th century, McLuhan famously wrote that if you want to

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<sup>4</sup> In contemporary society there has been a growing recognition of the polarising impact algorithms have in shaping people’s lives. “An algorithm is a sequence of computer code commands that tells a computer how to proceed through a series of instructions to arrive at a specified endpoint” (Lupton, 2015, p. 10). There are numerous examples of the productive and constraining aspects of algorithms. For instance, when Amazon sends users an email putting forward suggestions about potential items they may like to purchase, it has used algorithms to work out each individual’s possible interests. Moreover, social media algorithms can play a decisive part in determining the popularity of posts, which in turn sets the make-up of users’ newsfeeds. ‘Facebook’s algorithm ‘EdgeRank’ “structures the flow of information and communication automatically determining what content appears relative to three constructs - affinity; weight and time decay” (Bucher, 2012, p. 1164). These three constructs calculate an ‘edge’ for a post dependent on user’s interaction or strength tie with whomever makes a post or with a particular content thread. Therefore, the nature of the platform deeply shapes what content each user encounters. It would be expected that popular users and their content would be ‘liked’, ‘shared’ or ‘reposted’ to greater extents, thus giving it further ‘edge’.

understand the significance of the media, then the “medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). Some people took this as meaning the content of the media does not matter; however, it was not the case. McLuhan points out that media research tends to focus too much on representations and does not pay enough attention to the particular way mediums work. The central idea is that media technologies can have a transformative impact on sociocultural structures and behaviours by their very existence. In illustrating this point, McLuhan commented that the size and expense of early televisions meant they often dominated domestic spaces, with furniture arranged around them, in distinction to family members sitting facing each other. Having one massive and often expensive piece of media equipment for watching television programmes meant that families were more likely to watch it together, creating different spaces for talking about issues of culture or political debates. McLuhan's ideas are still relevant in contemporary society; however, the medium may have a different message with the rise of digital technologies and social media platforms.

Conflicting ideas regarding the power of social media are also prevalent. For Jenkins (2006), the media has ceased to exist as a dominant agency of power because of the complexity of the new ‘convergence culture’; this is contrasted with the view that the powerful find new and novel ways of using social media to reinforce existing power structures (McDougall, 2012). It may be more accurate to contend that social media has “empowered revolutionaries, reactionaries, and racists alike” (Jenkins et al., 2004, p. 12). I agree with boyd (2014, p. 15) that “more often than not, what emerges out of people’s confusion about the media takes the form of utopian and dystopian rhetoric...utopian and dystopian views assume that technologies possess intrinsic powers that affect *all* people in *all* situations the same way”. Contrasting and contradicting ideas about social media power are often accompanied by debates over whether the term ‘audience’ is still applicable (Ruddock, 2007; Lealand & Zanker, 2006).

The study of audiences has always been a critical dimension of media studies. While there is a rich history of media studies applying simplistic assumptions about the influence of media and the kind of impact it can have on audiences, a different view has emerged in recent years. Early enthusiasts for Web 2.0 asserted that the idea of the passive audience was no longer relevant. The active audience has supposedly replaced the passive one; however, the rise of social media has reinvigorated discussions about the future of the audience. A new ‘participatory culture’ has taken its place, with the assumption that everyone is producing and distributing their own media content (Jenkins, 2006). Some media theorists argued that the age of institutional media corporations had finished: top-down content production was giving way to a greater propensity for network communications. This would lead to an expansive revitalisation of society’s political and civic discourse engagement. As such, there are growing calls for the term ‘audience’ to be replaced with a term that can capture and describe the

complex articulation of how people engage with the media. This, however, is not easy, and researchers are grappling with how best to talk about what people do with social media and, conversely, what social media may 'do' to people.

Many media theorists have put forward their new conceptions of the audience. They have varied from the 'produser' (Bruns, 2008), to the 'citizen-consumer' (Murdock, 1992), to the 'user' (Buckingham, 2019). There are key implications with how the audience is theoretically understood and the type of influence social media may have on people's body image experiences. For instance, if body image researchers take the audience to be passive and acted upon by corporations' marketing and advertising of 'ideal' body content, it is likely that conclusions about social media's negative impact on body image may be reached. However, if the audience is positioned as being active, 'producers' who can challenge the dominant position of 'ideal' bodies by creating and distributing 'realistic', body positive content, it is likely that conclusions about social media's positive impact on body image may be reached. Binary views of the audience or terms that orientate the audience in limited ways may play a part in reproducing fragmented and partial arguments about social media's impact on body image.

In the following section, I explore contemporary body image research focusing on aspects that overlap with social media. The following section is not an exhaustive account of contemporary research findings.

## 1.4: Current Research

The following section provides an overview of body image research that overlaps with social media. The research discussed highlights the range of research insights generated but also illustrates how psychologists have tended to provide greater "emphasis on quantified detail without context, on progressively finer and finer measurement of smaller and smaller problems" (Atkinson et al., 2020, p.9). Taken together, the overview provided should more readily illustrate the need to take a more holistic and interdisciplinary view of the relationship between social media and body image.

### 1.4.1: Using Social Media

#### **Social Media Exposure**

Though the research is young, there is a growing number of studies that suggest the impact of social media might be more harmful than that of 'traditional media' on body image (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian 2015; Tiggemann & Slater 2013; Tiggemann & Miller 2010; Dittmar, 2009; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2004). For instance, Haferkamp and Krämer (2011) presented 'Facebook' user profiles coded as either 'attractive' or 'unattractive' to 43 men and 48 women. Results suggested that those who viewed 'attractive' profiles reported greater body image dissatisfaction than those who viewed 'unattractive' profiles.

The work of Fardouly et al. (2015) is a notable study as it is one of the few experimental within the body image research field. The researchers sought to ascertain whether 'Facebook' prompts different body image experiences in women users compared to other digital media, specifically, a fashion magazine website or appearance-neutral website. Groups of participants were appointed to each viewing condition. Before and after browsing through their assigned text for ten minutes, they completed a body image satisfaction questionnaire. Fardouly et al. (2015) found that browsing 'Facebook' led to an increased negative mood compared to browsing an appearance-neutral website (see also Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014; Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood, & Dwyer, 1997). This result, however, cannot provide conclusive evidence that browsing 'Facebook' led participants to report a decrease in mood due to body image and appearance comparisons. 'Facebook' includes such a vast amount of content, beyond images of 'idealised' appearance, that women could be comparing themselves on a broad range of life attributes. For example, similar to the findings of Chou and Edge (2012), "women may be judging others on 'Facebook' to be happier or have better lives than them, which in turn could induce a more negative mood" (Fardouly et al., 2015, p. 22).

Moreover, after browsing 'Facebook', participants did not report higher levels of body image dissatisfaction or any desire to alter their weight or shape. This finding is at odds with earlier correlation research (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004). Although, participants who rated higher in making appearance-related comparisons reported greater levels of face, hair, and skin-related discrepancies. It is interesting that face, hair, and skin discrepancies were prevalent over body size, shape, or weight. This may be because of the greater propensity of above shoulder 'selfies' being taken and uploaded to 'Facebook' (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Similarly, Mabe, Forney, and Keel (2014, p. 520) used an experimental research design to compare the impact that browsing 'Facebook' had against a control website, 'Wikipedia'. The research findings centred on 84 women who completed a range of questionnaires and scales before and after browsing their allocated viewing condition for 20 minutes. These tests concerned the participant's preoccupation with weight, shape, desire to exercise, state anxiety, and eating attitudes. Results are interesting as, before Internet browsing, both groups had comparable weight and shape preoccupation levels. After the allocated time for Internet use had drawn to a close and tests were completed, results indicated that Internet use, regardless of condition, was associated with decreases in weight and shape preoccupation, and urge to exercise. However, the women browsing the control website experienced a more significant reduction in weight and shape preoccupation, and the urge to exercise, than those browsing 'Facebook'.

While this area of research is notable in illustrating how social media can harm body image, it can imply that simply being a social media user will be detrimental to body image. Mabe et al. (2014) make the important point that specific actions and practices of social media use should be examined to uncover potential mediators of the relationship between social media and body image issues. As such, more body image researchers have turned to study the social media practices implicated in body image experiences.

### **Social Media Practices**

Body image researchers have become interested in social media because of the range of affordances these platforms enable and the various practices that are implicated in different body image experiences (Bian & Leung, 2015; Blond, 2008). For example, the degree to which people integrate 'Facebook' into their daily life has been connected with experiences of body shame, body image dissatisfaction, and self-surveillance and regulation for adolescent girls and young adult women

(Marengo, Longobardi, Fabris, & Settanni, 2018; Livingstone, 2007). Moreover, posting and viewing pictures on 'Facebook' has also been connected with body image dissatisfaction in girls and young adult women (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015). Following on from this, 'selfie' posting and the effort that goes into producing and posting the 'perfect' 'selfie' images on social media have been connected with increased body image dissatisfaction in young adult women (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017). Fardouly et al. (2015) suggest that due to the abundance of picture-sharing on social media, 'Facebook' stands to be a space where appearance comparison is highly accessible. Users can quickly post edited photos, feeding into plentiful opportunities to compare themselves to 'idealised' images, inciting body image dissatisfaction (Rutledge, Gillmor, & Gillen, 2013). Additionally, research has found that women tend to make appearance comparisons in far more harmful ways on social media than in person (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). The frequency of 'Facebook' appearance comparison is linked with body image dissatisfaction in young adult women (Puccio, Kalathas, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, & Krug, 2016).

Lastly, research has suggested that viewing friends' fitness posts on social media platforms are connected with making disparaging and critical comments about one's body or particular parts for young adult men and women (Arroyo & Brunner, 2016). Meier and Gray (2014) also found that a higher frequency of engaging in photo-related activities was associated with increased body image dissatisfaction and a higher motivation to develop an 'ideal' body and take a self-objectified view of oneself in adolescent girls. This parallels other research findings that have connected appearance focused 'Facebook' use, but not overall, 'general' 'Facebook' use, with increased body image dissatisfaction, body surveillance, and 'ideal' body internalisation in young adult women (Cohen et al., 2017; Oliver, 2017; Fitzsimmons-Craft, Bardone-Cone, Crosby, Engel, Wonderlich, & Bulik, 2016). While these findings provide interesting insights into the potential influence social media can have on body image; results can fall into presenting social media as having a uni-directional and totalising impact on body image.

However, there is an increasing amount of qualitative research highlighting how people resist dominant media representations. For instance, Gill (2008, p. 114) conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 140 boys and men aged between 15 and 35 in four British regional locations in the UK (London, Bangor, Manchester, & Newcastle) and 30 men in Australia. The research explored the meanings they attributed to representations in advertising and magazines of 'ideal' men's bodies. The men spoke about 'feeling under pressure' from 'idealised' bodies to try and conform to unrealistic appearance standards. At the same time, respondents were also highly critical of and resistant to



these representations. Men would also talk about 'ideal' bodies being an irrelevant and uniform body, highlighting contemporary body culture's superficial and narcissistic nature. These men's comments show how it is possible to move between and combine different orientations to their embodied experiences. Grogan (2017) also reported a similar finding after conducting qualitative interviews with women exposed to 'ideal' women body representations. According to Grogan (2017, p. 114), "participants did not accept media image offered to them uncritically. They were highly critical of the fact that "skinny" models and actresses were represented as "normal" body shapes in magazines and on film. They saw fashion models as being too thin, representative of an unrealistic ideal". Evens et al. (2021) similarly highlighted how some women criticised what they perceived to be an excessive amount of time and energy required to achieve and maintain the 'ideal' body often shown on social media, and concluded the 'ideal' body as unrealistic.

These findings align with contemporary views of media influence that emphasise that audiences bring their own sets of existing ideas, pieces of knowledge, beliefs and experiences that work together to shape how they meaningfully understand media texts (Couldry, 2019; boyd, 2014; Chan, Ng, & Williams, 2012). Therefore, simple conclusions about the ideological nature and positioning of 'ideal' body representations in the media do not guarantee people will accept their meanings unproblematically. Thus, it is critical to provide research participants with the 'space' to share the depth of their embodied experiences and mediated practices because these practices are difficult, if not impossible, to capture in simplistic, tick-box questionnaires (Gill, 2008).

It is important to note that body image influences can often occur outside one's conscious awareness. There may be various aspects of people's (social) media practices that are hindering or helping their body image they are not aware of. Thompson et al. (1999) note that people may not know what event triggered the onset of particular body image experiences. This point is elaborated on by Lealand and Zanker (2006, p. 1), who contended that "much of our media use is habitual. We are often barely aware of it". This means that there may be influences shaping people's social media practices and body image experiences that some research may fail to capture.

### **Self-Representation**

One notable difference between 'traditional' media and social media concerns self-representation. 'Traditional' media outlets typically display pre-selected images of celebrities and models. In contrast, social media enables users to post images of friends and peers in our contemporary media

environment (West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009). This is notable as there is research that suggests peer comparisons are the most influential kind of social comparison (Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2002; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992). This is based on the original conceptualisation of social comparison theory, which posits that people are more likely to make comparisons to similar others since these comparisons are more relevant and can provide more effective evaluative information (Festinger, 1954). For these reasons, social media may be more detrimental to body image than 'traditional' media because of the social comparisons that it allows users to make.

Much has been made about social media users' ability to present their physical appearance more selectively in online interactions (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). Technological affordances of social media platforms means people can exert greater self-censorship over their physical appearance because images can be carefully selected, enhanced, and edited (Toma & Hancock, 2010; Rich & Evans, 2009). Some studies have found that certain users attempt to improve their physical attractiveness by selectively posting profile photographs and digitally retouching the photographic images on their online profiles (Toma & Hancock, 2010; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Users can also attempt to control their self-representation by limiting or removing perceived unflattering photos on social media<sup>5</sup> (Lang & Barton, 2015). Social media users can selectively post photos of themselves in which they perceive themselves as looking 'good' or attractive (Shafie, Nayan, & Osman, 2012; Siibak, 2009). It has been suggested that social media users typically post their 'best self' on social media, and photos are often heavily edited and posed (Chua & Chang, 2016; Lee-Won, Shim, Joo, & Park, 2014).

Moreover, adolescent boys and girls who spend more time on social media can receive more feedback about their appearance (de Vries, Peter, de Graaf, & Nikken, 2016). In addition to receiving messages about their own bodies on social media, adolescents may see carefully selected and edited pictures of their social media connections (i.e., friends, friends of friends, and celebrities) and the comments they receive. Thus, social media use can expose adolescents to appearance-related messages in the form of comments about their bodies and through viewing what their social media connections find attractive about themselves and others.

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<sup>5</sup> The work of Goffman (1956) is useful for understanding why people may be concerned with representing themselves in particular ways. The author opens 'The Presentation of the Self in Everyday life' (1956, p. 13). with the following comment: When an individual enters into the presence of others they commonly seek to acquire information about him or bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of the self, his attitude toward him, his competence, his trustworthiness...there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him...the individual can glean clues for his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experiences with individuals roughly similar to the one before them.

## Media Literacy

Recent studies have found that media literacies can be a helpful prevention method and tool in helping protect women and men from body image dissatisfaction. According to McLean, Paxton, and Wertheim (2016a, p. 3), media literacy is “characterised by the ability to think critically about media in general...and in particular the ability to make an assessment about how realistic or unrealistic a media image is”. It is believed that arming people with media literacy skills will disrupt the social comparisons made with ‘idealised’ body types (McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2016b; Halliwell, Easun, & Harcourt, 2011). There are a number of body image researchers who argue media literacy will also help with social media. For instance, Fardouly and Vartanian (2016, p. 3) contend: “body image and media literacy intervention programs should address the potential impact of social media on its users. For example, intervention programs could highlight the idealized nature of the images and content uploaded to social media and educate children and adolescents about the impact that comparisons to such content can have on their appearance concerns”. Media literacy, however, has a chequered past. Some psychologists may be too quick in pointing to media literacy as an effective intervention and prevention method. For instance, Buckingham (2019, p. 9) makes the point: “media literacy seems to be regarded as a kind of quick-fix solution or used as a way of shuffling off responsibility from the state to the individual.” Media literacy and highlighting the artificial nature of ‘idealised’ body representations may not go far enough because it only deals with one influence - the media, and ignores the broader social, cultural, political, and historical context in which media usage occurs.

Williams and Ricciardelli (2014) point out that some body image researchers only have a limited understanding of how women and men interpret media messages and representations of bodies. This point is also raised by Couldry (2019, p. 37), who is highly critical of “psychological approaches that interpreted media ‘effects’ like a stimulus-response in a laboratory”. What is needed, Couldry argues, is to understand “how an actual viewer *interprets* a programme from *their* world, and how that interpretation intersects, or not with the interpretation that the producers of the programme had intended”. Life circumstances will shape people’s understanding of media texts, content or representations (Livingstone, 2012). This brings issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, family, and so forth into the interpretation equation (Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003).

Furthermore, according to Buckingham (2019, p.75) “media literacy is not simply a matter of knowing how to use particular devices, whether in order to access or create media messages. It must also entail an in-depth critical understanding of how these media work, how they communicate, how they represent the world, and how they are produced and used...if we really want citizens to be media

literate, we need comprehensive, systematic and sustained programmes of media *education*". The potential for media education to improve the relationship between media and body image is highlighted by Gill (2008, p. 111) who found that "men who had reflected extensively upon the impact of the media and body culture, and positioned themselves as critical of it, were able to talk about the ways in which their own ideals and behaviours had been impacted". Thus, without acknowledging broader structures that influence meaning, it is easy to fall into simply contending the media is responsible for the production of meaning. This may be why Valkenburg and Peter (2013, p.237) argue that "only if we know which, when, how, and why individuals may be influenced by certain types of media will we be able to adequately target prevention and intervention strategies at them".

In the section below, I turn to another form of representation that has become increasingly prominent on social media. Much of the contemporary research on social media and body image looks at 'fitspiration' and 'body positive' representations. The section below examines these two phenomena in more detail. I begin with 'fitspiration'.

#### 1.4.2: 'Fit' and 'Fat' Bodies

##### **Fitspiration**

One recent social media trend is based on 'fitspiration' and stands as the next iteration of 'idealised' bodies (Cataldo, De Luca, Giorgetti, Cicconcelli, Bersani, Imperatori, & Corazza, 2021; Verrastro, Liga, Cuzzocrea, & Gugliandolo, 2020; Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016). The term combines the terms 'fit' and 'inspiration'. 'Fitspiration' has become increasingly popular on social media platforms (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017). 'Fitspiration' content typically includes fitness-related images that supposedly inspire people to develop healthy fitness and dietary practices. Despite a positive intention to encourage healthy living, the 'idealised' bodies and messages associated with 'fitspiration' are similar to those found on pro-eating disorder social media and web pages (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Consequently, this has incited concerns over the possible problematic effects of being exposed to 'fitspiration' content (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). Research suggests women who post 'fitspiration' images on social media typically have an increased risk of having or developing disordered eating practices (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017).

Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018) showed that the effect of viewing 'fitspiration' posts on body image dissatisfaction is mediated by appearance comparisons. This finding suggests that viewing 'fitspiration' posts may be harmful for body image because women compare their own appearance to the 'idealised' bodies in those images (Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2018). Similarly, a

correlational study found that viewing more ‘fitspiration’ posts on ‘Instagram’ was associated with greater body image dissatisfaction among women. Processes of internalisation moderated this relationship along with appearance comparison practices (Fardouly et al., 2017). This process has not yet been tested among men, even though close to 30% of ‘fitspiration’ content on social media focuses on men (Carrotte, Prichard, & Lim, 2017). The impact of ‘fitspiration’ images on men represents a fruitful area for future body image research.

A growing body of experimental research shows that exposure to ‘fitspiration’ images can lead to increases in body image dissatisfaction in women (Robinson, Prichard, Nikolaidis, Drummond, Drummond, & Tiggemann, 2017). However, this is not always the case. There is some evidence to suggest ‘fitspiration’ images can positively impact exercise motivation. Several studies have shown that women report being more motivated to exercise following exposure to ‘fitspiration’ images. However, this increased motivation has not improved viewers’ actual engagement in exercise practices (Robinson et al., 2017). External motivations, including appearance-based motivations, have been linked to reduced exercise participation among men and women (Ingledeu & Markland, 2008). In contrast, among both men and women, health-based exercise motivations, which are considered intrinsic motivators, have been linked with increased exercise participation (Ingledeu & Markland, 2008) and can help reduce body image dissatisfaction (DiBartolo, Lin, Montoya, Neal, & Shaffer, 2007). Alternatively, appearance-based motivations can diminish the positive relationships between exercise and higher body image satisfaction in women (Homan & Tylka, 2014). Therefore, the appearance focus of ‘fitspiration’ images is likely to increase the desire to exercise for appearance reasons. Thus, the exercise motivation generated may not translate into positive behaviour changes (Prichard, Kavanagh, Mulgrew, Lim, & Tiggemann, 2020; Fatt, Fardouly, & Rapee, 2019).

### **Body Positivity**

Social media can also offer promising opportunities for positive intervention surrounding the body image of women and men of all ages. Social media is thought to be unique from ‘traditional’ media as content can more easily include user-generated content. This feature helps allow for typically marginalised bodies by society’s dominant appearance standards to have a voice and be seen finally (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2021; Tylka, 2019; Bahr, 2018; Tylka, 2018; Pfeifer & Bongard, 2006).

Over the past three years (June 2018 – July 2021), the hashtag #bodypositive on ‘Instagram’ has grown by over 160% to 16.1m posts. Similar hashtags #bodypositivity has grown 320% to 8.1m, and #bopo posts have increased by 70% to 1.2m posts. In a recent content analysis of 640 ‘Instagram’ posts sampled from popular body positive accounts, Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John, and Slater (2019) found

that posts typically include images of diverse body sizes and appearances otherwise underrepresented in mainstream accounts. For example, the majority (94%) of bodies depicted in popular body positive posts ranged from 'normal' weight to 'obese', and just under half (40%) featured attributes that diverged from Western societal beauty ideals such as cellulite, stomach rolls, and stretch marks. Such posts can include a variety of quotes, images, and captions, ranging from selfies of bodies proudly displaying their 'larger' bodies with captions promoting bodily acceptance such as "it's possible to love your belly rolls, it's possible to have a favourite spot of cellulite", before and after photos of 'real' bodies encouraging awareness of the use of digital alteration in mainstream media, positive quotes like "you are more than a body, go show the world more", and encouraging people to focus on body functionality "it's about what your body can do not what it looks like". Body positivity content can help incite people to take their focus away from appearance and refocus on body acceptance (Tiggemann, 2019; Tylka, 2011), self-care (Rahimi-Ardabili, Reynolds, Vartanian, McLeod, & Zwar, 2018; Cook-Cottone, 2016; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010) and functionality (Alleva & Tylka, 2021; Alleva, Tylka, Tvan Oorsouw, Montanaro, Perey, Bolle, & Webb, 2020) – all of which are connected with positive body image. Importantly, the body positivity movement is not limited to women. Stevens and Griffiths (2020) found that "encouraging social media users to follow BoPo social media accounts may be a useful way to protect and enhance users' body image and emotional wellbeing" for both men and women (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2020; de Freitas, Jordan, Hughes, 2018; Cook-Cottone, 2015; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011).

When people meaningfully alter their behaviour in such a way that is aligned with body positive content, the positive impact of this content may be amplified. The work of Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, (2015) showed that in conjunction with viewing body positive content, women also changed, shaped, and altered their behaviours and environments in positive ways. They sought out interpersonal relationships with others who had positive body image, kept away from body-related talk i.e. they engaged in self-care practices like yoga, and avoided practices that could potentially be harmful (e.g., reading appearance-related magazines) to protect their physical health and psychological well-being. Furthermore, these individuals served as role models to others, particularly younger women, about the importance of maintaining a positive body image and engaging in self-care practices such as regular exercise and healthy eating (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). This is important because positive body image is not linked to disengagement in healthy activities, such as nutritious eating and self-care (Heinberg, Thompson, & Matzon, 2001).

Researchers exploring body positivity pages acknowledge findings are preliminary and that "there is still a lot that is unknown about the efficacy of the body positivity movement, in particular, and more

broadly how user-generated movements on social media can achieve their goals” (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2021, p. 2). One key issue that arises from these studies is the assumption that people can draw upon “the power of user-generated content” to “combat the negative effects of dominant beauty ideals” as well as mainstream media (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2021, p. 2). For instance, a recent study carried out by Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, and Slater (2019) indicated that women who viewed body positive images on ‘Instagram’ were found to have significantly higher body image satisfaction when compared with women who viewed images consistent with the ‘ideal’ body. However, such views suggest that social media can have totalising effects on body image and do not engage with the complexities, moderating variables, and contradictions that make up how people interpret body representations.

It is important to note that body positivity originated from the ‘fat’ liberation movement - a radical movement and position taken by ‘fat’ feminists, queer, and Black women in the 1960s (Senyonga & Luna, 2021). At its heart, the ‘fat’ liberation movement was intended to create a space for invisible and marginalised bodies to be given a voice and be seen. However, there are growing concerns that the ‘fat’ liberation movement has been de-politicised, co-opted by mainstream commercial interests, and re-framed within body positivity campaigns (Johansson, 2021), which often cover a narrow range of subject positions, particularly privileging cis-gendered, affluent white women (Darwin & Miller, 2021; Senyonga & Luna, 2021).

The dilution of the ‘fat’ liberation movement can be seen as a result of the convergence of healthism, neoliberalism, and consumerism, leading body size, shape, and weight to become symbolic of 'good' or 'bad' 'health' and become a reflection of moral, civic choice, and identity (Riley, Evans & Robson, 2018; Roberts, Weeks, & Leonard, 2018; Paraskeva, Lewis-Smith, & Diedrichs, 2017). Body positive campaigns such as 'This Girl Can' invite women to take personal ownership of their 'health' by toning, sculpting and working on their bodies through active leisure activities and consumer consumption - crucially, this is the antithesis of what the ‘fat’ liberation movement set out to achieve. Healthism and neoliberalism tie government policy and commercial interests to the desires of individuals because, in general, people desire to be considered 'good' people (Badr, 2022). 'Good health' represents a person's ability to manage risk through lifestyle choices, with their health reflecting their kind of person.

Additionally, within neoliberal and healthism frameworks, consumerism is a crucial mechanism for people to undertake this self-management (Lliffe & Manthorpe, 2020; Yang, Phung, Hughes, Sherwood, Harper, & Kelly, 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). The desire to understand oneself and be seen

by others as a 'good' person can drive attempts to purchase products and services to work on one's 'health', for example, by exercising regularly. This market-based leisure economy intensifies socio-economic status and inequality issues to further 'other' less affluent and privileged groups (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Within a competitive consumer culture, people rarely reach their bodily goals because the construction of the 'ideal' physique can frequently change, and definitions of 'health' can shift (Hunter, Kluck, Ramon, Ruff, & Dario, 2021). Thus, women, and increasingly men, may be pressured into developing a corporeal 'mirage' and be disappointed when they fail to do so. Further bodily anxieties may arise due to body positive messages pressuring them to 'bounce back' in the face of their inevitable failure and re-frame negative experiences in an optimistic way (Riley et al., 2022; Gill & Orgad, 2018). The commercialisation of body positivity is highlighted by Lazuka, Wick, Keel, and Harriger's (2020) content analysis of 246 'Instagram' images from 238 accounts with the #BodyPositivity hashtag found that 8% of images promoted weight loss, dieting, appearance modification, or commendation for being 'skinny'. They also found a significant degree of commercialisation where body positivity content was used to promote detox teas, restrictive diets, and cosmetic surgeries.

While there are concerns and issues surrounding how liberating body positivity movements may be, it does stand as a promising area of research. Body positivity helps illustrate the liberating impact media platforms such as social media can have on body image, which helps dispel the pervasive idea that social media is 'bad' for body image (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). While research on positive body image has helped the field progress, longitudinal research could be useful to investigate positive body image over the years to provide a clearer picture of its role in shaping body image.

### **Body Image and Functionality**

There has been a great deal of research exploring the connection between positive body image and function. Exercisers seem to be more satisfied with their bodies than nonexercisers, and exercise seems to improve body satisfaction. The reason for these effects may be that regular engagement in exercise helps to incite a functional view of the body, which is connected to positive body image (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010). The positive effect between exercise and body satisfaction can also be explained by increases in physical self-efficacy. For example, Burgess, Grogan, and Burwitz (2006) found that adolescent girls who took part in a dance intervention demonstrated immediate improvements in perceived body attractiveness and physical self-worth. However, it may not be exercising per se that matters. Perhaps even more important are people's motives for exercising.



The physical benefits of regular exercise (e.g., walking, aerobic exercise, weightlifting, sport) are well established for physical and psychological health (Nystoriak & Bhatnagar, 2018). Of course, exercise practices can be implemented by people in dysfunctional ways. It can be challenging to ascertain the point where exercise moves from being helpful to harmful. Within body image research, exercise is often regarded as being done for the primary purpose of reshaping one's body – whether the end goal is weight loss or muscle gain – to approximate the 'ideal' body (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006) more closely. However, while research has demonstrated that exercise can take many forms (Richardson, & Locks, 2014; Shilling, 2012; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009; Shilling, 2008; Shilling, 2005; Gimlin, 2002; Etcoff, 2000; Brumberg, 1998), it often fails to capture the complexity of people's exercise motivations<sup>6</sup> and the various reasons why bodies can be reflexively worked upon, modified, and enhanced (Thualagant, 2012).

There are growing calls for body image researchers to be more critical in probing people's motivations for engaging in exercise. For instance, Gattario and Lunde (2018, p. 128) argue: "whether appearance-related practices are good or bad, adaptive or maladaptive, or anywhere in between may depend on many different factors, such as the extent to which people base their self-worth on their appearance, the extent to which they engage and invest in appearance-related practices, which particular practices they engage in, and their motives for engaging in these". It is debatable whether anyone can judge accurately when it comes to adaptive versus maladaptive appearance investment because the line between the two can become easily blurred. In her book 'Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image', Blood (2004) criticized society and body image research for pathologizing women's perceptions of their bodies. She argued that the constant iteration of women's body image as harmful or flawed oversimplifies women's lived experiences of their bodies. Body image researchers risk reproducing the dissatisfaction that it wishes to prevent. Women risk being penalized no matter what they do: they are pressured to adhere to appearance norms, yet women who invest in their appearance risk being viewed as superficial and looked down upon. A societal discourse of women as "damned if they do and damned if they don't" do not help to promote empowerment and positive embodiment. I align with Pope, Pope, Phillips and Olivardia (2000, p. xv), who argue it is not about "questioning if it's good...to work out, eat a healthy diet, pay attention to grooming, and want

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to identify the core motivational factor(s) that may drive individuals to behave as they do. It is helpful to think of motivation as operating on a continuum ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2007). At the extrinsic end of the motivational continuum, where the smallest amount of autonomy is exercised, practices are seen as being motivated by the external world and are seen as the path leading to rewards or avoiding punishments. At this end of the continuum, "men may internalize a mesomorphic ideal because they perceive those people whose approval they seek (e.g., peers and sexual partners) believe it to be a desirable body shape" (Edwards, Tod, Molnar, & Markland, 2016: 64). Whereas at the intrinsic end of the motivational continuum, where the most significant amount of autonomy is exercised, practices are motivated by individualized consequences determined by one's personal values. At the most autonomous end of the continuum, "men may internalize a monomorphic idea because they believe it reflects their own self-chosen values, such as living healthily or demonstrating competence" (Edwards et al., 2016: 64).

to look their best. But the need to push beyond what is healthy and reasonable can have a devastating impact on emotional and physical development". Making this distinction is important; otherwise, the risk is run of wrongly labelling positive and health-enhancing practices as problematic.

Despite burgeoning research on positive body image and functionality, there remain flaws in this area. Researchers have argued for more in-depth examinations of body functionality as it is experienced amongst people with disabilities and other body-related differences (e.g., in size, in gender presentation, in age, and living with pain and chronic health conditions; Webb, Wood-Barcalow, and Tylka, 2015). A more complex story of the relationship between functionality and body image emerges when research is focused on disabled people's experiences. For example, some studies show that for participants with physical disabilities that impact organ function, a focus on body functionality may be a negative experience (i.e., bladder and bowel; Bailey, Gammage, van Ingen, & Dittor, 2016). Participants with disabilities also report incorporating and not incorporating (Bailey, Gammage, van Ingen, 2017) functionality into their overall definition of body image. Consequently, Thomas, Warren-Findlow, Webb, Quinlan, Laditka, and Reeve (2019, p. 89) argue that body functionality research "should recognize what some bodies cannot do, and that many bodies function differently".

Moreover, the notion of body projects is a popular way of thinking about the 'identity functions' performed by the body. Bodily functions can be a method for expressing the self and a source of 'capital' for the individual. However, the notion of body projects can be overly voluntaristic as it can fail to recognise that certain bodily functions and reconstructions are not equally open to all, particularly to disabled and racialised bodies (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005). Progress is being made in providing some marginalised bodies with safe and inclusive access to spaces to 'work' on their bodies. For instance, Scrivner's (2022) work showcases how body diversity efforts have prompted more significant numbers of fitness providers to modify spaces and facilities to welcome a more diverse clientele. Scrivner (2022) investigated how individuals engage in physical activity in a body-inclusive space. The author observed how different social actors could actively challenge and subvert unreachable 'ideal' body standards.

### **Inconclusive Results**

Despite there being a large amount of literature that argues for social media having particular 'effects' on body image, i.e., social media being 'bad' or 'good', many studies have not been able to provide clear-cut results (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Botta, 1999). This is understandable given the multifaceted nature of body image and social media.

Contemporary theoretical perspectives emphasise that (social) media influence involves a complex transaction between media content and what the individual brings to media regarding needs, personality factors, and social situational constraints (Slater & Tiggermann, 2010). To grapple with social media and body image, and engage with the variety of variables reflexively shaping people's relationships, may require particular theories to be integrated and built around specific populations. Such an idea is not new. Nearly three decades ago, Livingstone (1996, p. 6) contended: "given the persistent difficulties, both conceptual and empirical, with grand theories of media hegemony... it may be more productive to build theory from studies of particular media as used by particular audiences or users under particular circumstances". Promisingly, there is a growing recognition that body image researchers need to be more precise in their approach to social media. For instance, Burnette, Kwitowski, and Mazzeo (2017, p. 116) contend that body image researchers need to specify the social media pages more clearly "participants visit, the sites on which they have accounts, the types of online activities in which they typically engage (e.g., read posts by friends, read news articles, and post pictures), and the frequency with which they engage in specific activities, such as general posting and posting pictures". Broad comments about 'social media use', 'sharing', 'liking' and 'posting' are likely to be useless without specification. As Valkenburg and Peter, (2013, p. 234) helpfully observe, "only by formulating clear hypotheses about which individuals are particularly susceptible to the effects of media are we able to specify the boundary conditions for media effects". Thus, as "there can be no 'pure' theory of media since media are always particular, historically embedded ways of communicating information and meaning" (Couldry, 2012, p. 6), advancing research on social media and body image will require continuous updating and detailed accounts of particular social media practices to be provided and explored. The constant evolving of social media is highlighted by Lucibello, Vani, Koulanova, DeJonge, Ashdown-Franks, and Sabiston's (2021) recent content analysis of 800 'Instagram' posts with the #quarantine15 hashtag, which was centered on the fear of gaining weight (i.e., 15 pounds) during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Curiously, this is a reappropriation of the term 'freshman 15', which is a common reference to the fear of weight gain during the first year of an undergraduate's university experience.

Inconclusive or contradictory results may not necessarily suggest failures in the research but reflect the complex, multidimensional, and fluid nature of these two phenomena. Each research finding may represent a fragment of this relationship being uncovered and explored.

## 1.5: Conclusion

Body image research has developed and diversified markedly over its lifespan. However, there is still more research to be done. Despite critical psychologists opening up the topic of body image and its influences, much of this work still remains siloed – a problem that has plagued body image research. Due to the prevalent methodological shortcomings across the body image field, there is a need for a new wave of body image research to be conducted that builds on the critical and qualitative research that illustrates how body image is a complex, multidimensional, and fluid process as opposed to a static product. Furthermore, body image research could benefit greatly from drawing on contemporary Screen and Media scholarship to produce research that more readily emphasises the complexity of social media and how people can simultaneously be users of and used by social media in ways that can both help and hinder body image. There is a growing need to position and understand social media in a more critical and holistic way.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

### 2.1: Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks surrounding the body and body image that guided this study. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides a brief outline and critique of body image research and its progress over time to increasingly acknowledge the complexity of the body and body image. This section paves the way for the second section that presents the 'Critical Body Image Model' and outlines why it is a valuable addition to the body image field. I will argue that approaching the relationship between social media and body image through a theoretical model informed by Critical Realism will lead to a much richer and more in-depth analysis. The 'Critical Body Image Model' will help to engage with the scale and 'weight' of these two topics more readily while touching upon the broader social, cultural, political, and historical events and situations they are embedded in and reflexively shaped by.

## 2.2: Deconstructing Body Image

This section briefly outlines the history of body image research and how it has progressed and developed over time. The basis of the outline centres on psychological research as it represents the lion-share of the research done. Throughout the review, I critique some of the beliefs and assumptions that have guided some of the psychological work.

Body image research is emergent from clinical practice beginning in the 1900s. Neurologists and neuropsychologists such as Bonnier (1905), Pick (1922), and Head (1926) were preoccupied with researching and treating cognitive injuries, and the way these impairments impacted patients' perceptions of their bodies. These researchers were fascinated by the likes of 'anosognosia' a disorder where individuals became unaware of a large part of their body; 'autotoppagnosia' a condition where individuals cannot discern the left and right sides of their body, and 'phantom limb', a phenomenon where amputees experience sensory feelings from their missing limb.

German neuropsychologist Paul Schilder was responsible for moving body image research beyond the exclusive domains of neurology and created the first multidimensional conceptualisation of body image. According to Cash and Smolak (2011, p. 4), "Schilder presciently argued for a biopsychosocial approach to body image emphasising the need to examine its neurological, psychological, and sociological elements". Schilder was a firm believer that both "conscious and unconscious processes contributed to the total image one has of one's own body and entertained such contributing factors as emotions, attitudes, wishes, and social relationships" (Thompson et al., 1999).

With body image being 'freed' from the constraints of neurology, a number of other theorists, primarily those coming from a psychodynamic paradigm, began to draw from the work of Freud, Adler and Jung, and researched body image from a psychological perspective (Secord & Jourard, 1953). One of the most notable researchers to emerge was North American psychologist Fisher, who, along with his colleague Cleveland, put forward body boundaries as a fundamental body image dimension. These ideas emanated from early clinical work with projective techniques and observations showing boundary differences in inkblot perceptions for patients with diverse psychosomatic symptoms. However, cognitive psychologist Franklin Shontz was very critical of this work. He argued that moving from a neurological to a psychodynamic paradigm had removed the body from body image research (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Shontz is generally credited with pioneering body image research away from psychodynamics and refocusing it on self-perceptions of appearance and body image. Shontz (1969) assessed the accuracy individuals had in perceiving the size of their bodies. He noted that individuals

had greater accuracy in perceiving the width of non-body objects as compared to their own bodies or body parts. He argued that there were gender-specific patterns of over and underestimation, finding that women were more inclined to overestimate the width of their waist as compared to men. This finding was attributed to women's desire to fit normative appearance ideals (Shontz, 1974).

Body image research gained academic and social interest by assessing clinical populations and eating disorders. While Thompson et al. (1999) assert that Lasegue (1873) was the first individual to comment on the relevance of body image dissatisfaction to anorexia nervosa, German psychiatrist Hilde Bruch (1962) was the first to outline a theoretical relationship between the two. Bruch argued that the real issue with anorexia was “not the severity of the manipulation per se...but rather the distortion in body image associated with it” (1962, p. 187). She contended that body image dissatisfaction was the single most pathognomic aspect of anorexia and that any improvement would only be short-lived “without a corrective change in body image” (Bruch, 1962, p. 189).

Bruch's work played a significant role in influencing the next generation of body image researchers. Slade and Russell (1973) sought to build upon Bruch's theory and link body size perception with anorexia. The pair are responsible for a landmark piece of research that found anorectics overestimate their bodies' size. The experiment had anorexic participants adjust the distance of two light beams in a dark room to represent the perceived width across four body parts: the face, chest, waist at the narrowest point, and hips at the widest point. The researchers compared the body site estimations to actual body site measures obtained by callipers. Findings showed that the anorectic participants more reliably overestimated their size compared to 'normal' control subjects. A secondary estimation task of an inanimate object, a vase, was also included to ascertain if anorectics' inability to perceive their body size accurately was due to broader perceptual disturbances. It was found that the anorectic women were able to perceive the width of the vase accurately but not their own bodies (see also Bowden, Touyz, Rodriguez, Hensley, & Beumont, 1989; Halmi, Casper, Eckert, Goldberg, & Davis, 1979; Garfinkel, Moldofsky, Garner, Stancer, & Coscina 1978). Thus, Slade and Russell (1973) argued the anorectic women had developed a means to identify and measure perceptual disturbance and, in turn, clarified a causal factor of anorexia. These results were reproduced by other researchers (Thompson & Spana, 1991; Cash & Brown, 1987; Garner, Garfinkel, & Bonato, 1987), and consequently, body image dissatisfaction came to represent one of the diagnostic criteria that make up anorexia nervosa as defined in the ‘Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’.

As a result of Slade and Russell's (1973) work, research conducted over the remainder of the 1970s and early 1980s was largely dedicated to body size estimation. Research during this time expanded to include obese individuals and those suffering from bulimia nervosa. The overarching thought was that perceived overestimation of body size was constitutive of eating disorders and that any subjective dissatisfaction of obese individuals was due to their abnormal size. It was reasoned that body image satisfaction in obese individuals would improve with weight loss. This meant the role subjective attitudes had on body image was by and large ignored. However, research was beginning to emerge showing that not all anorectics overestimated their body size (see also Sunday, Halmi, Werdann, & Levey, 1992; Touyz, Beumont, Collins, McCabe, & Jupp, 1984). A review of the body size estimation research by Hsu and Psych (1982, p. 306) found that "some of the normals overestimated their body width at least as much as the anorectics". Research showing that 'normal weight' individuals without eating disorders also reported body image dissatisfaction suggested that overestimating one's body could not be labelled a unique phenomenon among anorectics. Crisp and Kalucy (1974) discovered that 'normal' women overestimated their body size, albeit slightly less than anorectics. Whereas Button, Fransella, and Slade (1977) found no substantial difference between body size estimations of 'normal' women and anorectics. Thompson and Thompson (1986) discovered that 'normal' college women overestimated their body size. A compelling case was being put forward, suggesting that body image dissatisfaction afflicted more than those with eating disorders and obesity. These findings lead to much controversy regarding the methodology and legitimacy of body size estimation research, and understandably so (Gardner & Brown, 2014). In body size estimation research, individuals' desire to be 'thinner' or more 'muscular' may reflect what they judge to be an acceptable answer to researchers' questions. For example, when using the silhouette drawings, research participants may assume the mid-point is the average and considered 'ideal' (Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Gardner, Friedman, & Jackson, 1998). Participants may not necessarily have a body 'ideal' they aspire to; instead, they may be providing an answer they perceive to be 'correct'. Consequently, researchers may unduly label people as being body image dissatisfied (Gardner & Brown, 2010; Thompson & Stice, 2001).

Several lines of research converged in the 1980s, which led to a lack of interest in perceptual body image (Gardner, 2011). Firstly, body image researchers began moving away from researching individuals with eating disorders as there was greater recognition of subjective body image dissatisfaction across the broader population (Tiggemann, 2004). Secondly, researchers noted that size overestimation and body image dissatisfaction were not highly correlated, and subjective unhappiness with one's appearance was deemed to be a better predictor of body image experiences (Heinberg, 2001). Thirdly, it was found that perceptual appearance judgements were not static but



were influenced by numerous contextual factors. For instance, Thompson and Dolce (1989) found that estimates of body size were larger if participants were asked to make an 'affective' rating (i.e. how large do you feel?) versus a 'cognitive' rating (i.e. how large do you think you look?). Research also found that body size estimations were impacted by food consumption during body image testing, different lighting variations, and the types of clothing worn by participants (Thompson et al., 1999). Recognising that different situations can shape body image experiences in different ways was an important step toward engaging with body image as a complex, multidimensional, and fluid phenomenon. In particular, it led to more attention being placed on the role of social and cultural factors – particularly media images of 'ideal' bodies - in shaping individuals' body image experiences (Grogan, 2017; Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005).

### **The Sociocultural Model**

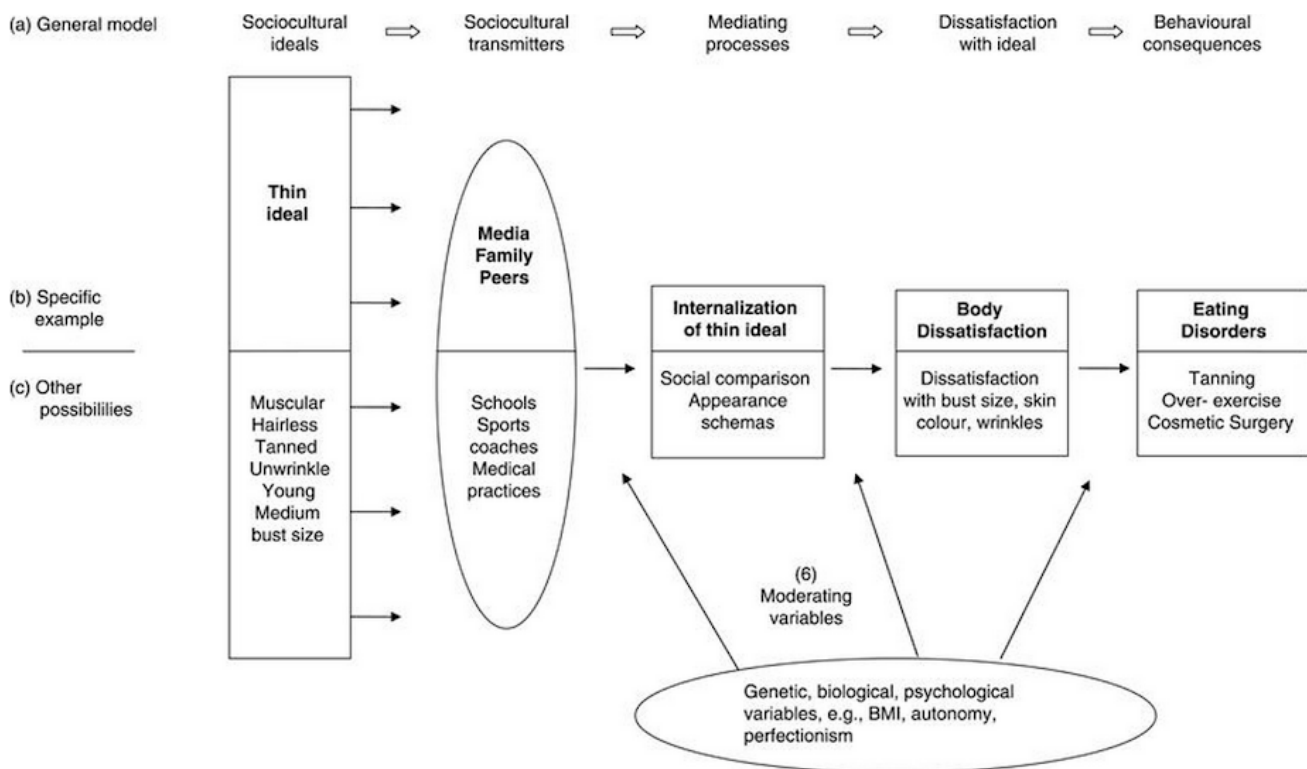
A number of theories have been put forward to account for the growing 'idealisation' and desirability of 'thin' and 'muscular' body types and, conversely, embedding the notion that 'fat' bodies are undesirable. Views can be broadly broken into two perspectives: internal and external (Cash, 2008). On the one hand, some biologists and evolutionary psychologists have suggested that body preferences emanate from internal and pre-social drives (Swami, 2011). It is believed that 'ideal' bodies are dominantly preferred across Western societies because a 'slender' and 'fat-free' body is supposedly healthier than a 'overweight' body. The most prominent means of assessing the connection between body weight and health is body mass index (BMI). BMI is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by squared height in meters. The 'acceptable', 'healthy' range is 18.5-24.9, overweight is 25-29.9 and over 30 is obese (Grogan, 2017). However, there are disagreements over the legitimacy of the BMI scale. Grogan (2017, p. 18) makes the point that:

The most parsimonious explanation of the data as they stand at present is that obesity may represent a health risk to some individuals, but links between moderate overweight (BMI 25-29.9) and health are unclear. The belief that slenderness is healthier than moderate overweight is not borne out by medical research...this suggests that social pressures to be slender are based more on cultural aesthetic preferences than on health concerns.

The precarious connection between health with 'ideal' bodies has given further weight external, sociocultural perspectives. Theorists who have researched social and cultural variances in body preferences across different historical epochs have tended to suggest biology, while not being

irrelevant, only plays a small role in the preference of 'ideal bodies' (Frederick & Reynolds, 2022). As such, it is typically believed that the idealisation of 'ideal' bodies is primarily learned (Grogan, 2006).

Figure 1: The Sociocultural Model



Tiggemann, M. (2012). Sociocultural perspectives on body image (as cited in Cash, T. F (2012)). *Encyclopaedia of body image and human appearance*. Academic Press.

Proponents of the sociocultural model (Figure 1) argue that social and cultural body standards stressing physical beauty and appearance that are accepted and internalised by most, but impossible for many to achieve, ultimately leave people dissatisfied with their bodies when they feel that they do not measure up to these standards (Tiggemann, 2011; Cash, 2008; Grogan 2006; Cohane & Pope Jr, 2001). Despite the 'ideal' body being an unreasonable standard, it is still unduly internalised and becomes the reference point for many women and men to compare themselves against. The transmission of 'idealised' body standards has been attributed to many influences, including family, peer groups, and the media (Cash, 2008). Of these three influential forces, the media are regarded as the most pervasive and powerful (Slater & Tiggemann, 2014). It is typically argued that the hyper-saturation of 'ideal' body representations in contemporary society's media is a core reason that so

many women and men internalise it as a normative representation of what a body should look like (Casale, Gemelli, Calosi, Giangrasso, & Fioravanti, 2021; Huang, Peng, & Ahn, 2021; Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989). These results are primarily put down to processes of self-comparison and objectification, where the discrepancies between the participant and 'ideal' bodies are cognitively identified (Grogan, 2017; Lewis & Cachelin, 2001).

The influence of social and cultural influences on body image experiences are also highlighted in the variability of perceived body image concerns across women and men. Historically, it was believed body image dissatisfaction was a women-only affliction because of the high rates of women with eating disorders. Such an idea is no longer regarded as accurate (Delderfield, 2018). This was in part due to studies suggesting that in relation to women: men had a greater sense of body image satisfaction, were less concerned with body fat, even if they were objectively over-weight, and that nine out of ten anorexics and bulimics were believed to be women (Leon, Carroll, Chernyk, & Finn, 1985; Pope Jr, Hudson, Yurgelun-Todd, & Hudson, 1984; Pyle, Mitchell, Eckert, Halvorson, Neuman, & Goff, 1983; Halmi, Falk, & Schwartz, 1981). These findings led some researchers to label body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders as a predominantly women affliction. Consequently, some body image researchers of the time saw no real need to study men's body image in any great depth (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). This is thought to have occurred because scales and "questionnaires aimed at women tend to be designed to access desires to be thinner, and concern about lower body 'fatness', whereas men's body concerns tend to centre on wanting to gain muscle from the waist up" (Grogan, 2017, p. 85). However, over the past 30 years, an expansive range of research exploring men's body image and embodiment has emerged. Men face increasing pressure to conform to the cultural 'ideal' of a 'lean', 'well-toned', 'muscular' build, which is reflected in dominant sociocultural representations (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986). Action toys (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999) and centrefolds (Stratton, Donovan, Bramwell, & Loxton, 2015; Leit, Pope, & Grey, 2001) have become more 'muscular', and naked men's bodies have featured more frequently in women's magazines. There is evidence that the cultural norm for the 'ideal' body has become increasingly 'leaner' and 'muscular'. For example, one study found that 'playgirl' models increased muscularity across the 1970s to the 1990s, with some bodies exceeding the upper limit of muscularity attainable without anabolic steroids (Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001).

While the sociocultural model is best thought of as a heuristic or conceptual model providing a general point of entry for investigating the dense field of body image (Girard, Chabrol, & Rodgers, 2018; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Tiggemann, 2004), there are some body image researchers who use the sociocultural model to provide an overarching framework for understanding body image experiences.

This point is evident from the binary findings which come from the limited and partial ways researchers can often conceptualise and analyse the relationship between social media and body image (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). Binary and limited conclusions are concerning, considering the field has matured to recognise that particular populations and individuals experience their body image in different ways, at different times, in different situations (Jankowski, Diedrichs, Williamson, Christopher, Harcourt, 2016; Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Hurd, 2000; Gardner et al., 1998). As such, the sociocultural model represents a significant step in moving the field forward and recognising that external, social, and cultural influences can shape body image in powerful ways; however I believe its linear structure makes it ill-suited to frame and truly capture the rich diversity of meanings and experiences associated with the body, body image, and social media (Hutchinson, Rapee, & Taylor, 2010; Gill, 2008; Grogan et al., 2004). In the section below, I outline how the sociocultural model can still problematically suggest that 'ideal' body types have a deterministic and totalising influence on body image and ignores how multidimensional influences fluidly weave together to shape body image experiences in complicated, fragmented, and often contradictory ways.

### **Situating the 'Ideal' Body**

The construction of the sociocultural model with 'ideal' bodies positioned at the front, which all consequent body image experiences eminent from, can problematically set the desirability of 'thin' and 'muscular' body types as having a uni-directional and totalising influence on people's body image. Such a view presents a narrow conceptualisation of contemporary society and ignores how the body is inscribed with various social, cultural, and political meanings which are historically situated and often highly fluid, fragmented, and contradictory (Blackman, 2020; Lupton, 2014; Lupton, 2013; Synnott, 2002). It is important to note that the desirability of 'thin' and 'muscular' body types are not shared by all. Contemporary society is a time where "multiple and contradictory discourses circulate, constructing work on the body as a route to living a good life, as something toxic and unattainable, and as something shallow and unimportant" (Riley et al., 2022, p. 12). There are also examples of different cultures and sub-cultures that have their own 'ideal' body type. There is research which showcases that in some cultures an 'ideal' body is what could be considered by some as a 'fat' body. Gilman (2004) makes the point that 'fat' "is a category, and categories are always self-limiting to groups that are clearly defined. Thus it can be defined by both gender and nationality in different ways at different times and in different circumstances". This is highlighted in the literature regarding New Zealand Māori and Pacific Island nations and positive attitudes toward 'bigger' bodies (McCabe, Mavoia, Ricciardelli, Schultz, Waqa, & Fotu, 2011). The variability of what constitutes an 'ideal' body places the sociocultural model in a precarious situation. It illustrates the importance of acknowledging

that what is considered 'ideal' will likely vary across individuals, cultures and sub-cultures (Cameron, Mandville-Anstey, & Coombs, 2019; Givskov & Petersen, 2018; Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Jones, 2012; Boero, 2009; Becker, 2004).

### **Fighting For and Against 'Fat'**

The sociocultural model also problematically positions 'thin-ideal' bodies as being dominant without providing critical analysis as to why. For instance, one crucial reason the 'ideal' body may be considered socially and culturally desirable may actually come from what it is not - 'fat' (Himanshu, Kaur, & Singla, 2020; Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). There is a rich history surrounding the discursive construction of the 'fat' body. What it means to have a 'fat' body in contemporary society is to embody socially, culturally, and politically stigmatized identity. Public discourse often equates being 'fat' as being something to be ashamed of, an affliction that must be hidden away (Erdman-Farrell, 2011). However, 'fatness' was once a mark of superiority; to be 'fat' was something that only a select few experienced<sup>7</sup>.

In the early 1800's, to have a 'fat' body was once a prerogative of the few as it required both wealth, meaning one had sufficient food and physical leisure time, and health, meaning one was free from flesh wasting diseases such as tuberculous and malnutrition, to add such formidable size to one's frame (Harrison, Rowlinson, & Hill, 2016; Erdman Farrell, 2011). A corpulent body was a symbol of privilege, affluence, and high status - a sign for what the labouring masses did not have. To have such a big body meant that one was not subjected to the same working and living condition of the lower classes and body size came to embody the social positioning where one was placed thus representing wealth, prosperity, and all that the lower classes aspired to be. This is highlighted by the media representations of the time that show 'fat' bodies in positions of power, surrounded with lavish things and living a life of freedom and leisure. Furthermore, the middle-class was more susceptible to flesh

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<sup>7</sup> The meaning of corpulence changed as economic and social changes of the 19th century began to take hold. 'Fatness' began to take on new meaning, toward the end of the 19th century the 'fat' body was articulated with discourses of greed and corruption within government and economic structures. As the working class started to get used to working in factories and began to make a decent and regular income, food production became more reliable (crops were not as likely to be washed away in severe weather events leaving societies in a famine due to industrial and indoor food production methods), better preserved (fridge and preservatives), and better transported (cars and trains) meant that food was in an abundance. Medical advancement was continuously being made which meant ailing bodies were able to be treated living longer. This was because in a new time where a greater majority of people had access to money, food, and leisure time (weekends verse working on farms), fat could more readily be added to one's frame. These changes lead to a change in the physical bodies of the working class. They got 'fat' which meant the 'fat' upper class weren't so special anymore. This shift was highlighted in the way bodies were represented within the media where 'fatness' was a mark of stupidity and the unnecessary occupation of space. While there was a belief that business growth, free markets, and trade would lead to prosperity, many reformers, critics, and ordinary people began to recognise that unimpeded business interests would allow some to grow 'fat' - figuratively and literally - while others would be left to starve and grow thinner and thinner. However, this began to change due to the burgeoning middle class. With the movement from agrarian to industrial work a greater propensity of the population began to earn more money at a reliable rate doing less physically intensive and calorie burning work in factories. This coupled with the mass production of food, the addition of factory processed foods, and the ability to better keep and distribute food around the community culminated in the 19th century where people's waist bands began to expand and with it the meaning of 'fat' began to change.

eating diseases of the time such as tuberculous and malnutrition due to poor living conditions and lack of resources for medical treatment. Therefore, body size came to serve as a metaphor. People in the middle-class lived precarious lives and did not have the leisure time, the luxury of excess food or access to the appropriate living conditions to produce a corpulent body; while those select few occupying the upper class lived in an environment that catered to adding such formidable size to one's frame (Erdman-Farrell, 2011). As such, 'fatness' came to represent an individual's social positioning and by extension their level of affluence and wealth. It was not until the 19th century that 'fat' came to be known as a 'mark of shame'. Now, a leaner body, the very body type that was once a mark of the working middle class, came to be the ideal. To have a lean body showed the rest of the world that in an environment where you had access to every spoil of life you were able to show restraint and diligently manage yourself.

The 'mark of shame' associated with the 'fat' body is now typically framed in discussions about body size, weight, and health (Lung, Jan, Tan, Killedar, & Hayes, 2019; Morris, 2019; Sobal & Maurer, 2017; Latner & Stunkard, 2003). Late modern health structures across New Zealand and Australia, as well as the world, are becoming increasingly concerned with individual and population health (Jeske, 2021; Bomberg, Birch, Endenburg, German, Neilson, Seligman, & Day, 2017; Keenan & Stapleton, 2010). These concerns are most often spoken about in relation to the 'obesity epidemic'. Across the world, concerns over health and obesity rates are increasingly dominating popular and academic discourse. The World Health Organization (2022, n.p) defines health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" and obesity is defined "as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health". A defining aspect in the fight against 'fat' centres on the supposed epidemic levels it has reached (Olds, 2009). According to Angier (2000, p.1) "the dreaded obesity epidemic that is everywhere in the news is not restricted to any race, creed, ethnicity or slice of the socioeconomic supersized pie".

Problematically, 'health' is often conflated with physical appearance, body size, and BMI (Monks, Costello, Dare, & Reid-Boyd, 2021; Stewart & Ogden, 2021). Women and men can experience considerable pressure to maintain a bodily aesthetic that is consistent with the cultural 'ideal' in order to appear 'healthy' (Liimakka, 2014). Conflating 'health' with appearance may play a role in encouraging people to engage in harmful body modification practices such as dysfunctional eating, dieting, and exercise routines (Prichard et al., 2020; McCreary, Hildebrandt, Heinberg, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007) or the use of anabolic steroids (Hilkens, Cruyff, Woertman, Benjamins, & Evers, 2021) to manage their physical weight, shape, and appearance, all in the thinly veiled name of 'health' (Monks et al., 2021). This concern with 'health' and 'obesity' is readily apparent on social media where

health and fitness content has become a regular feature. A myriad of government departments, health researchers and organizations, along with fitness magazines, centres, and professionals have taken to social media to promote content about the beneficial impacts exercise and diet can have on one's 'health' (Chou, Prestin, & Kunath, 2014). As a result, late modernity has been labelled a 'healthism' society.

The term healthism was coined by Robert Crawford (1980) to describe the growing preoccupation with personal health as a primary – often the primary – focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of life styles. Healthism represents a particular way of viewing the 'obesity epidemic' and is characteristic of the new health consciousness and movements. Healthism situates the problem of health and disease at the level of the individual. Solutions are formulated at that level as well. According to Lupton (2012, p. 39) healthy "citizens are essential to the modern neoliberal state because they are productive and entrepreneurial. Their continued good health is required both because they contribute to the workings of the state as productive citizens and because they do not place an economic burden on the resources of the state by becoming ill and requiring health care". Neoliberal governments depend upon their citizens adopting their injunctions voluntarily, rather than relying on coercive or punitive approaches to maintaining social order and facilitating prosperity.

It is essential to acknowledge how the beliefs and attitudes held toward the body have altered over time. Changing bodily beliefs illustrate the issues with simplistically positioning 'thin' and 'muscular' 'ideal' body types as being 'idealised' because they are 'sexy, or 'desirable' (Tiggemann, 2004). Such explanations do not go far enough in outlining why they are 'ideal', and they run the risk of ignoring the rich array of conflicting and shifting meanings the body can be imbued with (Gill, 2008; Grogan et al., 2004).

### **Persistent Research Problems**

Research exploring the relationship between social media and body image is similar to historical methods in that it is often informed by simplistic ideas surrounding the conceptualisation of the body, body image, and social media (Riley et al., 2022). The majority of studies examining connections between social media use, body image, and related issues have been experimental, quantitative laboratory studies that examine whether exposure to 'ideal' bodies on social media increases body (dis)satisfaction or associated concerns (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2004). These types of designs, in which participants are randomly assigned to conditions, are often believed to offer conclusive evidence regarding media effects on psychological outcomes. Researchers present one group of

participants with static images of ‘thin’ and ‘toned’ women or ‘lean’ and ‘muscular’ men and another with ‘average-size’, ‘oversize’ or non-body images. These two groups then subjectively rate their current state of body image (dis)satisfaction (Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010; Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004).

While experiments of this type contribute significantly to the understanding of social media’s influence on body image, research findings are still siloed and often include a level of artificiality that limits their external validity (Monks et al., 2021). Findings from laboratory studies may benefit from being combined with results obtained from qualitative studies in which participants report their actual social media use and complexities surrounding how they meaningfully understand different types of bodies and how that may, or may not, map onto how they experience their own embodiment (Webb et al., 2019; Livingstone, 2013; Livingstone, 1998b).

Calls have been made for the consolidation of body image theories and findings for decades. Fisher (1990, p. 3) made the comment that branches of body image research thrive in “splendid isolation” as if the others did not exist. He went on to remark that, “cross-references by researchers in different areas are, at best, sparse”. Some ten years later the same critique was levelled by Cash and Pruzinsky (2002, p. 8) who contended “there has been little attempt to integrate diverse lines of thinking and research on body image...divergent theoretical positions and lines of research are seldom integrated”. Reflecting on the trajectory of body image research, the field has slowly opened up and diversified to deal with the complexities, multidimensional, and fluid nature of the body and body image. However, there is still progress to be made. As Jarman et al. (2022, p. 225) state, different research methods and theories have “provided insights for the body image research field, yet [are] insufficient in isolation to fully capture the nuance and complexity of social media experiences”. In an effort to acknowledge and engage with bodies being multiply situated, and bring together siloed areas of research, I have created the ‘Critical Body Image Model’. I argue it represents a valuable next step in progressing the field. In the following section I discuss the model in more detail.



## 2.3: Critical Body Image Model

This section outlines in more detail the theoretical and Critical Realist informed base of the 'Critical Body Image Model' (Figure 2). I have drawn upon Critical Realism because I believe it will help the field move beyond existing body image theories and frameworks that are often limited, and reflect particular disciplinary perspectives centring on a limited range of causal influences. A Critical Realist framework can help emphasise, frame and describe body image's inherent complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity because it takes an approach to social life that seeks to avoid being trapped within the silos of single disciplinary views, acknowledges how causal influences can shift between facilitating experiences of liberation and constraint, and recognises that the construction of knowledge is transitive and open to being challenged and changed as new information comes to light (Thorpe, Brice, & Clark, 2021; Rousseau, Rodgers, & Eggermont, 2020; Haigh, Kemp, Bazeley, & Haigh, 2019; Price, 2014).

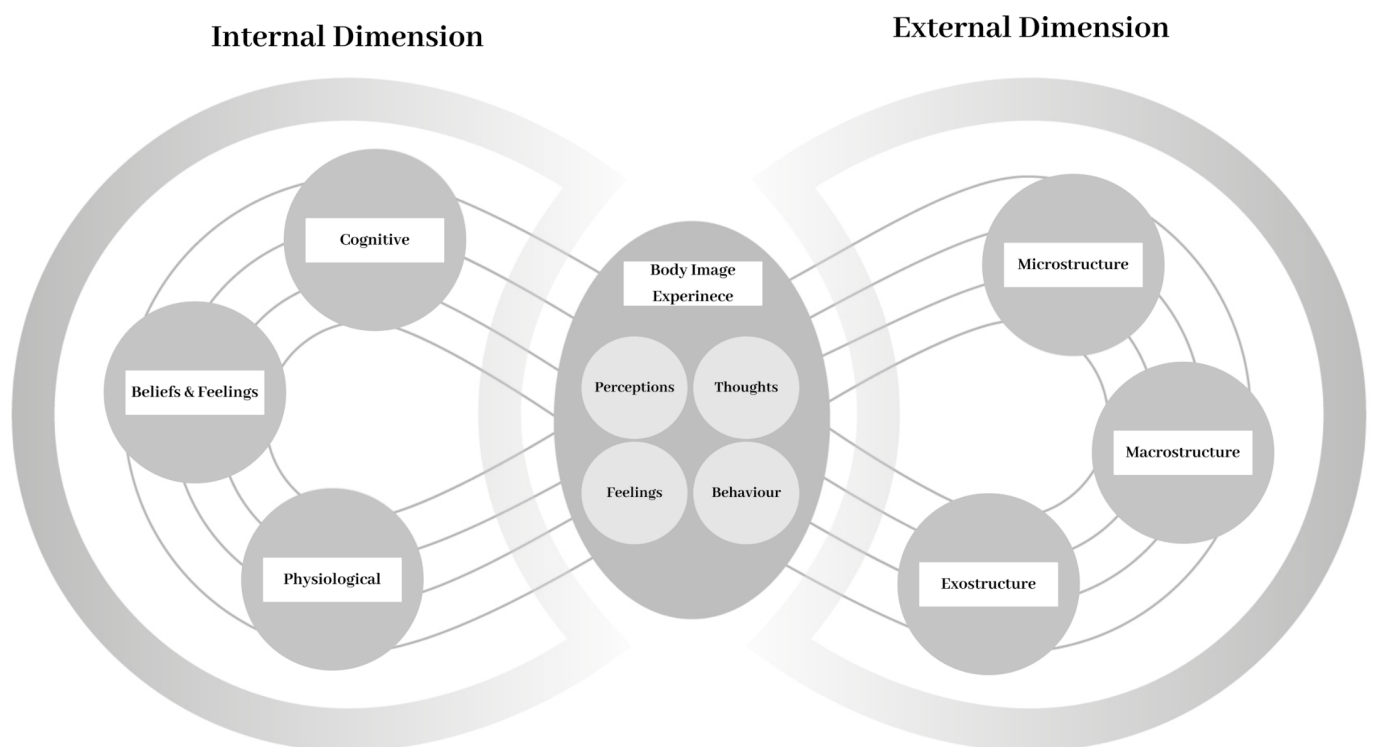
This framework emphasises that body image exists within a multidimensional, fluid, and open system consisting of various influential forces that can shape body image experiences (Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012). Within this framework, multiple influences are present, the types of influences are wide-ranging, each influence may subsume or be subsumed within other influences, and a vast array of influences can be activated and in play moment by moment (Price, 2014). It is essential not to fall into structural determinism because the relative force of particular influences shaping body image experiences may shift between structure and agency (Boero & Mason, 2020). People can be knowingly and unknowingly shaped by variously operating influential structures in constraining or liberating ways. Still, in particular circumstances, they also have the agency to intensify, re-frame, resist, challenge, and change those structures.

According to Haigh et al. (2019) the primary purpose of Critical Realist research is for the theorising of explanations for themes and recurrent relationships between phenomena, variability in such relationships or the absence of a relationship altogether in phenomena that have been observed or experienced. Using the 'Critical Body Image Model' will help to answer the research questions and explore and consider how the interplay of different influences, and the relationships formed within specific contexts, may enable or hinder the development of a positive body image. It is important to note that while the 'Critical Body Image Model' can help bring together a siloed area of research, the model is not exhaustive and cannot encompass all potential influences shaping body image. It is unlikely that any model will ever capture all of the potential influences and relationships that can shape people's body image. As such, I recognise that the 'Critical Body Image Model' is limited, and

aspects of it will need to be extended, modified, or rejected if it is used to explore the body image experiences of different individuals and populations embedded within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts.

Specifically, the structure of the 'Critical Body Image Model' draws from Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2005) 'Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis', which is partly informed by Critical Realism, and takes an ontological view of life as an 'open system'. Critical Realism (Collier, 1994) puts forward that social reality is an open system made up of the interconnecting and constantly shifting relationships between structures, practices, and events (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2005). This open system can be fluid and dynamic but also held in place through power's constraining and constructive nature.

Figure 2: The Critical Body Image Model



Structures can be thought of as the relatively stable and long-standing background conditions of social life that include, but are not limited to, the biological, economic, social, psychological, semiological, and linguistic. Structures are important as they outline a set of possibilities or rules concerning the general form social life can take. The biological structure outlines many biological elements responsible for specific bodily functions necessary for everyday life. For instance, the job of the

muscular element is to enable physical movement through muscles. In contrast, the circulatory element enables blood, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nutrients to be moved about the body.

On the other hand, the social structure can ascribe the body to a range of diverse meanings. A particular body within a certain culture may represent group identity, social cohesion, and economic and educational positions (Synnott, 2002). The relationship between what is structurally possible and what actually happens, that is to say, the relationship between structures and events is highly complex. The form events take is in no way a simple durative of structures. This is due to the relationship between structures and events being mediated by practices. More specifically, a particular practice can bring together specific structures and elements while excluding others. The retention of these selections is subject to change, meaning practices can move in and out of positions of dominance or marginalisation over time. Therefore, the body's biological and sociological structures cannot explain the body in and of themselves. They will entwine in particular ways relative to the situation at hand.

Certain practices are related to particular areas of life and represent local forms, relationships, and “habitualised ways...in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2005, p. 21). A relational-dialectical approach to critical discourse analysis primarily focuses on the dialectical relationship between structure and action, that is to say, the relationship between social structure, particularly the structural network of practices and events. This means that macro and micro social fields, institutions, and organisations can meaningfully represent the body which is then produced and reproduced through networks of particular social practices, which culminate in specific body image experiences. According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2005, p. 21), “practices are held in place by social relations of power and shifting articulations of practices within and across networks are linked to the shifting dynamics of power and struggles over power”. Power and practices may help demonstrate why particular body image experiences can be enduring and stable or fluid and changing. For example, it may be that a specific individual is body image dissatisfied only in certain situations where particular relations of power work to promote and sustain certain practices.

A Critical Realist theory of social life argues events (i.e. particular body image experiences) are shaped in complex ways by internal and external dimensions and their respective structures, mechanisms, and practices. With respect to body image, the internal dimension can be viewed as cognitive processes, thoughts and feelings, and the body's physiology. The external dimension can refer to

broader aspects of sociocultural life such as family, friends, government, and the media. Each of these dimensions will have a particular structure, mechanism, and practice. For instance, the internal dimension of cognition may give way to the structure of mental comparisons. A comparison mechanism may be to gain evaluative information about oneself or others. The particular practice then represents the specific expression of this broader process, i.e., one's ritualised practice of comparing their weight to that of their friend or an 'ideal' body type seen on a particular social media page.

This process becomes all the more complicated as any given mechanism is always mediated by the operation of other mechanisms. Therefore, no mechanism and, in turn, structure, has a deterministic influence on any one event (body image). This means body image experiences are indeed complex and not predictable in any simple way as an effect of one mechanism or structure. This means statements that people are body image dissatisfied because they compare themselves to 'ideal' bodies on social media become too simplistic and reductionist. Social media is embedded in broader macro and micro structures and can be used in ways connected to broader influences such as family, friends, and political beliefs. Thus, a central aspect of being critical of social media is not making totalising and binary claims about social media 'effects'. It may serve body image researchers in the future to talk in terms of social media 'influence' or social media's ability to 'shape' body image. These terms leave 'room', so to speak, for additional forces to be added to the conversation.

It is not critical enough to link structures and mechanisms with particular body image experiences. Practices are an important aspect to focus on as they constitute a point of connection between structures, their mechanisms, and concrete body image experiences. For instance, a particular practice brings together different structures and mechanisms in specific local forms and relationships – "particular types of activities, linked in particular ways to particular materials and spatial and temporal locations; particular persons with particular experiences, pieces of knowledge and dispositions in particular social relations; particular semiotic resources and ways of using language; and so forth" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2005, p. 21). While particular practices may be found separately in many individuals' body image experiences, the same combination of them is unlikely to be encountered in different people. It is this that makes every individual's body image "unique as a fingerprint" (Cash, 2008, p. 13). For instance, it may be straightforward to contend that a group of individuals engage in frequent appearance comparisons which often incite body image dissatisfaction. However, this practice will undoubtedly be further shaped by associated intervening practices (and,

in turn, structures and mechanisms). Appearance comparison practices may be 'diluted' by protective filtering practices such as mental role plays or body image flexibility techniques.

The 'Critical Body Image Model' closely aligns with Coleman's (2008, p.171) argument that "models which map fluid and dynamic 'becoming's' onto static and closed systems of being risk ignoring how bodies are constituted and, crucially, could be constituted differently". Many body image researchers need to recognise that bodies are 'multiply situated' and that the body is never isolated and singular; it is always already engaged with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). When analysing the body, researchers cannot ignore or 'cordon off' particular bodily domains because "bodies inhabit and display numerous, intersecting group memberships at once" (Boero & Mason, 2020, p. 22). Multiple forces will simultaneously shape body image experiences in incredibly complex ways. According to Pearson et al. (2010, p. 9), "any number of factors, alone or in combination, many explain preoccupation with the body and dislike of appearance". With this in mind, it stands to reason that classifying a person as either body image dissatisfied or satisfied fails to acknowledge the complex and often contradictory lives people live and how they experience their embodiment. Researchers need to be mindful of the entire body image experience as the inclusion or exclusion of particular dimensions, structures, mechanisms, or practices can completely alter how the relationship between social media and body image 'becomes'. This is why the 'Critical Body Image Model' comprises multidimensional influences reflexively connected through practices. Doing so helps to illustrate and remind researchers who may be using the model that the orientation of influences shaping body image experiences are fluid and can be constructed differently across various situations or contexts.

### **How the 'Critical Body Image Model' is used in this Thesis**

It is important to emphasise that the 'Critical Body Image Model' does not provide a rigid and mechanical body image framework but represents a heuristic model to help illustrate the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of body image experiences.

The 'Critical Body Image Model' provides a framework for thinking about the relationship between social media and body image from a critical realist perspective rather than a method of analysis. The 'Critical Body Image Model' does not try to cohere the whole literature and research done in the vast body image field, but provides a structure to connect disparate and isolated research findings and theories, and critically consider them in conjunction with the particular experiences of the respondents in this thesis. This point means throughout this thesis, the 'Critical Body Image Model' is not used overtly to connect specific influences in a deterministic way to create a 'formula' for

explaining body image experiences. Instead, it is used as a prompt to bring together and remain aware of the different influences and practices shaping the respondent's social media and body image experiences to illustrate the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of body image experiences.

Finally, while the 'Critical Body Image Model' and the findings outlined in this thesis should help the body image field progress, I hope the 'Critical Body Image Model' will also encourage other body image researchers to adopt a more transdisciplinary approach and provide them with a theoretical framework to contribute to, build upon, and locate their own research within.

## 2.4: Conclusion

Critical Realism provides a fitting framework for understanding the relationship between social media and body image. Importantly, it provides a language and way of thinking about the relationships between multiple phenomena without over-emphasising the significance of any one particular aspect.

As highlighted in the literature review, body image is a multidimensional construct shaped by a range of intervening internal and external dimensions and structures that can become more or less influential at particular times, in particular situations, for particular people. Researchers need to think across many dimensions in researching social media, not just apply simplistic notions of linear transmission and decoding processes. Critical Realism provides the basis for a theoretical framework that can bring together a range of interconnecting variables that can shape body image experiences. This is essential because the impact of any one variable is not over-emphasised, and a more holistic view can be presented. The multidimensional nature of social media and body image will mean there is no linear or binary relationship between the two. As these two phenomena are embedded within various social, cultural, and political landscapes, which also play a part in shaping social media and body image, the relationship will extend beyond these two constructs. It can become challenging to say where one construct begins and ends in this sense. This, however, does not reflect a failure of the research; instead, it reflects and highlights the increasingly complex and reflexively embedded nature of contemporary life that needs to be embraced and grasped as best one can.

The 'Critical Body Image Model' stands as a helpful framework for rectifying some of the issues surrounding body image research. In particular, the 'Critical Body Image Model' will help bring together siloed areas of study. Doing so will help illustrate that people make sense of themselves, their bodies, and body image in ways that can fluidly 'become' in both liberating and constraining ways within complex discursive flows circulating across various contexts, platforms, and increasingly mediated relationships.

## Chapter 3: Methodological Overview

### 3.1: Introduction

This chapter provides a methodological overview of the research methods that guided this study. The chapter is divided into two sections.

The first section provides an outline of the research process and further explains why I designed the research to include a questionnaire and interviews to produce a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data, along with describing the practical undertaking of data gathering and analysis. I outline the research population, their demographic characteristics, and, perhaps most importantly, how respondents came into contact with the research and its implications on the analysis.

The second section reflects on the research processes and reviews the relative successes and failures of the research methods. I conclude this section and the chapter with some reflections on myself as a researcher and how my subjectivity may have shaped the research process and conclusions made.



## 3.2: Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis of the social uses of media in all their diversity remains methodologically demanding (Livingstone, 2016, p. 6)

As noted in the literature review, body image research is dominated by quantitative research methods (Webb et al., 2019). Furthermore, most body image research comes from psychological disciplines, is often viewed through a cognitive-behavioural lens, and is based on American or Australian populations. This research was designed to bridge existing gaps in the literature and do so while applying a Screen and Media Studies lens<sup>8</sup>. The research methodology was made up of a two-part sequential process that gathered quantitative and qualitative data. The research began with an online questionnaire.

### 3.3.1: Questionnaire

Questionnaires were implemented because social media practices and body image are culturally bound and shaped by one's situational experiences (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). The quantitative data established an initial framework for respondents' particular social media practices and body image experiences. These findings were further probed into and built upon during qualitative interviews. This approach to researching social media and body image is supported by Jarman et al., (2022, p. 227) who contend "qualitative research is ideal for obtaining rich, detailed information about how people use social media, thereby helping us understand the specific types and patterns of interaction that hinder and help body image". Thus, the qualitative data held greater weight in reporting the research findings as it was better suited to exploring the complexities and nuances of individual experiences. The research process is outlined in the sections below, along with the relative strengths and weaknesses.

In theory, questionnaires provide an efficient way of reaching many people at a low cost. The struggles I faced in generating enough responses highlight some of the limitations of this research method. It is often contended that there is generally not a significant return rate for completed paper questionnaires, and using an online questionnaire can potentially counteract this. Bertrand and

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<sup>8</sup> This latter point is important as body image research has focused a lot on the influence of 'traditional' media. Many scholars have now turned their attention to the impact that social media has on body image. However, both platforms have typically been conceptualised in simplistic and binary ways. This thesis does not intend to overtly challenge or criticise how body image researchers have positioned the media but further build on what research has been done and demonstrate the multiple dimensions that must also be considered when researching the media. Body image and the number of intervening forces shaping it are manifold. Thus, I do not believe research necessarily needs to be overtly challenged but integrated and built upon.

Hughes (2017) raised this point, and argued that as digital technologies have expanded, there has been an increasing amount of autonomy given to audiences. Within our digital world, connectivity is seemingly unlimited. The dynamics of how audiences consume media texts are changing because the audiences themselves now have control over when, where, and how they consume media (Napoli, 2010). Therefore, as the questionnaire was online, it allowed for greater ease for potential respondents, as it could be completed in a place and at a time that suited them. The questionnaire could also be distributed and circulated across digital connections, thereby taking “advantage of the ability of the Internet to provide access to groups and individuals who would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach through other channels” (Wright, 2005, n.p). The online questionnaire had the potential to reach far more respondents across a significant geographical distance than any physical distribution would have allowed within the time constraints for this research project. However, Wright (2005, n.p) makes the point that online research can create issues concerning the sample, as “little may be known about the characteristics of people in online communities, aside from some basic demographic variables, and even this information may be questionable”. The questionnaire successfully generated the required sample size; however, it spread across digital connections and geographical locations that it was not intended to.

The questionnaire was structured to capture data about respondents’ relationship with social media and their body image. The questionnaire began by asking what body representations respondents were primarily engaging with on social media. This paved the way for questions regarding the influence and power of social media and particular body representations in shaping body image experiences, and the images’ perceived ability to shape behaviours such as inciting self-comparisons or altering their exercise dieting and self-representation practices. The questionnaire culminated with a section of demographic and social media use questions (i.e., how often respondents use social media and how long social media sessions typically last). While the questionnaire was broad enough to touch on different aspects of social media and body image, it did not go far enough in enabling respondents to comment on the complexity of this relationship<sup>9</sup>.

### **Recruitment**

Using a questionnaire was an appropriate first step as it allowed an exploratory approach to be taken towards a new topic, enabling the important variables shaping respondents’ particular relationship between social media and body image to be identified.

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<sup>9</sup> The limitations of the questionnaire are discussed further in section 3.3.

I set out to have 500 questionnaires completed by those who identify as New Zealanders, over 18 years old, and active social media users (i.e., having used 'Facebook' or 'Instagram' platforms within the past seven days). This was achieved as 552 questionnaires were completed. The questionnaire was considered 'complete' if the respondents had answered questions from beginning to end. Respondents did not have to answer every question; however, there needed to be an indication that the respondent started and finished the questionnaire and did not abandon it mid-way through. Furthermore, any frivolous responses were excluded. Initially, there were 611 questionnaire responses; although this was reduced to 552. However, gaining the required number of responses meant the research population to be further diversified beyond New Zealanders. The questionnaire was opened up to women and men from Australia.

The ways respondents were recruited deviated from the initial plan. The 'University of Waikato' campus was the initial starting point for distributing the questionnaire by approaching a broad range of undergraduate classes and tutorial groups to explain the aim of the research and promoting the URL link to the online questionnaire, and hoping that at least some would choose to complete the questionnaire online in their own time. It was hoped that a snowball effect would occur whereby these initial respondents would inform others about the online questionnaire, thus furthering its dispersal. The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University did note that 'using students as participants...should always be done bearing in mind that students are not a resource and are often recruited for research'. However, my faculty's concern was not a problem as the student research approach did not eventuate as promoting the questionnaire on 'Facebook' and 'Instagram' resulted in a reasonable response rate.

In order to get the questionnaire 'shared' across social media, I messaged pages from different walks of life, gyms, sports groups, athletes, car or film clubs etc. From there, the page administrators could then post in their own words should they wish, or a copy and paste version of a provided statement that briefly outlined what the questionnaire involved with a link attached for potential respondents to follow and complete the questionnaire should they choose to. Family, friends, and others from my networks were encouraged to 'share' a 'Facebook' link to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was hoped to circulate online as others 'shared' the link further, thereby spreading the link across a large domain of 'friend' groups and potentially reaching a broad range of respondents. The questionnaire was shared across many diverse pages; however, less than 60 responses were provided within the first six weeks. Notably, the questionnaire was shared on the Australian page 'The Moderation Movement'. Once this happened, there was a surge in responses. Although, this compromised the

intended research plan of studying New Zealanders as the vast majority of these respondents were understandably individuals who identified as Australian. As such, the research population was diversified and based upon Australasians. Time restraints were the main reason for this diversification. Although, the decision to do so led to a unique group of respondents being the focus of the research. The particular construction of the research population are discussed in the following section.

Questionnaire respondents needed to be over the age of 18 to complete the questionnaire. This was monitored by implementing a question at the outset of the questionnaire that required respondents to select an age bracket (<18, 18-25, 26-30, 31-35, >35). If the '<18' bracket was selected, the questionnaire ended as the respondent was underage. I understand that this is not a fool-proof way of excluding those under the age of 18; however, an element of trust from the respondents in adhering to the requirements of the questionnaire comes into play. Furthermore, as the research population was self-selected, a notable gender imbalance occurred. Women were over-represented 5:1 as compared to men. This may be due to men not thinking body image issues are something they should be concerned with, thus leading them to forgo engaging in the research<sup>10</sup>.

### **Research Respondents**

Giving critical demographic information about the respondents helps the reader contextualise and understand the research results. Of the 552 respondents, the largest nationality group was Australians, who constituted the majority of the respondents (67%), followed by New Zealanders (32%). Concerning gender, respondents were given multiple options of how they chose to identify and a space where they could specify their preferred gender identity should they wish to have done so, however, 85% of the respondents identified as women and 15% identified as men<sup>11</sup>.

This thesis did not intend to research a particular age group – respondents only needed to be over the age of 18. As such, the age distribution was wide-ranging and segmented along gendered lines. However, there are higher proportions of specific age groups. 18-21-year-olds only made up 2% and

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<sup>10</sup> I acknowledge there is body image research concerning Non-Western cultures that explore body image experiences that differ from those referenced in this thesis. These have been omitted because this thesis does not have the space or time to provide an encyclopaedia-level analysis of body image. Particular emphasis is placed on the Western, heteronormative bodies of the past century in response to how the participants defined themselves.

<sup>11</sup> The sex discrepancy of this research is notable. Questionnaire responses did not indicate why so few men completed the questionnaire; however, during interviews, several men put forward their ideas as to why many men may not be interested or feel forthcoming about engaging in intimate body image conversations. This is best demonstrated by the following respondent who said, *"I wanted to be a part of this research, so I could ask if other guys worried about their body image as well...It's something I have for a long while, but it seems like it's not something men are supposed to care about"* (AUM30). This may be why men were less inclined to be involved in the research. Such a point is given credence by Delderfield (2018, p. 5) who contends body image can be overlooked by men because of "denial, shame and stigma, due to a fear of being perceived as feminine, function as obstacles to accessing help...men themselves may fail to perceive that they have problem behaviours...believing themselves to be idiosyncratic or 'different'" (see also, Buckingham, Burlew, & Shurts, 2013; Cohn & Lemberg, 2013). Much more work needs to be done to make the area of silence that is men and body image issues more readily visible.

6% of women and men respectively; 22-25-year-olds 16% and 15%, 26- 30-year-olds were weighted more so to women at 26% as compared to 19% of men, in similar fashion 31-40-year-olds were the largest group with 36% of women and 26% of men. Slightly more men made up the 41-50-year-olds group with 21% compared to the 15% women. This trend was again apparent with 51-60-year-olds 13% men and 4% women. Very few respondents over the age of 61 completed the questionnaire - only 1% of women and 0% of men make up this group.

Many of the respondents were highly educated. 16% have received a High School leaving certificate, 16% gained University Entrance, 36% hold a Bachelor's degree, and 13% stated they held a Master's or Doctorate degree. Respondents could also report their income level relative to the average income of their country of residence. While 11% declined to answer, 85% of respondents reported a lower-middle-income level to a high-middle level.

### **Respondents and 'The Moderation Movement'**

The research respondents typically came into contact with the research through the 'Facebook' page 'The Moderation Movement'. 'The Moderation Movement' is founded and run by Jodie Arnot and Zoe Nicholson. According to the 'About Us' section of the 'Moderation Movements' website, Arnot is "a registered counsellor with a Masters in Counselling; Jodie has her own private practice offering 'Skype', telephone and in-person sessions. She specialises in helping clients experiencing body image distress, self-criticism, perfectionism, and a complicated relationship with exercise... Jodie also presents on body image in schools for The Butterfly Foundation" (The Moderation Movement, 2021a, para 1). Nicholson is a "practising Dietitian and Accredited Nutritionist...One of Zoe's primary goals is to help people stop dieting and instead enjoy all food and establish a healthy relationship with food and their bodies" (The Moderation Movement, 2021a, para 2). The movement is designed to provide "a supportive place for fans of the Moderation Movement approach to discuss all things moderation including: intuitive eating, non-diet, Health At Every Size®, enjoyable movement, body respect and self-compassion" (The Moderation Movement, 2021b, n.p). Furthermore, the page 'rules' intend to ensure further it is a supportive place by asking members to refrain from "promoting diets or weight loss, no mention of numbers (weights/measurements/calories), no body shaming nor food shaming" (The Moderation Movement, 2021b, n.p). The page is also very open and encourages members to 'add questions', 'stories of your experiences', and share posts or links to other relevant content.

### **Body Image Journeys**

Knowing the respondents came into contact with the research through 'The Moderation Movement' helps provides some context around why respondents' talk may have centred on their 'body image journeys', as several respondents called them, based on improving their relationship with their body and in turn their body image.

Generally, respondents commented on the competing tensions and negotiations between viewing and engaging with 'ideal' and 'realistic' body representations on social media; and operating in a socio-historical moment where, for these respondents at least, 'ideal' bodies are highly valued and sought after. Findings demonstrate how it is possible to have multiple and contradictory responses to 'ideal' and 'realistic' body representations. Research respondents did not have a single, fixed viewpoint but moved between various reactions, emotions, and subject positions which shaped their body image in both positive and negative ways. These respondents were generally aware of the influences and situations that incited body image dissatisfaction and satisfaction. This is understandable considering 'The Moderation Movement' intends to help people mitigate body image dissatisfaction. It stands to reason that those following 'The Moderation Movement' are consciously aware of their body image issues, to varying degrees, and have some ability to articulate parts of their relationship with social media and body image that were constraining and liberating. Consequently, this group of respondents are well-positioned to provide insights for answering the research questions.

### **Research Findings and Generalisability**

The fact that the lion's share of the respondents were following 'The Moderation Movement' leads to questions surrounding the generalisability of these research findings. An argument could be put forward that the positions unveiled here may not be generalisable to social media users and body image experiences more broadly because the nature of the online groups used to source respondents was based on a particular set of common interests. Thus, the data collected is not a representative sample. However, the thesis' central aim is to demonstrate the overarching risk, rewards, and tensions that are characteristic of the relationship between social media and body image, and as such I believe the results provide a level of generalisability to the broader population.

There has been a long-standing assumption that generalisation applies only to the domain of quantitative research; however, this assumption has been increasingly challenged by several researchers (Guenther & Falk, 2019; Delderfield, 2018). I have been increasingly drawn to Mason (2017, p. 316), who argues: "where conventional versions of generalisation have tended to be based

on the idea that, in generalising, we ‘step back’ and move away from the particular, to enable us to make generalisations about something, a more artistic view might lead us to use our closeness and affinity with our data to provide insights into something”. It is essential to acknowledge that the respondents of this research were on their own subjective ‘body image journeys’. It stands to reason that different people in different situations with different historical experiences, beliefs, and values may have a relationship with social media and body image that differs. I believe there is a level of generalisability from this thesis' findings when taken from higher level of abstraction. The quotes included in this thesis represent the respondent's collective experiences and are not necessarily an exhaustive recount of each individual's story. I did not include a comment from every single research respondent (see also Wood-Barcalow, 2006). The over-arching narrative of this thesis centres on the simultaneous risks, rewards, and ever-present tensions which are inherently characteristic of the reflexive relationship between social media and body image. In this sense, the findings presented in this thesis are generalisable to broader populations.

I do not make the above comments regarding the broader application of this thesis' findings lightly. There are moral, political, social, and intellectual issues trying to make unfounded and inappropriate generalisations (Baillie, 2015). It is, however, important that academia and broader society more readily recognise and engage with the risks, rewards, and ever-present tensions surrounding social media and body image. I believe it is only when we grasp the ‘full picture’ that we can help people see ‘into’ the complexities of the relationship between social media and body image. In doing so, insights and generalisations can be used to help social media users orientate and conduct themselves to diminish body image dissatisfaction and maximise body image satisfaction.

### 3.3.2: Interviews

The secondary interview phase aimed to produce qualitative data and build upon the responses outlined in the questionnaires. Interviews were a critical part of the research because there was more time to probe into the nuances of respondents’ mediated social media practices. This was important as social media practices were not explored in the questionnaire in depth due to the limitations surrounding tick-box questions, and the limited space for respondents to openly share their thoughts in open-ended question boxes (Gill, 2008). Interviews also brought issues of social media control and algorithms into the analysis. This was notable as the questionnaire did not explicitly address these central social media issues.

Respondents had the opportunity to leave their email addresses at the end of the questionnaire should they be interested in being interviewed. These individuals were contacted by email, and times were arranged to meet, or in instances when the respondent was located a great distance from the Waikato area, then ‘Skype’ was used. This point became more relevant considering the vast majority of respondents were Australian. Respondents were also emailed an information sheet containing information about the purpose of the research, what their contributions to the research were to be used for, and the rights they had as a respondent<sup>12</sup>. Respondents were also emailed a consent sheet that needed to be signed and returned before the interview. Respondents were made aware that the ‘Skype’ calls were being recorded and gave their consent to this before proceeding.

### Recruitment

Despite the initial challenges in getting questionnaire responses, many individuals were interested in being interviewed. While responses from the questionnaire provided a discursive context for the interviews, the interviews were semi-structured and organised around a set of predetermined, open-ended questions. It was decided that the interviews were to be semi-structured so questions could be altered or added in response to the interviewees’ responses. This afforded a deeper understanding of the subjective nuances of interviewee responses and the reasoning behind why they may be taking such a stance toward an issue.

Figure 3: Interviewee Demographic Information

	Women New Zealand	Women Australia	Men New Zealand	Men Australia
18-21				1
22-25		1	1	
26-30	2	1	2	1
31-40	2	3	2	2
41-50	1	3	1	1
51-60	1	1	1	2
61+				1

Of these interviewees, there were more Australians than New Zealanders. With regard to women, nine were Australian, with the remaining six being from New Zealand. A similar breakdown was

<sup>12</sup> A copy of the respondent information sheet can be found in the appendix.



present with men; eight were from Australia, and seven were from New Zealand. Despite a balance across geographical location and gender, there was a greater representation of 'older' interviewees. The largest age group of respondents was 31-40 year olds which was made up of 33% women and 27% men<sup>13</sup>.

Issues were raised by the Ethics Committee concerning respondent confidentiality and anonymity as the research was organised and conducted through email and 'Skype'. As Selwyn and Robson (1998, n.p) state, such a concern was warranted, "it is virtually impossible to guarantee the respondent anonymity as their name, or at least their email address is automatically included in their reply". However, these emails were kept online and protected by my personal password to be viewed. Furthermore, interview audio and hardcopy transcripts were kept throughout the research process. Audio data was kept on my personal computer, and hardcopy transcripts were kept secure during the research process in a way that was non-identifying. It was prudent to take such measures to ensure that respondents' material was kept confidential.

### **Data Analysis**

I analysed the questionnaire and interview data through Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis was seen as a suitable method because it is based on developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Thematic Analysis involves systematically coding data to establish and highlight patterns of meanings or themes (Belotto, 2018). Carrying out Thematic Analysis on the questionnaire and interview data sets helped structure and classify the respondents' comments, which were often messy and fragmented.

In analysing respondents' questionnaire comments, I drew on existing theories and concepts to guide my thinking and shape my coding labels. This is known as a deductive orientation and "refers to a more researcher- or theory-driven approach, where the dataset provides the foundation for coding and theme development, but the research questions asked – and thus the codes developed – reflect theoretical or conceptual ideas the researcher seeks to understand through the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.91). The reason I decided to take a deductive route is outlined in section 3.3.

The following sections outline the analysis process of the questionnaire and interview data. I begin with the questionnaire data.

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<sup>13</sup> In the analytical chapters, I have included respondents' demographic information in brackets at the end of each quote. 'NZ' refers to 'New Zealand', AUS refers to 'Australia', 'M' refers to 'man', and 'W' refers to 'woman', and the particular number included refers to their age.

## Questionnaire

Data from the four open-ended questions were coded to identify themes and provide an initial understanding of respondents' social media and body image experiences that could be explored in greater depth during the interview phase. During this analysis stage, a critical task was to explore the expression of shared or similar ideas or meanings across different contexts. Within Thematic Analysis, themes are defined by meaning-unity and conceptual coherence. Each theme has its distinct central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

I carried out the coding process by printing a physical copy of the qualitative comments from the open-ended questions. After initially reading and reviewing the qualitative questionnaire data to understand the data set, it became clear that there were many dimensions and influences to contend with. I applied codes in several 'layers' to deal with the complexity methodically and provide enough codes to capture the essence of what the quote was overtly and latently conveying. In practice, the coding process was very manual. I cut out discrete data excerpts. I then labelled 'post-it' notes with the codes identified and then grouped all relevant data excerpts into thematic 'buckets'. This method was 'hands on'; however, I found it easier to have a 'bird's eye view' of all the identified themes. Doing so made it easier to remain aware of all the themes identified and make decisions about moving particular data excerpts from one 'bucket' to another.

I used the first 'layer' of organising concepts or thematic codes to group comments that referenced body image experiences i.e., body image (dis)satisfaction that appeared to be shaped by 'internal' or 'external' influences. These codes draw from the research on how body image influences can be shaped internally and/or externally (Lewis-Smith, Diedrichs, Bond, & Harcourt, 2020; Cash, 2008). The codes were: 'body image satisfied internal', 'body image dissatisfied external', 'body image satisfied internal' or 'body image dissatisfied external'. This initial, static, and binary coding of body image is at odds with research outlined in the literature review, which emphasises that body image is a 'process' characterised by a series of interwoven and reflexive negotiations (Coleman, 2008). These codes may be a reflection of the limited understanding of body image I had at the time, the fact that my initial understanding of body image was guided by 'traditional' psychological research that can often position body image as a static and cross-situational trait, the limitations of the questionnaire to adequately capture the complex ambivalences, and fluidity of respondents' body image experiences or a mixture of these reasons. Despite these codes not necessarily being the best representation of body image as a phenomenon, there was more nuance to questionnaire quotes concerning how respondents' body image was influenced that needed to be coded and captured. As such, I applied secondary codes to

capture these particular influences. The 'internal' codes were supplemented with 'cognitive', 'beliefs and feelings', and 'physiological', while 'external' was supplemented with 'microstructure', 'macrostructure', and 'exostructure'. These secondary codes were again informed by existing body image and screen and media research.

The primary and secondary codes outlined helped define the respondent's body image experience (i.e. body image (dis)satisfaction) and point to the particular influences involved in bringing it into fruition. Throughout the coding process it became increasingly evident that the respondents' relationship with social media and body image is complex, multidimensional, and fluid, and shaped by a range of intervening influences; however, the coding process did not provide any in-depth information about respondents' particular social media practices and body image experiences. Respondents made comments about different influences 'within' the secondary codes. For instance, within the 'microstructure' code, comments were made about the negative influence of family and friends' appearance commentary. While in the 'cognitive' code, references were made to self-comparison and objectification. However, an issue faced during the coding process was the limited amount of qualitative data to draw on. This was not a surprise. It reflects the limitations of questionnaires in gathering complex and nuanced data. That said, the questionnaire served to identify the particular influences shaping respondents' relationship with social media and body image.

It was evident that respondents had more to say but were restricted by the space limitations or their ability to express themselves fully in the written form. There was enough depth in respondents' comments or, at times, overt flags that their relationship with social media and body image extended beyond what they had written, to suggest the research needed to be taken a step further. Interviews served as an opportunity to clarify and, importantly, build on the particular influences shaping the respondents' social media and body image experiences. During interviews, I built on the coding process and themes identified. I specifically focused on the respondents' particular social media practices to connect the gap between the broader 'internal' and 'external' influences identified and body image experiences.

### **Interviews**

I coded the interview data in the same way as the questionnaire data. I transcribed and printed data extracts and grouped them into 'buckets' of relevant themes. However, one point of difference with the interview data was that it needed to be transcribed before being analysed and coded. This was a laborious task; however, it provided me with an opportunity to engage with the data thoroughly

before embarking on the coding journey. Coding the interview data was insightful for several reasons. Coding interview responses highlighted the problems with my initial 'body image dissatisfied' and 'body image satisfied' codes identified in the questionnaire coding process. The respondents' body image experiences were not discrete experiences of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Instead, their body image was an ambivalent and dynamic phenomenon where experiences of body image dissatisfaction and satisfaction were often woven together.

It is important to note that the interview coding process was a cyclical journey. As Braun and Clarke, (2021, p.122) aptly point out, "coding is never completed because meaning is never final; you could (in theory) always notice something more or different in the dataset". I did not simply begin analysing the interview data and immediately identify discourses of body image and social media ambivalence. As I continued to immerse myself in critical body image literature that emphasises the fragmented, contradictory, and complex nature of body image, I revisited the themes and codes identified and slowly began to recognise how the respondents were often strategically negotiating with contradictory body discourses 'on' and 'off' social media. Crucially, recognising and understanding how respondents' tension-filled negotiations united what I had initially viewed as binary and isolated experiences helped illustrate that the relationship between social media and body image was not 'good' or 'bad'. Instead, it was characterised by ambivalence and fluid body image 'becomings' (Coleman, 2008).

While coding the interview data helped showcase respondents' ambivalent relationship between social media and body image, it created coding problems. In the same way, Gill (2008) found profound ambivalences between different and individual men's accounts of decoding images of 'ideal' male bodies, with one respondent moving from criticising the uniformity of 'ideal' bodies to explaining how this makes him, a person with a different body type, feel 'a bit uglier'; to finding these representations sexy and then dull. How does one code such a response? Are multiple codes applied to capture each experience, i.e., 'ugly', 'sexy', 'dull'? Or would one 'ambivalent' code suffice? I did not want to categorise responses as ambivalent. In my view, doing so does not accurately grasp what is being conveyed. I decided to counter this problem by coding individual experiences to capture what was conveyed by the respondents and then placing these codes into the 'Critical Body Image Model' to bring these individual, discrete experiences back into contact with one another to more accurately illustrate the ambivalence, contradiction, and tension of their body image experiences. While this presented much work to 'break down' respondents' comments and experiences into particular discursive 'strands' or 'fragments' before weaving them back together again, it meant I could

understand respondents' relationships between social media and body image in a much more nuanced way and more readily highlight how particular influences intensified or elevated tensions, ambivalences, or body image (dis)satisfaction as they were brought into or out of contact with other influences.

The interview coding process helped provide insights into the particular social media practices and specific body image experiences that 'sat within' 'cognitive', 'beliefs and feelings', 'physiological', 'microstructure', 'macrostructure' and 'exostructure' codes. Through engagement with interview data, I was able to expand my understanding of these codes as follows:

- **Cognitive:** self-comparisons, self-objectification, and mood.
- **Beliefs and Feelings:** 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies representing both liberation and constraint, body image dissatisfaction, body image satisfaction, and body image ambivalence.
- **Physiological:** BMI, 'health', functionality, mastery, and self-care.
- **Microstructure:** family, friends, (historical) appearance commentary, teasing, bullying, exclusion, life partners, romance, and dating.
- **Macrostructure:** work and leisure activities.
- **Exostructure:** 'ideal' body representations, 'realistic' body representations, limited influence, curation, mediation, advertising, algorithms, digital detoxes, and body positive communities.

It is important to note that these codes are not distinct but overlap and reflexively shape each other. For instance, it may be that an individual's body image dissatisfaction (beliefs and feelings) is shaped by processes of self-comparison (cognitive), which centre on appearance comparisons made with 'ideal' body representations on social media (exostructure) that are meaningfully decoded in line with historical body assumptions (beliefs and feelings) originating from negative experiences with family and friends (microstructure). It, therefore, makes sense to see the body image dissatisfaction in terms of an intersection of all of these influences. It is certainly not reducible to one influence alone. To add another layer of complexity to the above example, this hypothetical individual's body image may be ambivalent because there are instances where their life partner (microstructure) makes them feel loved and unconditionally accepted for who they are, which could make them begin to question, negotiate, or resist the legitimacy or relevance of their self-comparisons (cognitive) or historical body assumptions (beliefs and feelings) originating from negative experiences with family and friends (microstructure) in their current life stage. This is another added benefit of the 'Critical Body Image Model' – it reflects a view developed in Critical Realism (Collier, 1994; Bhaskar, 1986) that life is an

'open system' where particular events (i.e., body image experience) are influenced and shaped by various influences. The 'Critical Body Image Model' provides a framework where various influences, practices, and particular body image experiences (as shown in the above example) can be connected and transformed as different configurations come into contact with one another.

While the model's complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity help frame the dynamic nature of social media and body image, it can create a sense that there is no end to the analysis. Throughout the interview coding process, I often felt it was incomplete. I recall being overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of themes put forward by respondents and was worried about wrongly classifying respondent quotes and misrepresenting what they had said. At the time, I struggled to fully grasp the complexities of respondents' comments. I reflect on the research process more so in the next section.

### 3.3: Reflecting on the Research

In this section, I reflect on the research process and outline some of the challenges faced and how they were dealt with. I also introduce and outline how my subjectivity, experiences, and beliefs may have shaped the analysis process and conclusions put forward. Outlining my particular positioning as a researcher is an essential part of qualitative research because reflexive research treats knowledge as situated and as inevitably shaped by the processes and practices of knowledge production, including the practices of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This means that the following reflection is crucial to frame the analysis and conclusions put forward in this thesis.

#### **Reflecting on the Research Process**

Looking back on the construction of the questionnaire, it strikes me as being overly simplistic and reinforcing the binary view I now seek to challenge and argue against. This may not only have been due to the questionnaire design, but also due to my theoretical understanding of social media and body image. Leading into this research I did not understand the complexities of how body image is formed, shaped, engrained, and transformed well enough. My view of body image was guided by body image research exploring body image dissatisfaction and satisfaction in relative isolation. I constructed the questionnaire in a way that assumed respondents experienced their body image in a singular and totalising way, i.e., they were body image dissatisfied or body image satisfied.

The questionnaire structure may be less than ideal; however, it played a key role in pushing me to grow as a researcher. Considering I produced a questionnaire that invited binary responses, the fact that these respondents could convey the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of their (dis)satisfaction demonstrated that their body image was not a static, cross-situational experience, and it highlighted that my understanding of body image and social media needed to be further developed. To understand the respondents' body image experiences, I was pushed to explore the literature in greater depth. By going back and forth between the literature and research data, I was slowly able to identify 1) an incongruence between 'traditional' body image research and the research respondent's experiences, 2) a great synergy between contemporary screen and media scholarship, the growing body of research done by critical psychologists on body image, and the respondents' experiences. Finally, 3) recognising and understanding the (in)congruences between the various types of body image literature and research data illustrated the need to develop the 'Critical Body Image Model'. The model represented a way to combine siloed research areas, draw on contemporary media theory, and build on critical body image research to more adequately frame the complexities of the respondents' experiences with social media and body image.

The time taken to grapple with the volume of literature and research data meant the process of analysing the research data was not simple. Instead, it was a cyclical journey (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and it needed to be. While I was dismayed for a long time about my perceived 'inability' to understand this topic; on reflection, the time it has taken, and the effort required to present the analysis in its current form is understandable. Bringing together such fragmented and conflicting experiences in the face of a research field that has thrived in "splendid isolation" (Fisher, 1990) is no small task.

Another consequence of needing to grapple with so much literature and research data meant several parts of the original plan of this thesis were discarded. Firstly, the initial proposal indicated questionnaire and interview responses were to be interpreted through Hall's (1997) 'Circuit of Culture' and semiotics. Secondly, the initial research proposal included a creative exercise where interview respondents would have been asked to draw what they perceived an 'ideal' body to look like. The drawings were to be done on a piece of A4 paper using coloured pencils. While this may be seen as an unorthodox research method that has not been implemented in much media research to date, it has been used in research on children and media use, and has benefits in promoting a relaxed research environment, enabling cognitively held body representations to be fluidly expressed and providing a direction for interview questions to take (Lealand & Zanker, 2006). Whilst interview respondents were drawing, questions could have been asked about what they were drawing and why. This exercise may have been beneficial in helping identify the factors that influence their perceptions of body image in particular ways. It also would have provided a starting point to compare and contrast their representational body image drawing against different body types typically shown across social media and flesh out why some body images and features may be seen as more or less preferable than others. While this method could not be implemented, it stands as an interesting method that could be implemented in the future. It was decided between myself and supervisors of the time that it may be inappropriate to ask respondents to provide paper and drawing materials themselves; and alternatively far too cumbersome, expensive, and time consuming sending materials to respondents for this exercise.

In this project's infancy, the Ethics Committee expressed concern over 'the appropriateness of a young man interviewing women about their perception of their bodies'. This was an understandable concern to have. While it is disheartening to think my gender may have positioned me as a threat and potentially unsuitable to carry out this research, I recognise and understand that body image can be a highly personal and sensitive subject for some people, which means this type of research must be carried out with great care.



Finally, a notable problem I faced during this thesis was finding men to participate in this research. I suspect some men may not want to participate in such a study because of concerns that body image dissatisfaction is an issue reserved for women (Cibralic & Conti, 2018; Bordo, 2009). This is my own speculation based on several conversations with men involved in this research and my own thoughts and feelings when I began having problems with my own body image. I suspect the problem with men not being so willing to engage in body image research is more complicated than this; however, I am buoyed by the fact that more and more men are beginning to research body image (Delderfield, 2018).

### **Reflections as a Researcher**

It is important to reflect on my position as a researcher and how my beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and experiences may have shaped the research process and analysis. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 22) described "all research [as] interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible, only assumed".

One vital aspect of myself as a researcher is spending five years working in commercial gyms as a personal trainer. I believe my time working as a personal trainer has shaped my ability to engage with research respondents' body image experiences empathetically. Working in the health and fitness industry, I witnessed first-hand the strong emphasis placed on exercising and dieting for appearance reasons and the problems that can often arise from such a pursuit. These experiences motivated me to research the relationship between social media and body image. Although, my time working in gyms may have also shaped my initial binary views of body image. I do not recall having conversations with people about the complexities of their body image experiences. Many spoke about body image dissatisfaction and trying to overcome it. This may have happened because the gym is a space where people can try and rectify perceived 'problematic' areas, meaning gyms may have a higher population of people experiencing body image dissatisfaction. Once it became known that I was researching body image, several people engaged in conversations with me about their body image woes. Once again, my view of body image may have become further slanted toward body image dissatisfaction. Moreover, working as a personal trainer may have pushed me to pay more attention to the respondents' social media practices and body image experiences related to exercise, health, and fitness. Probing the ways exercise can help or hinder the development of body image satisfaction had an initial appeal because the insights gained could have enabled me to help my clients who were dealing with body image problems. It is important to note this bias because it may have led me to overlook other influences that shaped the respondents' body image experiences.

Finally, I started this thesis as a 25-year-old who had not left the shores of New Zealand and had spent the majority of my years living and learning about the world in rural towns. My view of the world was small, primarily defined by European, heteronormative perspectives. I did not have the cultural knowledge or experience to engage with this topic's depth truly. I was, however, lucky enough to live in London for 18 months throughout writing this thesis. During this time, my view of the world and bodies expanded. My time away did not provide me with all of the answers to the body and body image, but it readily illustrated that there was still much for me to learn. This understanding has helped markedly present a more mature and critical analysis.

### 3.4: Conclusion

The methodological context for this study is one driven by qualitative analysis taken from extensive and comprehensive fieldwork. In this chapter, I outlined that questionnaires were used to establish an initial framework, orientation, and understanding of respondents' social media practices and body image. I considered this research approach to be the most straightforward concerning the main objectives of this study and it was an essential first step in the research process because social media practices and body image experiences are socially, culturally, and historically bound and shaped by one's unique situational experiences (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). However, due to the limitations of questionnaires in understanding complicated phenomena, questionnaire findings were further probed into and built upon during qualitative interviews. Interviews helped to capture the complexities and nuances of respondents' relationship between social media and body image. While the qualitative data holds more significant weight in reporting the research findings, bringing together quantitative and qualitative research methods with thematic analysis has likely been the most helpful for gaining valuable insights into respondents' relationships and experiences surrounding social media and body image (Jarman et al., 2022).

## Chapter 4: Social Media Images

### 4.1: Introduction

Chapter 4 is broken into two sections that explore how respondents experienced their body image through social media. The chapter is centred on the first research sub-question that focuses on the type of body representations respondents engaged with on social media. I probe into how respondents meaningfully understood 'ideal' and 'realistic' body representations, the influence they had on their body image, and how social media could enable and challenge respondents' process of developing a positive body image.

The first section outlines key questionnaire findings that suggest respondents were dominantly body image dissatisfied from viewing 'ideal' bodies and body image satisfied by viewing 'realistic' bodies in their social media newsfeeds. While this linear and binary finding was partly true, it did not accurately represent their relationship with social media and body image. Instead, it reflected the questionnaire's methodological limitations in capturing the complex relationship between the respondents, social media, 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies, and body image.

The second section, which focuses on interview responses, reveals a complicated narrative of mixed meanings, resistance, liberation, and constraint. The respondents' actual social media practices and decoding processes were much more varied than a particular body type viewed on social media, impacting their body image in a seemingly totalising way. The respondents did not view 'ideal' or 'realistic' bodies in isolation or singularly decode them. Interviews were characterised by conversations about the body image tensions and ambivalences created by negotiating with the multiple conflicting meanings, beliefs, and experiences associated with 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies, which they meaningfully understood in line with various social, cultural, and historical influences. This finding meant social media, 'ideal', and 'realistic' bodies did not have discrete or uni-directional impacts on respondents' body image. Contrary to the questionnaire results, the respondents' relationship with social media and body image was complex, multidimensional, fluid, and shaped by their negotiations with converging and contradicting bodily meanings and subjective experiences that incited body image (dis)satisfaction.

The findings in this chapter are important as they set the scene for the remaining chapters, which build on the ambivalent relationship respondents had with social media and body image.

## 4.2: Key Questionnaire Findings

Western society has a rich history of linking physical attractiveness with positive personal qualities (Cash, 2008) and the questionnaire findings suggested that most of the respondents agreed with such a view. Questionnaire respondents indicated the dominant body type viewed on social media was 'thin' and 'toned' women; and 'lean' and 'muscular' men – otherwise known as 'ideal' bodies. Women and men questionnaire respondents indicated they primarily saw body representations of their own sex on social media, i.e., women saw women and men saw men.

### **Describing the 'Ideal' Body**

Questionnaire respondents were asked to describe the dominant body type they viewed on social media. While some women commented on specific body parts, i.e., that the 'ideal' woman's body has "*toned shoulders*", "*thin arms*", "*a narrow waist*", or that they have "*perfect makeup on and be wearing form-fitting clothes*"; there was also a strong emphasis placed on the overall weight, shape, and tone of the 'ideal' women's body (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2000; Thompson & Tantleff, 1992). This was illustrated by the respondents who described the 'ideal' woman as "*having a slim and petite body but still be toned but not overly muscular*" or as being "*nicely shaped without any excess fat*". There was the distinct sense that for these respondents, the 'ideal' woman's body was based not necessarily on what it was but what it was not: 'fat'.

Men described the 'ideal' body similarly; however, there was a greater emphasis on the body being more 'muscular'. In a similar fashion to above, respondents commented on particular bodily attributes contending the 'ideal' man had "*wide shoulders, a big chest and a narrow waist*" or "*muscular upper body where you can see muscle definition*". There were differences in what represented the 'ideal' body. However, there was an overriding emphasis on the absence of 'fat' and the visible presence of 'muscle' for both women and men.

### **'Ideal' Bodies and Body Image Dissatisfaction**

Respondents reported that viewing 'ideal' bodies on social media incited body image dissatisfaction. Only 2% were significantly satisfied with their body image, and 10% were somewhat satisfied. Conversely, 40% indicated 'ideal' bodies on social media persuaded them to be somewhat dissatisfied, and 27% were significantly dissatisfied. 16% were unsure/did not know. Of those who reported significant body image dissatisfaction, 74% indicated these feelings were long term, and the remaining 26% indicated the body image dissatisfaction was short term. On the other hand, of those who were somewhat dissatisfied, 65% indicated body image dissatisfaction was long term and 35% short term.

Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that 'idealised' bodies were appealing. Just over 50% of women found them somewhat appealing, while 34% found them significantly appealing. Men were more evenly spread, with 36% and 38% indicating that the 'ideal' body was somewhat and significantly appealing, respectively. When asked what part of the 'ideal' body they found appealing, women indicated body shape (7%), size (10%), tone (11%), abdominals (7%) and the fitness, health, or wellness (9%) of the body were the most appealing aspects. Particular body parts such as the face (4%), hair (4%), clothes (4%) and chest (1%), shoulders (2%), back (1%) or arms (3%) were much less important.

For men, the most appealing aspects of the body were: body shape (7%), size (10%), tone (10%), abdominals (8%) and the fitness, health, or wellness (7%) of the body also being the most appealing aspects. Particular body parts such as the face (3%), hair (3%), clothes (1%) and chest (6%), shoulders (5%), back (3%) or arms (5%) were less important than the overall conditioning of the body but were slightly more appealing as compared to the women. The importance of the 'ideal' body's physical attributes is further reinforced by respondents' lack of interest in the performative nature of the 'ideal' body. For both women and men, very few found the physical capabilities, skills, or traits of the body (4%/3%), the masculinity or femininity of the body (3%/4%), the particular demeanour, pose, or gesture of the body (4%/3%), the lifestyle and surroundings of the body, i.e., occupation, financial situation, material possessions (4%/4%), or the beliefs that looking like the 'ideal' body will lead to fitting in with friends, family, or social groups (2%/3%) to be appealing.

### **Whose 'Ideal' Body?**

Questionnaire respondents were also asked, "whose body images do you see most often on your selected social media site?" This is relevant as body image researchers often contend that images of family, friends, or known peers with 'ideal' bodies are more harmful than celebrities because they have closer ties to these people, which can position their appearance as more attainable (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Shomaker & Furman, 2009). For women, images of friends were most frequently seen (74%), followed by fitness models (55%), celebrities (46%), and fashion models (44%). Fewer women reported looking at family (38%), professional sports figures (33%), acquaintances (29%), music stars (23%), and bodybuilders (22%).

Men were similar in that the majority viewed friends most frequently (70%), followed by fitness models (51%). A notable difference is that men were more inclined to view bodybuilders (45%) and professional sports figures (43%) but less inclined to see images of acquaintances (6%). A limitation of

this question was that it did not provide enough context around body type. The question relied on assumptions about the type of body typically associated with the identity, i.e., celebrities have 'ideal' bodies, but celebrities certainly vary in body size. For instance, the singer 'Lizzo' is a celebrity whose body deviates from the 'ideal' body.

Questionnaire results suggested that the 'ideal' body was important and desirable for this group of respondents and that social media had a totalising influence on their body image. However, questionnaire results only outlined part of how respondents experienced their body image through social media. Curiously, respondents indicated 'ideal' bodies were the primary body type viewed on social media; however, most questionnaire respondents did not actively follow or seek out these body types. Of the respondents', 63% reported they do not actively follow 'ideal' bodies and 29% indicated they do actively follow these body types, while 9% were unsure or did not know. How can it be that questionnaire respondents indicated they primarily saw 'ideal' bodies on social media, yet the vast majority did not follow or try to seek them out? When questionnaire respondents were asked, 'whose body images do you see most often on your selected social media site?' they were given a chance to contextualise their responses in an open-ended question box. Here, the majority of respondents briefly commented about the sociocultural dominance of 'ideal' bodies and how they can be unwillingly pushed into their newsfeeds through advertising, friends, and family. However, respondents were making conscious efforts to curate their newsfeeds. Respondents tried to remove 'ideal' bodies from their newsfeeds and follow 'realistic' body representations and body positive social media pages to improve their body image. This finding contradicted all of the tick-box questions and posed several questions that needed to be addressed in the follow-up interviews. During interviews, this complexity was further probed into; a latent narrative of resisting 'ideal' bodies emerged alongside the complicated negotiations respondents went through when decoding 'ideal' and 'realistic' body types. In the next section, I focus on qualitative insights from the interviews to critically explore respondents' social media and body image experiences.

### 4.3: Body Image Ambivalences

Contrary to what the answers to the questionnaire suggested, for these respondents, social media played an important role in enabling the process of developing a positive body image by bringing 'realistic' bodies into their lives. It was typical for respondents to make comments such as: "*I follow people who actively try to change body image by pushing stereotypes*" (NZM23), "*through following body positivity groups, I'm now seeing a more diverse range of body types*" (AUW33), or "*I try to include a wide spectrum of body shapes, sizes, ethnicities, abilities*" (NZM33), and "*I deliberately seek out pages who attempt to normalise and celebrate differences and individualities*" (AUW36). Respondents described 'realistic' bodies as being 'normal' bodies. These "*curvy bodies*" (AUW36) were said to have "*a few lumps and bumps here and there*" (NZW42). Importantly, while a 'realistic' body was highly subjective, it was always made in opposition to an 'ideal' body. While the particular construction of the 'realistic' body varied from one respondent to the next, it was clear that 'realistic' bodies provided respondents with a new, positive way to conceptualise the body and experience their embodiment.

Respondents noted that 'realistic' body representations were brought into their lives not because they consciously set out to find them, rather, they arrived seemingly by chance. These images often came into their newsfeeds due to a 'Facebook' friend or an individual, organisation, or business they follow on 'Instagram', 'liking', 'sharing' or 'commenting' on a piece of body positivity content. As one respondent said: "*this girl I work with liked a post from bodyposipanda. She's a bigger woman, and I remember being like, what's she doing on here? I just wasn't used to seeing people in bigger bodies on 'Facebook'*" (NZW23). While another made a similar comment about a friend sharing a post from 'The Moderation Movement': "*I'd never really seen those kinds of bodies online until my friend shared one on her page. It was strange at the time, but it has made all the difference to me and how I live my life now*" (NZM58). It is understandable that the respondents seemingly came across 'realistic' bodies by chance. As noted in the literature review, body positive content has become increasingly popular on social media. Over the past three years (June 2018 – July 2021), the hashtag #bodypositive on 'Instagram' has grown by over 160% to 16.1m posts. Similar hashtags #bodypositivity has grown 320% to 8.1m, and #bopo posts have increased by 70% to 1.2m posts. It stands to reason that more body positive content being created and circulated on social media provides people with more potential opportunities to see it and learn about alternative body discourses. This appeared to be the case for many of these respondents.

As a result of coming into contact with 'realistic' bodies, many of these respondents were prompted to look into the specific pages and, from there, discover a world of content based on 'realistic' bodies.



This is illustrated by the respondent who commented: *"It made me curious, and I looked into The Moderation Movement some more and was interested in what they had to say about the body and eating...one thing it made me realise though was that there were so many others out there saying the same kind of things...it was a shock, to be honest"* (NZM23). This particular respondent went on to comment on the seamless nature of 'realistic' bodies being brought into her life: *"I think being able to access this kind of content so easily is a huge plus...being able to go from page to page and check things out helped show how prominent this was"* (NZM23). These comments illustrate the liberating impact social media can have in exposing respondents to alternative content and ways of experiencing their embodiment. However, it is important to note how these respondents were curious enough to probe further into pages such as 'The Moderation Movement' to *"see what they had to say about the body"* (NZW27). This comment suggests that viewing 'realistic' bodies in of themselves may not lead to positive body image changes. Instead, learning about the body by going from *"page to page"* on 'The Moderation Movement', a page dedicated to teaching and providing a space to discuss topics surrounding body image, enjoyable movement, body respect, and self-compassion provides critical insights that help respondents come to terms with the contrived nature of 'ideal' bodies and progress on their body image journeys.

While 'The Moderation Movement' served as many of these respondents' introduction to this research, it was not the only body positive page respondents cited following. A considerable number also referenced the campaign 'This Girl Can'. The campaign seeks to *"celebrate active women who are doing their thing no matter how they do it"* (This Girl Can, 2021, para. 5). Considering the majority of respondents were Australian women, it makes sense this campaign was heavily referenced.

The use of the #thisgirlcan tag on 'Instagram' helped to spread their body positive message. It was how several of these respondents came into contact with the campaign. One respondent said, *"my friend put up a post on 'Instagram' of her at the gym, and I saw the #thisgirlcan tag, and it caught my attention. I looked them up, and it was so refreshing to see people like me doing all sorts of things. They were running, swimming, and biking; it was different from what I'm used to seeing, but it was good. An amazing way"* (NZW39). Here the ability for content to quickly spread across social media played a central role in bringing 'alternative' body representations into respondents' lives; however, for this particular respondent, the representations themselves had a profound effect because of the sense of close identification she had with them. She went on to say: *"it felt like these women were just like me. They looked like me and talked about how it can be hard trying to exercise when you have a family, but it's important to make time for you too"* (NZW39). Identification is essential here as it

breaks down the perceived distance between the respondent and the social media representation. It may be that the respondent did not need to compare and judge herself against the image because she could more readily relate to the representation. Conversely, there is the possibility that the respondent did compare her own body against that of the 'realistic' body and by finding similarities, a comparative process she may not have had when comparing herself against 'ideal' bodies, she came to the realisation it was "*just like*" her. This suggests that there may be no inherent problem with social media and the comparison process, as many researchers suggest (Mabe et al., 2014, p. 520). Instead, the particular type of comparison being made, i.e., 'upward' or 'downward' comparison, may have a greater connection to it being a practice that is liberating or constraining.

The impact that images from the 'This Girl Can' campaign had on this respondent's body image is highlighted by her comment: "*it made me feel like I wasn't alone and that I didn't have to spend all of my time resenting my body for not being skinny enough or exercising like the fitness people I see online...it made me feel at home in my body, and I started to stop seeing it as this ugly thing that needed to be smaller. It's ok; I'm ok. It's time for me to get out there and get into it!*" (AUW41). This demonstrates how social media can enable the process of developing a positive body image and be used to create meaningful change in people's lives by circulating discourses users can more readily relate to. As this respondent's comment illustrated, seeing a 'realistic' body helped to move her away from appearance comparisons and the tendency to focus on perceived bodily 'defects'. Importantly, this enabled her to begin feeling "*at home*" in her body and provided her with the mental space to turn her attention to her exercise, getting out there and getting into it.

While it is evident that 'realistic' body representations had a positive impact on the respondent's body image, it is important to not fall into the assumption that social media and user-generated content will "combat the negative effects of dominant beauty ideals" (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2021, p. 2) and powerful corporations who profit from marketing the 'ideal' body (Atkinson et al., 2020). There are problematic instances in research where this assumption is made. A recent study carried out by Cohen et al. (2019) indicated that women who viewed body positive images on 'Instagram' had significantly higher body image satisfaction as a result, especially when compared with women who viewed images consistent with the 'ideal' body. Such a finding is reminiscent of media theory which positions audiences as passive and homogeneous (Hall, 1997) and suggests that social media and particular representations can have totalising effects on body image. This type of research does not engage with the complex articulation of influence that can shape how people interpret media representations such as 'ideal' and 'realistic' body representations. It is not new knowledge that audiences decode media

content according to their existing beliefs, experiences, and feelings (Couldry, 2019; Hall, 1997). Contemporary body image researchers can draw from a long lineage of Screen and Media scholars who have been researching and exploring the nuances of media reception for decades. Nearly a century ago, the publication of Cantril's (1940) 'The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic' highlighted the subjective nature of audience responses to media content. Through qualitative interviews, Cantril (1940) found that the meaning audience members took from media content was based on factors surrounding their social, cultural, and political standings. These findings have been replicated in more recent years (Buckingham, 2019; body, 2014). However, it is concerning that Screen and Media researchers have explored and written about the complexities, conditions, and limitations of media 'effects' for nearly a century but these findings have not been drawn upon in much of the theory or research on social media and body image.

While probing into the contradictions surrounding respondents' comments about 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies, the broader social, cultural, and historical influences shaping their decoding processes were highlighted. I was curious about the ways respondents referred to 'realistic' bodies being "*strange*" or that it was "*a shock*" when initially coming into contact with these bodies, but how they would also make comments that these bodies "*looked like me*" and helped them feel more "*at home*" in their own bodies. It is not a matter of trying to ascertain which experiences are 'right' or 'wrong'. Instead, these comments run parallel with the work of Gill (2008), who found profound ambivalences between different men and, significantly, within individual men's accounts of decoding images of 'ideal' male bodies. Gill's (2008) findings illustrate the multiple and conflicting meanings particular bodies can have, similar to the way respondents of this research were shocked by 'realistic' bodies but also found a sense of 'home' in them. While these findings are interesting, they do not explain why these men held such diverging views of the body. The same problem is prevalent with the respondents of this research.

When asked why it was initially confronting when viewing 'realistic' bodies, it was common for respondents to discuss how their intended meanings of body positivity, self-care, and acceptance sharply contrast with the respondent's subjective, historically embedded beliefs and experiences concerning the body and 'fat'. One respondent commented: "*when I first saw a picture of a bigger woman online, it kind of took me back a little. I was like can she be on there? Is that ok? I think it was because I'd never seen a bigger body being celebrated*" (AUW50). This particular respondent went on to say: "*it was strange to start with because these are bodies I've spent ages trying not to be. I know in the past I've seen bigger bodies like that come up in my feed before I have thought, oh god, no, thank*

you!" (AUW50). It may be that their sense of reality had become distorted through a lifetime of feeling external and internal pressure to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body. Considering the fact that one of the primary purposes of body positivity content is to challenge narrow appearance 'ideals' which people have internalised as being normative, to the point that the 'ideal' body has been connected with generating a "normative discontent" (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-moore, 1984; Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, & Larose, 2011) for both women and men, it stands to reason that respondents may initially interpret body positivity content as representing what they have been actively trying to avoid being for a considerable number of years. The ways respondents' negotiated between historical and present-day bodily meanings and experiences (Cash, 2008) illustrate why body image researchers must engage with body image as a multidimensional and fluid phenomenon. Failing to do so may mean that crucial parts of people's embodiment go unanalysed, and researchers may misrepresent people's body image experiences as being totalising, static, and rigid.

Comments about family experiences were often considered one of the primary reasons 'realistic' bodies were initially regarded as 'strange'. Respondents recalled instances from their childhood when they watched their parents' concerns and anxieties about body weight and shape, and overheard or actively engaged in conversations centring on body management and modification. This was demonstrated by the respondent who said: "*my mum was never in great shape or anything, she was a real little lady, but she was actually a terrible binge eater like if she were going to eat a lousy meal like she could eat six snickers bars in one go, she'd then be really good for the next few days to balance it out before her next binge and I was like that as well up until the last year or so. I think I learned it from her*" (AUM30). Another respondent made a similar comment about watching her mother's frustration while she weighed herself: "*I remember seeing mum weigh herself and getting so wound up that she wasn't losing anything...it really stuck with me, I look to mum to guide me on so many things so seeing her upset about the weight I think taught me that I should be worried about mine as well*" (AUW39). The harmful parental influence on body image outlined above is not an issue that only women face. Men also spoke about parents modelling behaviour concerning body weight, shape, size, and tone: "*I remember mum and dad always taking us out on runs before Christmas day lunch. It's always a big day of eating, and they'd say, 'we've got to earn the calories'. But they said that kind of stuff all the time, so it wore off on me. I got preoccupied with making sure I'd earned my food*" (NZM47). Another respondent made a similar comment about his father and body size comments: "*When I was little, dad always said things about 'my boys and their big pukus [Māori for stomach], and it made me aware that it was something others were aware of. It was such a small thing, but it taught me it's something I should be thinking about*" (AUM38). Comments such as these

were commonplace among respondents. The internalisation of ideas surrounding a body's appearance has origins that pre-date any exposure to social media. This point is crucial because it highlights the complexities of how respondents meaningfully decode social media body representations. The fact that so many respondents could recall historical, familial experiences that have shaped how they understand the body illustrates the point that audiences decode media content according to their existing beliefs, experiences, and feelings (Couldry, 2019). These comments highlight that social media cannot be labelled as the root cause of respondents' body image experiences or as having uni-directional 'effects' on body image (Riley et al., 2022; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). Doing so would be reductionist and play folly to the complexity and multidimensional influences that shape respondents' social media practices and body image experiences.

Many respondents spoke about the influence of interpersonal relationships with friends and peers on their body image. There was a notable gendered element to these experiences. Men often spoke about being teased for their 'small' body size and women for being too 'big'. For instance, one respondent said, *"I used to be hassled at school when I was younger because I was skinny, and I didn't like that. It was almost like I thought if I got bigger, it would stop me from being hassled and make me more attractive to people. Attractive to both sexes"* (NZW28). It is important to note how men also experienced pressure to conform to bodily norms in this research. This finding goes against the work of Miller and Halberstadt (2005, p. 190), who found that "young New Zealand women, but not men, experience the body image dissatisfaction deemed normative for women living in Westernised cultures". Furthermore, it contrasts with historical research findings, which argue that, compared to women, men are typically more satisfied with their physical appearance (Muth & Cash, 1997). There are undoubtedly gendered elements to the 'ideal' body, i.e., men supposedly requiring a 'V' shape torso and women a toned-hourglass figure (Jarman, Marques, McLean, Slater, & Paxton, 2021). A respondent who highlighted this, was ridiculed for being 'skinny' as a man. However, it is interesting to note the shared language deployed by men and women in the comments above about being 'fat'. Both men and women could recall the harm caused by being shamed and teased because of being in bodies that were socially categorised as being 'too fat'. This is highlighted by the respondent who said: *"when I was young, I was bullied for looking like a girl because I was so small. I felt like I needed to build muscle to make a masculine body, and that's hard and takes time. Building muscle isn't an overnight job, but once I'd done that, I was still keen on maintaining it, but I started to care more about keeping the fat in check"* (AUM48). This respondent went on to comment about the implications 'fat' has on obscuring a gendered body: *"regardless of the body you have if there's too much fat covering it all, it's not visible. Think about strong men. These guys have heaps of muscle but the fat to go with*

*it...they lose the classic masculine look and are just round"* (AUM48). A disdain for 'fat' may unite the bodily concerns of women and men, albeit problematically. Both genders may share an equal concern for 'fat' because the 'ideal' bodies' gendered features may similarly be obscured by layers of 'fat'. That is to say, men's 'V' torso and women's toned-hourglass shape could become less visually defined when 'excess fat' is added. For these respondents, 'fat' may serve as the common 'enemy' for both men and women because, as Angier (2000, p. 1) contends, the concern with 'fat' is not confined to any particular population.

It is particularly striking that the respondents' comments suggested 'ideal' bodies were positioned as desirable because of what they were not – 'fat'. As highlighted above, respondents could recount numerous situations where they were exposed to anti-'fat' discourses through their parent's concern and self-surveillance with their own physical size, appearance, and weight. Instances such as these may have served to educate and illustrate how to be in a body – experiences that may have been reinforced by being coupled with appearance teasing at school by friends and peers and at home by siblings. Being the recipient of negative appearance commentary may have engrained the belief that a 'fat' body is to be avoided because there are real-world punishments in the form of stigmatisation, social belittling, and exclusion (Gailey, 2022; Keel, Forney, Brown, & Heatherton, 2013; Puhl & Latner, 2007; Puhl & Brownell, 2001). It stands to reason for many of these respondents that the desirability of the 'ideal' body may be guided by a fear of 'fat' and the problems often associated with having such a body type (Rinaldi et al., 2020).

Under such circumstances, it is understandable that these respondents had internalised the belief that developing and maintaining an 'ideal' body should be a central concern for their lives moving forward. Several respondents commented about having made some progress on their quest for visual perfection. As one respondent said: *"I looked just like the pictures, I had veins showing over my abs. There's a lot of effort that went into it, it consumed me"* (NZM55), while others may not have developed the perfect body they had spent much of their time, money, and energy to do so but fell short: *"it didn't seem to matter what I did I could never lose the weight. For 15 or so years I tried and couldn't make it happen"* (AUM52). These quotes demonstrate that, regardless of the body type they did or did not produce, a great deal of time and effort had been focused on body modification and having an 'ideal' body. It would not be easy to transition from organising their time, effort, and beliefs from producing and/or maintaining an 'ideal' body to embracing what they perceived to be a body they had spent much of their lives trying to avoid being. However, respondents' body image experiences are not reducible to only historical, developmental experiences. As Cash (2008) notes, it

is vital to understand the historical influence of people's past, which shapes how people come to understand bodily meanings, but this needs to be coupled with an understanding of the current influences in people's day-to-day life that may reinforce or reframe these historical experiences.

For these respondents, ageing and changes in life circumstances were two dominant influences that incited many to challenge and resist accepting 'ideal' bodies as normative representations of what a body should be. As one respondent said: "*I can't stop getting older, and there's part of me that gets excited by the products that'll make me ten years younger but then there's another part of me that just wants to let it be what it'll be, that I need to adjust and respect that fact I'm getting older*" (AUM55). For this respondent, there was a clear desire to remain 'young' to the point that it 'excited' him, while the prospect of ageing is something that merely needs to be accepted. This comment also illustrates the internal tensions and negotiations that often come with significant bodily and life changes. While respondents often spoke about the desire to move beyond 'ideal' bodies because they were incongruent with their current-day lives, broader changes need to be acknowledged. Aligning themselves with 'realistic' bodies may mean accepting that their perceived 'youth' is over, and a significant part of their life is behind them. In this sense, these respondents may have been 'farewelling' a body – which may have been a source of great dissatisfaction in their lives, but nonetheless transitioning from one identity to the next. This transition may be highly symbolic, somewhat distressing, and potentially permanentised by feelings of grief and uncertainty.

While the ageing process was often put forward as an important reason respondents wanted to stop trying to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body, this often sat alongside several other associated reasons concerning respondents' particular life stage and changing priorities. There was a sense that respondents' use of the term 'realistic' applied to it being a 'realistic' representation of physical appearance and for the lifestyle they now wanted to live. The following comments illustrated this: "*it's a body that fits with my lifestyle now. I'm a mother and just don't have the time or desire to be in the gym five days a week or always to have the right meals prepared. I still care about my health, don't get me wrong, but being 5-10kgs heavier just fits with where I'm at in life*" (AUW44). Another respondent made a similar comment concerning the growing demands of being a parent: "*I used to be in the gym each night for two hours or so, but now I want to get home and my young fella, it's a tough one because I miss the gym and it's hurt my body image a bit with not being as muscular as I was, but I need to accept that now*" (AUM38). These comments suggest it was not simply a case of 'getting older' that made respondents begin to become disillusioned and resistant to 'idealised' bodies, but broader life changes that created considerable incongruences between the requirements

of developing and/or maintaining an 'ideal' body and the demands of their personal and professional lives. It may have been this recognition that made respondents pay attention to 'realistic' bodies when they first appeared in their newsfeeds and motivated them to explore social media pages such as 'The Moderation Movement'. If so, the positive influence social media, 'realistic' bodies, and body positive discourses had on the respondents' body image was paradoxically contingent on them not only being body image dissatisfied, but dissatisfied to a point that they had reached a realisation an alternative way of experiencing their body was needed.

One reason that pushed some respondents to this realisation was a critical awareness of the opportunity costs and sacrifices (i.e., missing family events because it conflicted with their gym schedule) often associated with efforts to be in an 'ideal' body. Respondents talked about being "*tired of spending all of my time going to the gym*" (AUM38) or being incredibly particular about what they would eat. As one respondent said, "*I was the one at parties, birthdays or whatever passing up eating nice food because I was worried about how many calories were in it*" (AUW36). Respondents were ready to experience their bodies in a new way. This was illustrated by the respondent who commented: "*it was after I looked in the mirror that I could see how exhausted I was, how much pain I was in and in that moment, I knew that I couldn't carry on that way something needed to change*" (AUW41). While they were aware of the positive rewards associated with trying to develop or maintain an 'ideal' body, this sat alongside an awareness that what they were doing was not sustainable nor having a positive impact for their body image and quality of life. The tension respondents faced while negotiating the opportunity costs of embodying an 'idealised' appearance compared to reorientating their embodiment to align with ageing and changes in life circumstances illustrate the body image implications that exist for people being multiply situated in their bodies and lives (Boero et al., 2020).

These findings suggest that respondents' body image ambivalences and negotiations may be centred on tensions between trying to negotiate with conflicting bodily discourses associated with the 'ideal' and 'realistic' body when shaping their own embodied experiences. This point is demonstrated by Grogan et al.'s (2004) work on female bodybuilders. The authors interviewed female bodybuilders who described the 'balancing act' they performed between muscularity and femininity to meet the complex demands of those within and outside the bodybuilding community. It may be that the respondents of this research were trying to conduct their own 'balancing act'. In the same way, the bodybuilders of Grogan et al.'s (2004) work commented on the 'balancing act' between muscularity and femininity, and respondents in this research were trying to negotiate with and balance the



perceived sociocultural rewards of having an 'ideal' body, the sacrifices and pain associated with trying to do so, and the allure of the 'realistic' body which closely aligned with their personal bodily needs as they aged and their lives changed.

What can these findings tell us more broadly about the relationship between social media and body image? Findings from this chapter give more weight to moving research away from positioning social media as having uni-directional 'effects' (Wykes & Gunter, 2005) on body image. For these respondents, social media played a role in enabling and challenging the development of a positive body image. Social media stands as a platform where respondents are able to view and engage with different body representations that simultaneously symbolise liberating and constraining ways of being in a body that respondents are negotiating with.

The findings in this chapter reinforce the need to make more significant strides in recognising and proactively dealing with social media as having conditional and temporal influences on body image (Buckingham, 2019; boyd, 2014). The ways respondents spoke about their historical body image experiences, embodied desires for the future, and how different influences entwined to shape their body image in particular ways gave an initial sense that they were in control of their body image and were 'outside observers' critiquing and reflecting on their body image. However, the way respondents commented that their decoding of 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies often changed, highlighted how important it is to remember that body image is a situated experience. This point means the interview responses should be engaged with as a discursive snapshot of the respondent's body image 'becoming's'. That is to say, the body image experiences outlined during the interviews were an insight into a much broader phenomenon taken at a particular point in time. For instance, the respondents' comments about their historical body image may have been shaped or 'coloured' by the bodily beliefs that happened to be 'top of mind' for them at the time, and they were most likely not providing 'The' account of their body image (Cash, 2008, Fisher, 1990).

The results of this chapter also give additional weight to the concerns of Williams and Ricciardelli (2014) that body image researchers only have a limited understanding of how people interpret media messages and representations of bodies, and illustrate why Couldry (2019, p. 37) is highly critical of "psychological approaches that interpreted media' effects' like a stimulus-response in a laboratory". Probing into the respondents' decoding process of 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies highlighted that social media did not have determinate 'effects' on their decoding process or body image experiences. Interviews helped reveal that respondents' body image experiences were not simple derivatives of

'ideal' bodies inciting body image dissatisfaction and 'realistic' bodies inciting body image satisfaction. Rather, respondents' body image was characterised by a series of interwoven and reflexive judgements, perceptions, beliefs, experiences, feelings, and reflections concerning the multiple meanings associated with 'ideal' and 'realistic' body representations. Negotiations were based on their historical experiences that denigrated the 'fat' body and praised the 'thin' body alongside their subjective experiences of pain and sacrifice many respondents went through to try to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body that was now incongruent with the demands of their current life stage.

Finally, the findings in this section highlight why body image researchers must provide people with the 'space' to share the complexities of how they decode different body representations in order to truly understand the depth of their body image experiences (Jarman et al., 2022). The initial questionnaire could not capture the respondents' complex body image processes and negotiations in simplistic, tick-box answers. Interviews gave respondents the time and space to share the true scale and shape of their body image experiences. For these respondents, their relationship with social media and body image was complex, multidimensional, fluid, and shaped by their negotiations with converging and contradicting bodily meanings and subjective experiences that incited body image (dis)satisfaction. Respondents' body image experiences were undoubtedly a 'moving target' that made it difficult to 'pin down'.

## 4.4: Conclusion

In Chapter 4, I began answering research question one and explored how respondents experienced their body image through social media. An important first step to answering this question is to know the particular type of body representations respondents are primarily engaging with on social media and understand how and why they are decoded and meaningfully understood in the ways that they are.

While questionnaire responses indicated that respondents found 'ideal' bodies appealing but also a source of their body image dissatisfaction, interviews revealed that this was only a fragment of how social media shaped respondents' body image. Interviews enabled the complexities, nuances, and fluidity of respondents' relationship with social media and body image to come to the fore. Respondents learned about the importance of 'ideal' bodies and the stigma socially associated with 'fat' through the appearance comments, modelling, and teasing from their family, friends, and peers. Moreover, the number of converging influences that reflexively shaped how respondents decoded 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies highlight the need to critically understand how people interpret representations from their world. This means exploring how particular interpretations intersect with others and the different ways meaning is shaped by broader social, cultural, historical, and political structures. Understanding the broader influences shaping how respondents decoded 'ideal' body representations illustrates a crucial point. It shows that social media did not influence respondents' body image experience by itself. This finding gives more weight to contemporary media research, which emphasises the conditional and limited influence social media has in influencing aspects of social life. The conditional and limited impact of social media in shaping body image is further highlighted by the respondents' motivation to challenge and resist 'ideal' bodies that appeared to come from ageing processes and changed life circumstances. It again highlights the impact broader structures and influences have in shaping how media representations are meaningfully engaged with and decoded. These broader life changes typically incited respondents to become aware of the incongruences between embodying an 'ideal' body and the desires and demands of their new life stage.

Social media's conditional and limited influence is further explored in the next chapter, which focuses on the role social media has in shaping respondents' exercise and self-representation practices.

## Chapter 5: Social Media Power

### 5.1: Introduction

In Chapter 5, I continue answering research question one by exploring the second research sub-question. Here I probe into the limitations and conditions of social media's power in shaping body image experiences – particularly exercise and self-representation practices.

This chapter further explores how social media helped respondents on their body image journeys and helped enable the development of a positive body image by bringing 'realistic' bodies into their lives. These body types helped respondents to learn alternative ways of experiencing their embodiment were available. However, analysis of respondents' interview comments revealed that the inclusion of 'realistic' bodies in their newsfeeds did not have the power to improve their body image and appearance-related practices in of themselves. These respondents had, of course, spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to avoid being this type of physical body type – 'larger', 'curvy', and 'fat'. Respondents still partly viewed 'realistic' bodies in a stigmatising way and had an underlying fear that the social capital built trying to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body would dissipate, leaving them to be teased or excluded as they once were. This made it challenging to alter exercise (i.e., reducing their exercise intensity and volume) and self-representation (i.e., posing to appear 'thinner', hiding self-perceived problematic body parts or digitally altering images) habits, despite an acknowledgement that their exercise and self-representation practices were, at times, dysfunctional and incongruent with how they wanted to experience their embodiment moving forward.

This chapter's findings illustrate how the respondents' body image was characterised by negotiating with conflicting positive and negative bodily meanings of 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies shaped by social, cultural, physiological, and historical influences. This finding meant social media, 'ideal', or 'realistic' bodies did not have a totalising or uni-directional impact on respondents' body image. Instead, their body image was highly ambivalent. Consequently, social media's 'power' in influencing respondents' body image, exercise, and self-representation practices was conditional and limited.

## 5.2: Exercise and Mixed Motivations

There are growing calls for body image researchers to be more critical in probing people's motivations for engaging in exercise. For instance, Gattario et al., (2018, p. 128) argue that determining if exercise practices are liberating or constraining "may depend on many different factors, such as the extent to which people base their self-worth on their appearance, the extent to which they engage and invest in appearance-related practices, which particular practices they engage in, and their motives for engaging in these". The findings outlined in this section illustrate the authors' point. The respondents commented about the tensions experienced in negotiating with the perceived positive and negative repercussions of altering their exercise practices. Even though respondents were aware of the positive impact doing so had on their body image, this was not a seamless transition because they were highly aware of the sociocultural stigmatisation that can accompany being in a 'bigger' body. The following section will outline the tension respondents faced in reframing their exercise practices to make them motivated by internal desires to improve their physical functionality and mastery, and promote bodily self-care.

### **Conflicting Body Image 'Becoming's'**

Respondents were making conscious efforts to stop exercising for appearance reasons. Many contended they needed "*daily reminders to resist impulses to exercise for appearance reasons*" (NZW37). In contrast, others only needed to remind themselves "*every now and then to not go back into being preoccupied with appearance*" (AUW41). Respondents spoke about making conscious efforts to stop being appearance-focused with their exercise by creating routines and rituals that placed self-care, functionality, and mastery as the primary outcome of their exercise practices. This is typified by the respondent who said: "*I started a habit of asking myself what I'm getting out of each workout or exercise I'm doing...if I want to go for a run, I ask myself 'will my health improve, will I be fitter from this run?'. I ask because I used to run if I'd eaten something 'bad' and wanted to burn the calories*" (AUM34). Another commented, "*I track my workouts to see if I'm getting stronger. It's a positive thing for me because I used to over-exercise and run my body into the ground to lose weight. So, by keeping a tab on if I'm getting stronger or not is an indicator I'm looking after myself and not over-doing it. The body needs rest to get stronger, you know*" (NZM39). The satisfaction that can come from body control and mastery is highlighted by the respondent who said: "*the gym for me is about being able to train my body to do cool stuff. I've got a lot more appreciation for that stuff. For me lifting weights became easy, you just go in there and do it. But to do tasks, push-ups and pull-ups, tasks that require a certain amount of brain power and focus and dedication and time is a lot harder and more rewarding than anything else*" (AUW44).

Based on the above comments, it is important to note that respondents' exercise practices did not necessarily need to change. Rather, they needed to reduce motivations to exercise for appearance focused reasons, i.e., weight loss or muscle gain, and increase their focus on exercising for self-care, functionality, and mastery related reasons. This is illustrated by the respondent who commented: "*I always ran to keep lean. It didn't matter if I was injured or overtired, I'd run. But now, I try and think about how my running is actually affecting my broader health and life. Sometimes the best thing is to stay home*" (AUW29). Social media pages like 'The Moderation Movement' and 'This Girl Can' helped reconfigure respondents' exercise motivations. Respondents' comments about the positive impact focusing on their body functionality had on their body image align with research that those who report feeling more significant control over their body are likely to be more satisfied with their body (Martin, Lichtenberger, Cash, & Pruzinsky, 2002). While appreciation for one's body functionality and mastery appears to be a fruitful target for promoting body image satisfaction (Tylka, 2019; Tylka, 2018; Halliwell, 2015), it is important to note how the respondent above did not comment on body functionality in isolation. This respondent critically reflected on the impact running, or not running, would have on her broader health and life. This comment illustrates that it was not a case of viewing 'realistic' bodies and body positive content and their motivations simply changing for the better. Body image experiences are shaped by multidimensional influences that can be highly contradictory and conflicting. Thus, it may be that making meaningful improvements in body image lies in people negotiating and trying to balance, as best one can, simultaneous experiences of body image dissatisfaction and satisfaction (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

Meaningful change required respondents to consciously reconfigure how they act in their bodies. This point aligns with the work of Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015), who found that when people meaningfully alter their behaviour in such a way that is aligned with body positive content, the positive impact of this content may be amplified. The authors argued that positive body image changes increased when viewing body positive content; women also changed, shaped, and altered their behaviours and environments positively. For instance, they sought out interpersonal relationships with others who had positive body image, kept away from harmful body-related talk, engaged in self-care practices like yoga, and avoided reading appearance-related magazines. It is essential to note that focusing on bodily functionality was a solution for these respondents; however, emphasising the body's performative capacities is unlikely to be a solution for everybody. For instance, while the above respondent felt they had improved their body image by focusing on their running practices running will not be an option for everyone. There are, of course, those with conditions that make running impossible for them, and individuals where running may be too 'advanced'. As noted in the literature

review, some studies show that individuals with disabilities report incorporating (Thomas et al., 2019) and not incorporating (Bailey et al., 2017) functionality into their broad definition of body image. Consequently, I agree with Thomas et al. (2019), who argue that body functionality research should recognise that bodies function differently which means what is considered 'functional' is likely to be highly subjective.

It is evident that respondents have a history of exercising for appearance motivated reasons as one respondent said: *"it's been a process to try and be less focused on what my body looks like and care more about what my body can do... I'm better at recognising when I'm more looks focused than I used to be, though"* (AUM48). Embracing change did not come easily for many of these respondents. One respondent reflected on going to such lengths to fit exercise into his day that he would routinely get up at 3am: *"there were days where I'd have too much on and couldn't get to the gym. That's why I joined a 24hour gym so that I could get one in anytime"* (NZM30). What made this interesting was that he did not enjoy exercising at this time and said it was the desire to build an 'idealised' physique that motivated him to do it: *"no pain, no gain, right? I hated when I'd have to train that early, but you know if I wanted to have the body then I've got to put in the work"* (NZM30). When I asked what he does to keep himself motivated, social media was an important aspect: *"I had this picture of Ulisses Jr [Fitness Influencer] saved on my 'Instagram' that I always go to. When I'm up at 3am, I'll lay in bed for a bit looking at the body part I'm training on him and just tune into it"* (NZM30). For many respondents, exercise still remained, in part, a socially required practice, and nothing would stop them from getting their workout in because the body it (re)produced symbolised social inclusion, improved life outcomes, and alleviated them from being teased, bullied, and rejected for their appearance – experiences they knew well and could readily relate to. In this sense, the motivation to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body was partly to avoid being treated as they once were.

There was a fear that reverting to their 'old body' would mean the positive experiences they were having as a self-perceived result of their 'new body' would stop. Several respondents commented that they could revert to exercising for appearance reasons because they did not want the positive comments about their looks to stop. This in of itself was interesting as it was as if these respondents became addicted to the positive reinforcement: *"I liked getting the comments about my physique, I didn't even have to do anything, and people commented about the kind of shape I'm in. If I'm honest it was actually pretty addictive"* (NZW39). Another reason why it may have been difficult for respondents to accept 'realistic' bodies is that they could readily recall instances where they had been stigmatised, excluded, or bullied because of their appearance. This was highlighted by the respondent

who commented: *"When I'm leaner, I get all the positive comments and praise. When you start to get a little bigger, it stops. People can even start to get concerned about me...poke fun that I'm less disciplined with my gym"* (NZM33). Another respondent commented on the praise that comes with being seen trying to develop an 'ideal' body: *"my workmates would always go on about how good I was, how disciplined I was with going to the gym before work. I never had abs or anything, not even close, but you still get the accolades for trying"* (AUM34). This respondent went on to say that he was cognisant of potentially losing the praise of others: *"I would worry that the positive comments would be gone forever, to be honest...I knew my body size would change because I was over-exercising to stay in shape"* (AUM34). There was an expectation held around the comments and treatment they received from friends, family, and the general public because of their physical appearance that some respondents did not want to lose. However, the respondents' desire for this positive commentary to continue may run deeper than enjoying pleasurable feedback. As shown in Chapter 4, these respondents are aware that 'larger' bodies were, and still can be, the subject of social exclusion, stigmatisation, and discrimination (Norman & Moola, 2019). The respondents may not want to lose the positive appearance commentary because it signifies a move toward being in a socially, culturally, and politically stigmatised body. These respondents appeared to be more concerned with not being 'fat' than being 'thin'. This is typified by the respondents who would comment about worrying *"positive comments would be gone forever"* (NZM29) or how appearance praise stops once they *"get a little bigger"* (AUW25). Such comments suggest that the allure of the 'ideal' body may lie in what it is not – 'fat'. Respondent comments illustrate the need to move beyond using simplistic bodily meanings to guide theory and research orientations – such as the sociocultural model positioning the 'ideal' body as dominant because it is 'thin' and 'toned'. Doing so means the true diversity of people's embodiment may go unresearched (Coleman, 2008; Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Carter & Weaver, 2003).

These respondents were highly aware that their body weight, shape, and size impacted how they were treated by others. This is highlighted by the respondent who said: *"I read these posts saying 'fat is beautiful,' but I know that being fat is the reason I was bullied at school, the reason people have not wanted to date me, and the basis of assumptions about my work ethic. Even if fat is beautiful for so much of the world, it isn't, and even if I change my view, others won't, and that's the hard part"* (AUW25). The connection between appearance and identity is further demonstrated by a young man who lost a substantial amount of weight and noticed how that impacted his social life: *"I think I'd lost about 20kg during the Christmas break from uni and when I came back and caught up with everyone people were like 'wow you've changed so much', and that was cool...I was tagged in this FB ['Facebook'] photo by someone I wasn't friends with, but they tagged me as 'skinny', and it made*



*me think that's how they see me now, and I'd worry about how that would change if I put it back on. Would I be tagged as 'fat' again? I was almost scared of that happening"* (NZM29). These comments demonstrate respondents' complex and tension-filled negotiations surrounding viewing 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies on social media. Even if this respondent is physically, emotionally, and mentally drained from trying to embody an 'ideal' physique and knows this pursuit is no longer sustainable, they still have first-hand experiences where they have been bullied at school, romantically rejected and had negative assumptions made about their work ethic because of their supposed appearance 'problems'. This respondent referenced three critical aspects of one's life: school, romance, and employment. It is curious how one respondent commented that even if they were to change their bodily views and become more accepting of 'realistic' body representations, *"others won't"* (AUW25). It highlights how entwined identity, appearance, and the perceptions of others can be.

The depth and gravity of respondents' negotiations are also illustrated by other respondents who found it challenging to become less focused on exercising for appearance reasons because they perceived their identity and how people engaged with them depended on their physical appearance. The following respondent readily illustrates this: *"as a young person, you're looking for the respect of your peers, you're looking to find your place, you're looking to stand out from the crowd. I wondered who I was and who I was going to be when I grew up. It was a time when big muscular men were celebrated. So, it was automatic to feel an affinity toward Arnold and these other guys"* (AUM52). This respondent went on to say that being muscular reaped social rewards: *"You walk into public places; people are like wow, and that is quite addictive. The head-turning, the compliments...you walk into any situation with a group of guys, and you automatically get 'hey, you're looking good bro', so there is an automatic respect you get from other men"* (AUM52). However, the tension for this respondent came from that fact he was beginning to age and his ability to maintain such a body was starting to wane: *"I'm getting older now, and I can't sustain this type of training anymore. I know that, but it's hard to stop because, for better or worse, it's been such a big part of my life. I'm not ready to let go of that yet"* (AUM52). These comments highlight that for many respondents, their body image was shaped by negotiating between aspects of 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies, which often simultaneously brought liberating and constraining experiences (Gill, 2008).

Respondents were making conscious efforts to remain aware of their body's physical capabilities because it served as a mechanism to prevent returning to dysfunctional exercise practices. As one respondent said: *"it's taken me a long time to realise this, but I am who I am. I'm loved, and my body has done amazing things. My body is to be looked after, not looked at, but that's something I need to*

*remind myself from time to time*" (AUW59), while another said: *"I treat my body from a place of self-care and love - not loathing and punishment. I exercise to nourish my body. This has and continues to take some practice. Every now and then, I need to catch myself from falling back into old habits"* (AUW44). These respondents' comments highlight how body image is a process characterised by multidimensional negotiations. To make meaningful and enduring changes to body image may require more than curating social media newsfeeds to decrease 'ideal' bodies and increase 'realistic' bodies. Despite a clear understanding that exercising for appearance-based reasons was often dysfunctional and harmful, they still struggled with *"falling back into old habits"*. Social media can play a critical role in introducing respondents to a new, positive way of experiencing their body and body image; however, the introduction did not lead to positive body image changes in of themselves. Alongside bringing 'realistic' bodies into their newsfeeds, respondents also made many broader changes to their cognitions, beliefs and feelings, and exercise practices to improve their body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Their experiences suggest a level of awareness is required to orientate themselves to move them toward experiencing their body in a positive, liberating way and away from harmful, constraining experiences. The way respondents spoke about 'catching' themselves *"falling into old habits"*, or *"reminding"* themselves to exercise from a place that emphasises functionality, mastery, and self-care demonstrates that body image is not a single or fixed phenomenon. These findings illustrate that social media's relative impact on body image is contingent upon other intervening influences (Klapper, 1960). This suggests that social media's power to shape body image is limited. However, a positive aspect of social media's limited influence means that it can be a tool implemented, among others, such as focusing on bodily function, self-care, and cognitive reminders, that can simultaneously work together to improve body image experiences.

In the next section, I focus on another important aspect of social media and body image. In the following pages, I explore social media's limited and conditional power in shaping respondents' self-representation practices.

### 5.3: Self-Representation Negotiation

For these respondents, self-representation was a vexing topic. While a number of respondents said they do not post images of themselves or indeed anything on social media, the vast majority spoke about the tensions faced in curtailing their desires to produce self-representations with a view of what others might be thinking about their appearance compared to posting image of who they authentically are.

Respondents were mindful of developing and representing a sense of identity that was not linked wholly to their physical appearance. Respondents often recounted how their self-representation practices were done in an objectified way in their younger years when they first started using social media. For instance, it was common for respondents to contend: *"I would care a lot about how I presented myself in my early twenties. I would never post anything where I thought I looked bad. But that was a time when I was very insecure and cared a lot about what other people would think about the way I looked. It's not really something I care about now"* (AUW33), while others would talk about they would take multiple photos to find the ones with the most *"flattering angles"*. This particular respondent went on to comment on the way digital cameras made this process much easier and motivated her to take large numbers of photos to get the right one: *"when you can take hundreds of photos on your phone and quickly go back and scan through you can make all of these little changes in how you're standing to make sure you don't have any fat rolls or that there's no double chin showing. It's easy to do, so you just do it, but it can make you incredibly picky about every little bit of your body"* (AUW33). The intensity of the inspections can be exacerbated by the ability to zoom in on photos and explore perceived problem areas in finer detail: *"Sometimes I would go through and look at my arms...I used to hate my arms...and find the best one where they looked thinner. Looking back, it was pretty bad that I put so much effort into it"* (AUW33). Many of the respondents were able to reflect on how they once represented themselves on social media and how they do now: *"I used to feel pressure to look naturally beautiful... appear that I rolled out of bed with perfect hair, brows, and body. But now I choose to share everyday things that are real-life moments and don't consciously think about the body image I'm portraying"* (NZW39). These comments highlight how the respondents' body image ambivalences appeared to centre on negotiations with external and subjective body image experiences. The respondents were caught between wanting to produce and circulate self-representations that *"other people"* would find acceptable compared with images that honoured and reflected who they intrinsically are in *"real-life moments"*. A part of these respondents' body image dissatisfaction may centre on experiencing their body in a disembodied way. In creating self-objectified self-representations, the respondents may be subverting their bodily subjectivities. While

self-representation may seem inconsequential these comments highlight how they can be inextricably linked to broader perceptions of the self.

One respondent was mindful the connection between appearance and identity, and made a conscious effort to make sure appearance was not the salient feature in his conversations with friends: *"it's the language we use; it's all about the language. When I see a friend, I say it's great to see you; it's removing physical appearance as part of who they are because it's not; when I go catch up with a friend, it's because they're awesome; it's got nothing to do with their body size, so it's important to remove the physical appearance from our everyday conversation"* (AUM20). This respondent went on to say this way of engaging with people was of greater importance on social media when commenting on photos: *"the hard thing about social media is that it's too easy to fall into appearance commentary. So, I'll always like and comment. I'll never just like. Otherwise, it might be seen as liking something about appearance. That's the good thing about commenting as well; you can say something nice and try and move the conversation away from appearance, which so much of social media is about"* (AUM20). There are critiques from some body image theorists that body positive content can still unduly place emphasis on appearance (Morris, 2019). While that may hold true for some individuals, the respondents of this research thrived from being a part of communities where they could see 'realistic' bodies on the screens that 'ideal' bodies had historically dominated. Social media became a space where many became inspired to share more of their self-representations to *"be a part of the solution, not the problem"* (AUM20), as one respondent said. Such a comment highlights how social media can help people fully participate in social life (Jenkins, 2009). Social media was able to help many of these respondents realise that they can *"move the conversation"* in a way they desire. This may be through overt comments or simply 'liking' images of 'realistic' bodies. Doing so may not lead to widespread displacement of 'ideal' bodies. However, having the ability to engage in public discourse on social media may be incredibly liberating for people who have been socially excluded, belittled, and stigmatised because of their body and guided by a belief that they need to be 'thin enough' to be seen or heard. In this sense, social media can play an important role in improving body image because it can help give the 'voiceless a voice' even if on a small scale.

Respondents were making conscious efforts to produce self-representations that showcased their 'true' selves and broader lives. This is illustrated by the respondents who commonly talked about using social media to *"share photos of holidays, pets and hobbies for friends and family who are overseas to see. So, I'm in a lot of the photos, but it's not about me anymore... it's about showing what I'm doing, what my family is doing"* (NZW39). Using social media to document and share images of family events

and their children was now an essential element of their social media use: "*I'm more interested in my children than worrying about what myself or other people look like online*" (NZW39). This, however, was not to say old beliefs could not re-emerge. Respondents were in a precarious position where they were consciously aware of the social pressures to conform with working toward an 'ideal' body along with the social capital that can come from having such a body (for those respondents who believed they had closely approximated the 'ideal' body) versus their subjective sense of who they are. These comments align with Cash (2008), who makes a critical point about the attitudes and behaviours of individuals who are the most resilient to threats and challenges to their body image. According to the author, these individuals may: "enjoy looking nice, as a simple pleasure in their relationship with themselves, but not because they think life is a beauty contest or because their worth as human beings is dictated by conforming to some social standard of physical perfection" (p. 45). One could argue that these respondents improved their body image, exercise, and self-representation practices partly because they broadened their lives and used their bodies to do more things than be a particular shape, weight, and size. To draw on Cash and Pruzinsky (2002), these respondents added more aspects to their lives, creating more body images. This is, of course, a mildly awkward phrase. However, it conveys that they have invested in many other things for self-fulfilment in their lives. This perspective is reflected in the following respondent comment: "*the problem might be that I spent so long looking at the ideal body and comparing every other part of my life to that and ignored all the other parts that were actually really positive. It's not like I used to be constantly reminded about what my body can do compared to now when I can share and go back and look at my hiking trips and things like that online*" (AUM62). This response reinforces the point Couldry (2019, p. 34) makes: "to bring us back to the reality of what media do, it is worth writing the word 'representing' with a hyphen, as in 're-presents. Media present us with a world for our reactions...but this is always a re-presentation, just one way that the media have chosen to present to us what they have heard, read or seen". It may be a case of needing to simultaneously broaden people's bodily experiences and social media representations and teach them about the fallacies of the 'ideal' body that all work together to create meaningful change.

Respondents' comments in this section illustrate that self-representations on social media present difficulties and conflicts for body image. Still, they can be a political practice (Morris, 2019) and a source of personal liberation (Lee-Won et al., 2014). Much has been made about social media users' ability to present their physical appearance more selectively in online interactions (Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards, & Churchill, 2019). They can exert greater self-censorship over their physical appearance because images can be carefully selected, enhanced, and edited (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Social media users can also attempt to control their self-representation by limiting or removing

perceived unflattering photos on social media (Lang & Barton, 2015). However, some of these respondents illustrated that the opposite is also true. Social media self-representation can also be a tool for resisting and subverting the emphasis often placed on 'ideal' appearance in innocuous ways. I am drawn to the respondent who would "*share photos of holidays, pets and hobbies*" (NZW39) to improve body image. It seems almost strange that holidays, pets, and hobbies could feature in body image improvement and self-representation conversations. However, possibly unknowingly, this respondent demonstrated a critical understanding of media literacy and the significance of representation on social media. This respondent understood the latent meaning created by posting self-representations of herself on holiday, with her pet, and engaging in her hobbies. She aptly said, "*it's not about me anymore... it's about showing what I'm doing*" (NZW39). This can have a profound impact on one's body image and that of others. On the one hand, such images show the body in action, aligning with body image satisfaction and functionality research (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010). However, on the other hand, the way she says images are not about her anymore suggest she is trying to integrate 'realistic' bodies with the world around us to help illustrate their normality. While this type of self-representation may seem banal, they become a form of activism when placed within the broader historical, social, cultural, and political context of 'fat' bodies being something that should be avoided and hidden (Morris, 2019).

### **Digital Alterations**

Without touching on digital manipulation, any study on social media and self-representation would not be complete. Much has been made across both academic and social life regarding "the visual and technological features that some social media sites offer [which] may increase the ability of individuals to enhance their own images and... increase the likelihood that users will see those images" (Kim & Chock, 2015, p. 337). However, many of these respondents demonstrated a critical awareness of digital manipulation techniques. According to one respondent: "*having it spelled out to me that the media pressures us with images that are so unrealistic. They have make-up artists, personal trainers, and stylists. Take that all away, and they'll look like everyone else. It's unrealistic to compare to celebrities and models, so it doesn't matter if I buy your specially designed training plan; I'll never have the other things to make a body like that*" (AUW29). The respondents showcased a high level of awareness of particular individuals, such as celebrities and models having access to resources that would help create and sustain an 'ideal' body that the broader population and themselves did not have. On this level, the 'ideal' body is still seen as attainable but only through "*make-up artists, personal trainers, and stylists*" (AUW29), which they did not have. This view may position the 'ideal' body as unobtainable and not a body they should try and emulate; however, it may leave respondents

with a lingering belief that they theoretically could have such a body if their economic standing were higher for instance. Such a view may ultimately be unhelpful for improving body image and could lead to feelings of broader dissatisfaction with their lives.

Many pointed to body positivity pages such as 'The Moderation Movement' when asked where they learned about the contrived nature of many body representations on social media. One respondent said: *"these pages are really educational. There's always a lot of posts about it being ok to be in a bigger body, but there can be a strong emphasis on the tricks the media use to make the ideal body so ideal all of the time"* (AUM30). It was interesting that several respondents made similar comments but referenced the idea of 'media literacy'. One respondent made a comment: *"media literacy is something 'The Moderation Movement' has taught me. I think it's all well and good to show different body types, but we need to learn how to make sure we aren't harmed in the future as well because there are still influencers and all that out there posting stuff that can be really triggering for a lot of people. Me included"* (NZW27). Media literacy appeared to help build a perceptual distance between respondents and 'idealised' body representations. It enabled respondents to thoughtfully analyse and critique body representations, messages, motives, and methods social media content producers use to persuade people to buy into these discourses.

Respondents realised that images of 'idealised' women and men on social media can be digitally altered to appear 'perfect' and flawless. This knowledge reinforced the belief that these 'ideal' bodies are unattainable - because they are a digital mirage, and helped them recognise that they could waste valuable time, effort, and money trying to reach an appearance standard that they are never going to achieve. As one respondent said: *"I'm always going to see something that triggers me, so learning to recognise that the perfect body isn't actually perfect, knowing that companies have made it that way to make me want to buy products helps to me step back and recognise the negative feelings I might have in that moment aren't authentic"* (NZW37). This is a belief that many of these respondents held, which helped them to navigate social media in a way that helped them maximise the positive and minimise the negative impact on their body image. Despite there being positive steps made in improving the diversity of body representations on social media and across media platforms and advertising more broadly, it is unlikely images of 'ideal' bodies will be removed completely. There is a strong case for removing photo-shopped and digitally altered images that produce unobtainable body types. However, certain people may be physiologically predisposed to carrying less body fat and/or more adept at building and maintaining muscle (Florescu, 2016). This means that developing a protective filter that can be employed in situations that may incite body image dissatisfaction for

particular individuals may be a valuable way to maintain a positive body image across varying situations (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2021).

### **The Limitations of Media Literacy**

For these respondents, media literacy certainly made them aware of the constructed and posed nature of the 'ideal' body. Still, importantly it may be that media literacy also incited them to rethink some of their historical experiences, which in a sense, taught them about the body: *"When I started to learn a bit more about how companies can profit from making society dissatisfied with their appearance it makes me think about my mum and that she was probably in the same position as me"* (AUW25). The respondents' body image seemed to improve markedly because of media literacy practices. That said, it is certainly not a perfect solution. Social media is still implicated in triggering body image problems. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that social media has meant they can engage with alternative modes of embodiment that have improved their body image. In one case, a respondent thought that media literacy meant he could: *"be in charge of what I think about my body, it's not always that I'm not good enough in comparison to them...they aren't a standard I have to measure myself against now"* (NZM33). It may be that increasing their media literacy meant they were no longer comparing themselves to a narrow 'ideal' they would never fit as they were shown to be fictitious.

Recent studies have found that media literacies can be a helpful prevention method and tool in helping protect women and men from body image dissatisfaction. According to McLean et al. (2016a, p. 3), media literacy is "characterised by the ability to think critically about media in general...and in particular the ability to make an assessment about how realistic or unrealistic a media image is". It is believed that arming people with media literacy skills will disrupt the social comparisons made with 'idealised' body types (Halliwell et al., 2011). One respondent said that after learning more about the media, she would *"always think in the back of my mind things they might do to make the photo a bit better and in day to day they may not actually look like that as such. They probably have bloat as well, or sometimes I think the image can be a little bit played with. Especially some of the big Instagrammers because they probably get paid a certain amount for the posts they do, so it's like their job to look perfect"* (AUW41). While these respondents spoke about media literacy, what they referenced seemed closer to media education (Buckingham, 2019). Importantly, this is not a 'quick-fix' strategy for improving body image. Instead, these respondents were embarking on a journey of comprehensive and critical understanding of the way social media operates.



These respondents were not simply judging bodies as being 'realistic' or 'unrealistic'; they were becoming proactive, critical processors of the discourses they engaged with (Grogan, 2017). They were learning to understand social media as a platform that can facilitate a range of influential individuals, institutions, and companies to produce and circulate discourse for many motives (Couldry, 2012). Respondents were starting to think about where particular bodily discourses are coming from, i.e., who is producing them and why they are being presented in the manner they are. The respondent highlighted this point who referenced 'Instagrammers' maintaining an 'idealised' figure because they "*get paid a certain amount*" for their posts. Such a comment touches on a level of growing critical thinking that goes beyond seeing the 'ideal' body is still seen as attainable but only through "*make-up artists, personal trainers, and stylists*" (AUW29), as the respondent above said. It demonstrates an engagement with the broader influence and economic motivations that help explain why images of 'ideal' bodies are posted on social media. This knowledge may help the respondents see that 'ideal' bodies' social and cultural dominance is not natural, i.e., because they are 'healthy'. Instead, they are often artificially constructed to create feelings of body image dissatisfaction to effectively market and sell products and services that will supposedly facilitate and produce an 'ideal' body (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). While most of these respondents could not specifically cite particular influences potentially at play, i.e., the diet industry, they showed signs of critically reflecting on social media images in multi-dimensional ways. It may be that as respondents increase their level of awareness around the powerful influences that use social media to produce and circulate particular body representations for economic or political reasons, they may generate a more robust protective filter against 'ideal' bodies.

## 5.4: Conclusion

The results of this chapter illustrate the dialogic nature of the respondents' engagement with their body and highlight the limited and conditional influence social media had in shaping their exercise and self-representation practices.

Notably, 'realistic' bodies did help enable respondents on their body image journeys by providing them with alternative bodily discourses, which incited them to focus on what their body can do instead of how it looked. However, their body image did not simply improve by focusing on how far they could now run or the heavier weights they could lift in the gym and posting self-representations of these developments. The respondents were caught in negotiations with many different and conflicting influences working to shape and re-shape their bodily beliefs and body image. Many of these respondents still viewed 'realistic' bodies in a stigmatising way. Many had an underlying fear that the social capital built trying to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body would dissipate, leaving them to be teased or excluded as they once were. This fear challenged respondents' process of developing a positive body image and made it difficult for many of them to fully embrace focusing on bodily functionality, self-care, and mastery or post-self-representations that did not reflect an 'idealised' appearance. The tension respondents experienced may have come from their bodies not being isolated or singular; instead, they were multiply situated. Respondents were caught between wanting to conform to the demands of sociocultural appearance expectations because they were aware of the rewards and punishments associated with meeting the outlined standards or not. This point contrasted with their subjective experiences of wanting to experience their embodiment in a new way because of the physical and emotional pain many associated with trying to develop an 'ideal' body as their life circumstances change; and their newfound pleasures of focusing on bodily functionality, self-care, and mastery or posting what were a re-presentation of what reflected the most joyful ways of experiencing their body. Thus, aligning their embodiment with either 'ideal' or 'realistic' bodies had perceived positives and negatives, which appeared to drive their constant negotiations.

The results of this chapter illustrate that no single influence has determinate effects or totalising power to shape respondents' relationship with social media and body image – their body image is complex and not predictable in any simple way. In other words, social media, 'ideal', and 'realistic' bodies did not have a uni-directional or totalising influence on the respondents' body image. In Chapter 6, closer attention is paid to the mediated nature of social media to answer the third research sub-question: How do the social affordances of social media shape respondents' social media

practices; and, in turn, body image? In this chapter, it will become clearer how broader social contexts would reflexively shape social media practices and body image experiences.

## Chapter 6: Social Media Practices

### 6.1: Introduction

In Chapter 6, closer attention is paid to the mediated nature of social media to answer the third research sub-question that centres on how the social affordances of social media reflexively shaped respondents' social media practices; and, in turn, body image.

This chapter outlines the blurred relationship between social contexts and situations, specifically work, life partners, respondents' social media practices, and body image experiences. Respondents recounted numerous instances of the connection between being in specific social contexts where others commented about the desirability of 'ideal' bodies, the importance of rectifying 'problematic' body parts, or the acceptability or unacceptability of different body types, and respondents then seeking out or paying more attention to images of 'ideal' bodies on social media.

This chapter also outlines how respondents learned to deal with problematic social situations to avoid becoming body image dissatisfied. I also outline a surprising finding surrounding the impact mood could have on social media practices and body image. Respondents spoke about having 'bad body image days' or being in bad moods that could drive them to actively seek and follow pages based on developing an 'ideal' body. However, respondents spoke about learning to deal with broader situations and recognising particular moods, and implementing strategies that could shape their social media practices and body image in more positive ways.

The data analysis in this chapter indicates how respondents' social media practices have become embedded within broader parts of social life to the point that their social media practices and body image reflexively shaped one another. Findings in this chapter highlight why it is vital for body image researchers to socially, culturally, politically, and historically embed social media's connection with body image in particular situations and contexts because it can shape this relationship in constraining and liberating ways.

## 6.2: Mediation

Mitchell, Petrie, Greenleaf, and Martin (2012, p. 163) make the point that "messages about weight, appearance, diet and body size can be communicated not only by the media but also the people who are in one's social environment", however, in this chapter I outline how body image influences do not operate in discrete, linear ways, i.e., the media or social environment. Contemporary (social) media audiences have become increasingly embedded in complex-mediated landscapes or 'convergence cultures' (Jenkins, 2006). As "audiencing becomes ever more embedded in the complex and diverse structures of modernity" (Livingstone, 2016, p. 6), the distinction between participating in society through physical and digital means has become increasingly blurred as the two worlds merge. In the following section, I explore how reflexively embedded social context, social media, and body image were for these respondents. I begin this exploration with the workplace.

### **The Workplace**

The workplace was one of the most often spoken about 'offline' contexts that could influence social media practices and body image. The respondents all worked in some capacity – be it part-time or full time. One of the issues the respondents faced was not the line of work or physical space they were in but the individuals they worked alongside. Respondents recounted the frequent struggles they faced in dealing with and mitigating the harm caused by co-workers who held and overtly shared anti-‘fat’ beliefs (Powroznik, 2017).

Several respondents found it challenging to engage with their work colleagues. Specific conversations and behaviours could trigger respondents' own negative appearance beliefs. This point is aptly illustrated by the respondent who said: *"Being at work can be really, really harmful for my body image because, basically, during our lunch breaks, a lot of my workmates will start talking about what they're eating or not eating so they can lose weight... it's honestly tough to sit there and listen to that and not start thinking that I should start dieting or that I should be worrying more about what I eat"* (AUW36). Another respondent made a similar comment about being surrounded by dieting conversations and finding an appropriate location to have lunch with work colleagues: *"We go out for lunch I'd say once a week, and it's always the same old bullshit about not going here because it's too carb-heavy or not this place because there's no healthy food...I know other people can still be caught up in worrying about their body unnecessarily, and I can't control that but it can spark that little voice in my head that says I should be more critical of food choices"* (AUM34).

This respondent shared how harmful appearance commentary in the workplace can be: *"it can start this cycle where I think I need to lose some weight, and then I think no remember how harmful all of that is, and I try to remind myself that it's just my body image problems coming out"* (AUM34). Experiences such as these had long-lasting impacts on the respondent's body image behaviour. He spoke in more depth about the cycles he can often experience: *"One night I wanted pizza, but I thought about my work lunches, and that kind of food will probably lead to me putting on weight, so I'd head off to get something healthy, but then I'd think I should get the pizza because I want it and if I don't it's just my fears winning... it's happened before where I'll drive around town thinking about what I should have"* (AUM34). These offline situations were harmful at the time; however, they had the potential to shape respondents' social media practices in negative ways. The flow-on influence is illustrated by the respondent who said: *"without really knowing it, I can start to pay more attention to exercise stuff on my socials. Before I know it, I'm back on fitness influencers' pages looking into their programmes and diets to get the perfect body"* (NZW27). The experiences of this respondent highlight how entwined the multiple influences that shape body image can be (Gill, 2008). In this situation, is it fair to contend that social media is the cause or dominant influence of their body image dissatisfaction? I do not think so. To do so ignores the broader context of the respondent. The respondents' body image dissatisfaction cannot be explained solely by the 'offline' workplace influences or social media. Instead, their body image dissatisfaction is a process that 'becomes' from various influences working together in particular ways at particular times. This is why the 'Critical Body Image Model' is helpful in body image research. It can help frame the complex, multidimensional, and fluid nature of influences shaping body image and illustrate how people make sense of themselves, their bodies, and body image within complicated and contradictory discursive flows (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Carter & Weaver, 2003).

A handful of respondents were critically aware of the negative impact situations like these could have on their body image and were able to implement strategies that reduced the possibility of that happening. Understandably, such an endeavour was not easy. Many of the respondents commented about *"trying to keep aware of what I'm looking at my social media feeds to make sure I don't slip back into all the ideal body stuff"* (NZW27); however, it was challenging because many found anti-'fat' discourses could unduly influence them. Respondents varied in the strategies used to stamp out harmful body image incidents. While some respondents tried to remove themselves from potentially triggering situations, one respondent was far more vocal and forthright in confronting such situations. This respondent spoke about his willingness to challenge people about negative body commentary. He commented, *"it's tough and challenging when some dick says something out of line. You know, it's*

*never socially appropriate to comment on anyone's body size or food or whatever, but people do it. It's become the norm, it's socially acceptable, but it's not. People need to get called out, and I do; it's really uncomfortable, but if I don't do it, then they will continue to do it, so if you don't create that barrier like a boundary, it's going to be never-ending"* (NZM39). Notably, respondents such as this one recognised the need to actively deal with these situations if they were to make meaningful changes to their body image. While there was only one respondent who commented about actively challenging people, several others took a more subtle approach and spoke about learning to become more resilient: *"It showed me that I needed to develop resilience to the outside things, like being at work...even if what they're doing and saying is not right, I can't expect them to change overnight. So, I would try and come up with things I could do next time people say shit that triggers me. I would role-play these situations"* (NZW37). This particular respondent went on to talk about mentally replaying situations they had historically experienced: *"This girl I work with always talks about how much weight she needs to lose, and it's quite triggering for me...I think about what I can say back to her or things I can do to help keep me in a good headspace"* (NZW37). While respondents had different ways of dealing with troubling situations, I do not believe there is one better way of engaging with people's triggering appearance commentary. The way one respondent commented about people needing to be *"called out"* for their harmful appearance commentary could be considered aggressive for some individuals. In that case, role-playing practices may be better suited as this practice can help prepare the individual to deal with problematic situations in ways that are tailored to the context at hand. As such, it may be a case of a particular solution fitting specific individuals and their communication style or personality type.

Learning to deal with problematic 'offline' situations appears to be beneficial in helping build a positive body image because it can help make respondents' day-to-day lives more positive. It may also help stop them from becoming body image dissatisfied and seeking out 'ideal' bodies on social media, as the respondent above commented. For these respondents, an essential part of using social media to develop a positive body image appears to require the management of their 'offline' experiences as well as their specific social media practices. Such a point illustrates how the relationship between social media and body image cannot be understood in a vacuum. In a mediated era where social media platforms, the social and technological affordances provided, and people's everyday 'offline' experiences are increasingly tethered together and reflexively shape each other (Livingstone, 2016), the lines become blurred between where particular influences start and stop. This illustrates why it is necessary to research how social media shapes body image holistically.

### Life Partners and Romance

Another frequently referenced aspect of respondents' broader life that could trigger negative appearance beliefs was their home life. In particular, the actions and comments of their life partners. This is interesting as it runs counter to the idea that appearance is significant in the initiation of romantic relationships but less so in long-term relationships where personality traits, dispositions, and compatibility become more salient features (Davison, 2012; Sitton & Blanchard, 1995).

Interestingly, both women and men commented that they sometimes felt social media images of 'idealised' bodies could trigger an underlying belief that they must be 'thin' to be seen as romantically desirable. For instance, one man commented, "*I've been with my partner for five years, but I still think about my weight...when we first met, she would talk about liking my shape, and even though she says it doesn't matter now I still think 'well that was what you found sexy then why would it have changed'...it can make me really mindful of my body still*" (NZM33). Similar to this respondent, women often contended they felt insecure about their appearance around their romantic partners. As one said: "*You see pictures of perfect women and start to think, is that what my husband is looking at? Does he want me? Does he expect me to look like that? I mean, it's not going to happen; I've had kids, and I'm in my forties! But there still this little bit of me that worries that compared to them [social media images], I'm not enough and never will be, not now*" (NZW42). These respondents looked to social media images as a point of reference for what they should be; despite providing some logical reasons why comparing themselves against these images was not sensible and fair, they would still revert to these problematic practices. Respondents' first-hand experiences of being marginalised because of their 'non-normative' bodies may have led to strongly ingrained anti-'fat' beliefs. While respondents have been working to dismantle these beliefs, it may be that these harmful beliefs can resurface and incite respondents to make appearance comparisons with 'ideal' bodies and 'worry' that they are "*not enough*" compared to them.

Comments in these sections illustrate how time-consuming body image negotiations can be. The way respondents commented about their 'little worries' about fitting with 'ideal' body standards and the numerous questions they asked themselves about the 'ideal' body and perceived expectations from their romantic partners to conform to it are understandably cognitively demanding and hurtful. It is important to recognise that in writing about body image 'becomings' and negotiations within a respondent's body image, there are still particular experiences of body image dissatisfaction that have harmful impacts on their embodied lives. For instance, the respondent's comments about having thoughts of whether her husband still 'wants her' and worrying that he may expect her to approximate



an 'ideal' body more closely are undoubtedly upsetting thoughts. It is critical to remain aware of this and not let such harmful experiences become a part of the complexity characterising body image and, in a sense, leave it there. A crucial part of research like this will be to pull out the negative and constraining experiences, shine a light on them, and pose potential ways to mitigate or move past them.

It was worrying talking with respondents who could become body image dissatisfied from such simple situations as being at home. According to one respondent: "*when I'm at home with my partner, I'll think about how I'm sitting so I don't slouch and have my fat roll showing...I worry that he looks at girls like Kayla [Fitness Influencer] and thinks she's hot and then sees me and thinks, look at how fat she is...I don't want him to think of me like that, so I'm mindful of it, I suppose*" (AUW36). In this example, her objectifying gaze has influenced how she sees much of her life to the point that trivial matters of sitting are analysed and held to account. In this sense, body image dissatisfaction should be viewed as emerging not from a perception that one's body is incongruent with appearance norms themselves, but as a derivative of appearance standards associated with sexism written onto the body (Bartky, 1990; Wolf, 1991). Such a comment speaks to how ingrained the importance of 'idealised' appearance can be and illustrates why many of these respondents have struggled to diminish their body image dissatisfaction despite a critical body image awareness of what they needed to do to become primarily body image satisfied. This comment and the recounted situation demonstrate how tethered appearance can be with broader aspects of one's life, such as being in a successful romantic relationship. With such an important part of life perceived as contingent on the way one looks, it is understandable that many of these respondents have felt pressured to develop and maintain an 'idealised' appearance. This respondent's comment highlights how often body image negotiations may occur. Even when sitting at home, this respondent is still aware of how her body is positioned and how others may perceive her. Doing so would understandably be cognitively demanding and suggests that many of these respondents' body image negotiations were a dominant feature throughout their day, i.e., from work to home. It stands to reason that many respondents may have found it difficult to immerse themselves in the situation at hand as part of their mind was so frequently devoted to taking an objectified view of themselves. More broadly, the respondents, and people with body image issues, could sacrifice much of their mental capacity and ability to focus due to frequent body image worries and negotiations.

Research has suggested there are gender differences regarding the importance of physical attractiveness in dating. This has been shown in personal advertisements where "men seeking women

emphasise slenderness and sexiness (conventional expressions of physical attractiveness), whereas women seeking men mention physical attractiveness less frequently and focus more on status, permanence, and affluence" (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007, n.p). This difference reflects traditional expectations that women should be objects of beauty and men be providers of security. However, men in this research also felt their appearance was crucial in finding love. "*I was on 'Facebook' and read an article that said women like guys with abs and big arms... It makes sense... it's what I see all the time online*" (AUM30). Respondents often commented about the health and fitness pages on social media, posting articles that outline what parts of the body the opposite sex finds romantically and sexually attractive. This respondent went on to say: "*articles often describe how body parts should look to be of interest to girls. It's always about exercising and dieting to build muscle size and reduce fat to make upper body parts big and toned*" (AUM30). Once again, 'idealised' appearance is perceived as being connected with developing and maintaining a romantic relationship. With appearance being inexorably linked to such an enriching aspect of life, it further illustrates why these respondents have spent so much of their lives focused on appearance surveillance and regulation.

### **Mood**

One unanticipated finding was the impact mood could have on social media practices and body image. Respondents spoke in broad ways about having "bad days" or being in "bad moods". The respondents could not determine the reason for their bad moods. However, many would recount how being in a bad mood could make them more susceptible to becoming body image dissatisfied from viewing 'ideal' bodies.

These respondents commented about being influenced by 'ideal' bodies, especially when they felt vulnerable. For instance, one respondent commented: "*I would say that they do influence me to diet if I am already feeling bad about myself*" (NZW42), while another said: "*Often when I have a bad day, typically when I'm tired or run down from work, these images can send me into a cycle of restriction that is often accompanied by bouts of bingeing*" (AUM38). These comments highlight that respondents' body image dissatisfaction may originate outside of any genuine concern with their appearance. As one respondent said: "*I've learned to identify body image dissatisfaction as a sign that something else needs to be focused on in my life: self-care, stress management, communication in my relationship*" (AUW59), while another elaborated on this point further by saying, "*I think when I'm upset about something else in my life, I see these pictures and think wow ok if I look like that then the problem I have will be fixed. So, in a way, the body image problem is a sign of an issue elsewhere*" (NZW58). There were instances where respondents were not always cognisant of what triggered the

onset of these negative body image experiences. One respondent said, "*sometimes I'll be really unhappy with my body, but I don't know why. I've started to wonder if it's because I'll scroll through 'Instagram' when I'm waiting for my next job at work... it's like really quick scrolling, but maybe it's bad for my body image, and I don't even know it*" (NZM33).

The opposite was also put forward about "good moods" having a positive impact on their social media practices and body image. This was typified by the respondent who commented: "*I find that when I'm having a nice, good day, I'm a little more resilient to body images that can make me normally feel bad about myself*" (NZM47). Such a point was also put forward by another respondent who said, "*being in a good mood means I can deal with potentially upsetting things a lot better, but maybe, it makes me focus on the positive stuff in my feed more than the bad stuff*" (NZM23). Discussions about the unconscious impact of body image influences are difficult to traverse. There is nothing concrete in this respondent's comment to point to and illustrate how their body image changes due to unconscious impacts. Such is the nature of the unconscious – people are, of course, unaware of the influence at hand. However, this comment does help to reinforce the notion that body image is not a pre-formed mental representation that remains relatively static across situations. The respondent was aware that their body image could transform, change, and become in different ways as they scrolled through their social media feed. For these respondents, being aware that their body image can vary in a particular situation without pinpointing the specific influence on social media is nonetheless a positive step in orientating oneself to promote body image satisfaction more often. Significantly, this general awareness may help them begin probing their social media practices more critically (Jarman et al., 2022).

These comments illustrate the point of Thompson et al. (1999) who argue that people can often not be consciously aware of the event that incited particular body image experiences. This point is clearly illustrated by the respondent who said, "*I'll be really unhappy with my body, but I don't know why*" (NZM33). It stands to reason that these respondents may have been audience members for a range of content and messages they were not consciously aware of. The way this respondent said he could often "*scroll through 'Instagram'*" quickly when waiting for his next job to start suggests a level of passive social media viewership where he is not critically decoding texts viewed. This type of practice may be particularly problematic for this group of respondents trying to improve their body image. This is a concept elaborated on by Lealand and Zanker (2006, p. 1), who makes the apt point: "we all are members of media audiences... We can be willing, unwilling and accidental members of media audiences. We offer our time and attention to all kinds of media". It may be that respondents can be

"unhappy" with their body due to quickly scrolling past an 'ideal' or 'realistic' body image that triggers underlying anti-'fat' beliefs. There is also the chance that other social media content has shaped their body image on an unconscious level they are not aware of (Izydorczyk, Sitnik-Warchulska, Lizińczyk, & Lipowska, 2020; Paquette & Raine, 2004). It is not easy to make concrete statements about social media's influence on respondents' body image, even when they provide clear insights and reflections on particular influences and how they perceive them to be shaping their body image. In a situation like this, where even the respondents are unsure, there is a world of possibilities that could explain how respondents' moods and social media practices shape their body image.

One of the primary problems respondents faced in dealing with situations that could trigger body image dissatisfaction was their ability to seamlessly re-engage with social media pages dedicated to 'ideal' bodies. Social media is embedded in the textures and routines of many aspects of people's everyday lives. Respondents touched on the fact that they were able to access and view 'ideal' bodies far more frequently due to the portability of smartphones and the near-constant access to social media through digital connectivity: *"If you want them, or even don't, they are always there every second or third post they're there. I don't think I'm always sitting there thinking 'oh look at how skinny her waist is', but I see it, it's there"* (NZW28). Another respondent made a similar comment saying *"every time I go online, even when there's other positive stuff I'm seeing, you know, like my friends and family and what they're getting up to, I still always see these bodies. It does, I guess, always keep it in the front of my mind...like, that I need to look like that"* (AUM20). However, it is important not to blame social media for this. Jenkins, Mizuko, and boyd (2016, p. 11) make the point that technologies "may be accessible and adaptable to multiple kinds of users. They may encode certain values through their terms of use and through their interfaces. But ultimately, those technologies get embraced and deployed by people who are operating in cultural contexts that may be more or less participatory". For this particular respondent, it may be the case that he consciously or unconsciously embraces 'ideal' bodies due to being in a cultural context that celebrates and idolises 'thin' and 'toned' bodies. As shown in the sections above, these respondents seemed to find themselves situations where anti-'fat' discourses were dominant. This may be why even after decreasing the number of 'ideal' bodies they were viewing on social media, the importance and desirability of 'ideal' bodies were kept 'in the front' of respondents' minds.

Another potentially harmful aspect of social media is that respondents were able to view appearance commentary that was not directed at them but still impacted them. Several respondents commented about family and friends posting comments on 'Facebook' about diets, weight loss, and body

modification that were upsetting and triggering for them: "*I read comments they [parents] make on fitness people's posts saying 'oh, I need to lose 5kg before summer' and it makes me start to go back to my old ways of thinking, like maybe I could stand to lose a little weight but having my groups right there I can catch myself and put myself back into a positive headspace by spending some time on there. It gets me back on track*" (AUW25). This comment readily illustrates the blurring of our mediated mediascape. Here the negative influence of this respondent's parents has become mediated and entwined with problematic social media body representations (Jenkins, 2006). The lines between different body image influences become less clear; however, in this instance, it may be fair to contend that social media has further intensified the scope and scale of an existing problem rather than developing a new issue.

Social media users can circulate content on the same platform, and through the same screen space, as commercial producers – although there are factors, i.e., algorithms, that prioritise what people will see on their social media newsfeeds (Jenkins et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2006). Positioning 'realistic' bodies alongside 'ideal' bodies may help break down the traditional 'gap' between 'top-level producers and 'bottom' level consumers. This is highlighted by one respondent who said: "*commenting on an image of a normal body was inspiring, it was as if I was making this huge statement to me, my family and friends and even society that this is what I want, this is what I like, this is what I vote for. They say money talks but so does a little old like on 'Facebook'*" (AUW39). The way this respondent takes meaning from being able to comment on an image suggests that the power of social media may lie not only in the content that is circulated but that it enables a diverse range of people an ability to 'speak' and feel as though they are a part of the broader conversations circulating around us. While respondents themselves may not be focused on creating content, they do not have to wait for content to arrive. They can bring together a range of diverse knowledge, possibilities, and representations from all areas of social life, both locally and globally, that may have been previously marginalised or unknown to them. Being able to 'like', 'share', and 'comment' on 'realistic' bodies gave respondents a way to make meaningful statements to themselves and the world about the body type they align with.

Due to the mediated nature of social life, when it comes to the relationship between social media and body image, it is not a simple matter of identifying parts social media that are oppressive and constraining, and it is necessary only to separate them from the rest of social media that liberate. In some cases, this distinction is clear and indeed achievable. The recent efforts to remove 'pro-anorexia' pages from 'Instagram' are an example (Ging & Garvey, 2018; Chancellor, Pater, Clear, Gilbert, & De Choudhury, 2016; Brotsky & Giles, 2007). However, more often than not, the line dividing oppressive

and liberating social media content and practices cuts through much of social media and is regarded differently through the eyes of different people (Buckingham, 2019). The findings in this section highlight that some respondents, and people more broadly, may not easily discern what kinds of social media practices may be associated with a troubling relationship with their own body. This is why it is essential to explore how the social affordances of social media can reflexively shape people's social media practices and body image experiences. Critical awareness may be part of working towards being an empowered and proactive user of social media even while one is simultaneously used by social media.

### 6.3: Conclusion

The results of this chapter illustrate that the relationship between social media and body image extends beyond these two phenomena. Respondents' experiences highlight how reflexively embedded social media is within contemporary society and why it is essential to research the influence social media can have on body image holistically.

Despite respondents' best efforts in balancing their social media newsfeeds to include more diverse body representations, this work and effort had the potential to be undone by influences operating 'outside' of social media. Respondents learned to deal with problematic situations by confronting other people's harmful bodily beliefs, role-playing these situations to establish an effective way to deal with them ahead of time or recognising particular moods that would lead to body image dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that developing a positive body image through social media will be positively or negatively shaped by the type of social and cultural contexts people are in and how they can successfully navigate and operate within them. This finding is important because it illustrates the conditions and limitations social media have in enabling the promotion of a positive body image.

In the next chapter, I explore how the technological affordance of social media was experienced in ways that both limited and facilitated respondents' autonomy.

## Chapter 7: Social Media Control

### 7.1: Introduction

In Chapter 7, social media properties are put under the spotlight. This is where the technological affordances of social media are analysed to answer the fourth research sub-question: How do the technological affordances of social media shape respondents' social media practices; and, in turn, body image? This chapter is broken into two sections, and I draw from Buckingham (2019) to illustrate that the respondents were simultaneously used by and users of social media.

The first section explores how social media has used respondents and probes into how respondents were aware of social media platforms' commercial motives. This knowledge helped them understand the limited influence they had over social media and come to terms with and prepare for the fact that 'ideal' bodies will undoubtedly get into their newsfeeds.

The second section explores how respondents were users of social media. Respondents joined body positive communities that gave them a sense of belonging many had never experienced before, which helped improve their body image. Being part of communities of like-minded people that celebrated diverse body types illustrated to many respondents that the 'ideal' body was socially constructed and not a normative representation of what a body 'should' be.

The findings of this chapter highlight that social media is not a neutral space. Instead, it is a platform that simultaneously offers risks and rewards for body image.



## 7.2: Used by Social Media

Respondents typically perceived they had greater autonomy in shaping their social media newsfeeds than 'traditional' media platforms; however, many were aware of the imposed limitations. For instance, many were keenly aware that they did not have total control over the types of representations and content that made its way onto their screens.

Respondents' awareness of their limitations in controlling their social media newsfeeds are highlighted by the respondent who said: "*even though I can curate my feed, there are still things that get in there that I don't want to see*" (AUM48), while another respondent made the comment: "*sometimes the occasional image will come through as a 'friend likes this' or if they share something in their stories...I can do some work in keeping them out, but it's not a perfect system*" (NZW37). Others specifically pointed to the intervening capitalist motivations driving social media platforms: "*they ['Facebook'] make their money from advertising, so advertisements are always pushed into my feed because I fit some targeted demographic criteria. It could be an ad for something unrelated to exercising or diet. However, it could still use pictures of perfect bodies to try and sell stuff*" (AUW33). At the same time, another commented on the differentiation between social media platforms and the companies using social media to distribute their messages: "*I've learned to do a lot of digging, looking into the companies who are posting on 'Facebook' and what have you. These businesses are pumping unrealistic body standards out into the world, and 'Facebook' just laps up the advertising dollar*" (AUM52). Many of these respondents' comments illustrate a conscious awareness of the broader economic influences shaping how social media platforms operate. Many were aware of a point raised in the literature review that billions of dollars are spent worldwide each year to influence and change people's attitudes about various topics (Soules, 2015; Shrum, 2012). The prominence of fiscal drivers in such a global platform used by a range of everyday people presents many issues that this thesis does not have the time or space to account for. However, respondents' awareness of how social media platforms operate commercially may have helped them resist accepting 'ideal' bodies as normative representations of what a body should be – knowing that the dominant position of 'ideal' bodies is partly driven by businesses using social media platforms as a distribution channel to circulate 'ideal' body representations in the form of advertising may have lessened their perceived importance. The respondents may benefit from further advancing this knowledge and connecting the use of 'ideal' bodies in advertising to create or trigger body image dissatisfaction to sell products and services (Atkinson et al., 2020; Lazuka et al., 2020).

Discourses of social media curation were one of the most prominent when it came to practices motivated to challenge and resist the dominance of 'ideal' bodies and support the development of a more positive body image. Respondents were highly motivated to take an active role in deciding what they saw on social media by shaping the circulation of content through curation practices where possible (Rodgers, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2021). This was a conscious process where they systematically went through their newsfeed and thought about whether the accounts they were following were helpful or harmful to their body image. Respondents initially curated their newsfeeds by removing any body representation that triggered them to think their body was 'abnormal' and needed changing. Respondents commented about manually filtering out images of 'idealised' bodies by *"just right-clicking on the bodies that I don't want to see and selecting that I don't want this in my feed anymore"* (NZW27) as one respondent said. However, it was a simple process that appeared to have a liberating and restorative effect on their body image. This was highlighted by the respondent who said: *"it makes me feel like I'm in control of what I'm seeing. There's a sense that it's my feed and I use it to see what I want to see not what others do. It's empowering"* (NZW42). For these respondents, the sense of empowerment in removing 'ideal' bodies and including 'realistic' bodies on their newsfeeds may have derived from a long history of being *"at the mercy of other types of media"* (AUW29) as one respondent said. These comments align with Jenkins (2009, p. 1), who has been an advocate of using digital technologies to *"participate fully in public, community, [creative] and economic life"*. Even if respondents' social media curation practices do not overthrow the dominance of 'ideal' bodies on a macro scale, it undeniably has a productive impact on their lives and body image. The way the above respondent comments about curation practices provides a sense of "control" over what they see to the point that it's "empowering" and may help give a sense of micro change that leads to profound changes in their own daily lives. Social media helped bring respondents into contact with 'realistic' bodies and a range of alternative discourses to shape their embodiment in liberating ways that made many "feel at home" in their bodies; it is essential to acknowledge and celebrate that positive transformation – even if it is not a permanent change. This transition has helped highlight the social media and social life areas that promote body image (dis)satisfaction. With this information, respondents have been able to begin orientating themselves in ways that increase the chances of being body image satisfied more often.

Several respondents referenced the 'explore' and 'discover' functions on 'Facebook' and 'Instagram' being a part of social media that challenged their positive body image development: *"I see many different types of body sizes due to friends and other pages I follow; however, on the discover page, there are mostly pictures of fitness models with small, toned bodies"* (NZW27). This point was

particularly curious as many of the respondents spoke at length about their perceived ability to remove advertisements from their newsfeeds and never see them again. However, the point these respondents were trying to make may not centre on an ability to remove advertisements featuring 'ideal' bodies more broadly but in specific instances. This is highlighted in the following comment: "*the problem is how perfect body images are so locked into society. I can remove an ad, but then there will always be more, from a different business trying to sell whatever, it's that they're so ingrained*" (NZW28). This respondent went on to say: "*when you have a moment of weakness and have a bad body image day and click back on one of these bloody images, the algorithm can see that and go 'ohh give her more of that' and then you're back in the cycle again. I try and be disciplined and not get sucked back into it*" (NZW28). While these respondents curated their newsfeeds, many were aware that 'ideal' bodies could still reappear. The fact that this happened illustrates the limited power users have to actually control social media newsfeeds. As such, comments that contend users are in control need to be re-evaluated to more accurately reflect the limitations social media users face.

### **Digital Detoxes**

One solution some respondents used to curtail the body image challenges posed by the constant connectivity that social media can enable was implementing social media detoxes. It was common for respondents to comment about "*mindless scrolling*". This was when they "*need to pass the time*" (NZM29), as one respondent phrased it. Others commented about times when they were "*bored*", "*waiting in lines*", on "*public transport*", or simply "*sitting in front of the TV*" carelessly scrolling through their newsfeeds. Respondents commented about these viewing practices potentially further reinforcing the ideological position of 'ideal' bodies in their lives: "*When I wake up, the first thing I do is go through my insta feed, and I'll casually scroll past these flawless people. So, I guess it's kind of makes me start my day right off with that on my mind*" (AUW33). Another respondent made a similar comment saying: "*I know it's bad, but my phone is the first thing I grab in the morning...I check what's been happening across the socials, and the 'ideal' bodies will be hidden away in there. I sometimes wonder if even though I'm not looking at them consciously thinking, oh, I need to be like that but just seeing it subtly reinforces its' importance*" (NZW28). One common way respondents tried to mitigate the problems associated with social media and connectivity was to self-impose restrictions on social media usage.

Refraining from using social media in the morning and evening was common. It was thought that starting and ending the day without the influence of external messages would enable them to keep in touch with their feelings, thoughts, and emotions. In one case, a respondent said: "*I was waking up*

*and going straight on 'Instagram', and even though I'd changed what I was following to be better for me, it just felt like I wasn't giving myself any time to kind of tune in and see how I was doing"* (NZM23). Another respondent took prolonged breaks from social media. He took a week away from social media every few months. Before he departed, he made this known to his social media friends and followers. The justification for doing so was similar to the above; however, there was a greater emphasis on it being a restorative practice. He said: *"I take a week off any and every form of social media...it gives me time to reflect on what's been happening in life without the interference of others. It's easy for me to get caught up in social media and not give full attention to my world. Time away gives perspective about where I'm at and if things are going as I want"* (NZM30). These types of comments could be inferred as suggesting there can be such a thing as 'too much' social media. The way one respondent would take a *"week off any and every form of social media"* in order to *"reflect on what's been happening in life"* may not suggest that social media can become inherently 'bad' after a certain point. While this respondent spoke about removing social media for a week to reflect on their life, maybe they also removed other points of distraction: television, specific friends, or going to the gym. Instead, this respondent's comment may reflect how dominant and engrained social media has become in contemporary society (Couldry, 2019).

While respondents differed about what they believed constituted 'too much' social media, there was a consensus that when social media was interfering with their family, friends, or work commitments, they needed to *"cut back"*, as several said. One respondent contended that *"I was just going on 'Facebook' for no reason; it was a habit to sit there and go through my newsfeed almost like hoping something would come up...I was just wasting so much of my time looking down... I've put limits on when I'll use it and for how long, and I'm happier for it, to be honest"* (AUM34). Respondents limited their social media use in different ways and for varying lengths of time. Several respondents suggested that even with curating their newsfeeds, they did not want to be tied to their phones and social media. There was a fear of sorts regarding being more generally regulated by social media use. As one respondent said: *"It's easy to flick through 'Facebook' to the point I can start losing sight of what's actually going on around me. It's like the ultimate procrastination tool, but it becomes addictive and a habit of checking social before doing something"* (AUW25). One respondent often went on social fasts where she would *"just have windows within a day where I don't go on 'Instagram'. I was checking it like 40 or 50 times a day. It was getting depressing seeing perfect bodies, so I decided that I'd do social fasts every morning and every evening. I wish I had done it sooner!"* (AUW29). There is a sense that no specific period of time defines where social media use moves from being productive to unproductive. Instead, limiting social media was based on the idea that there was more to life or other spheres of

life that required their attention. This promoted them to focus on what was happening around them and not on a mediated world. It seemed that they did not want social media to consume their lives because it would be done at the expense of other fulfilling and meaningful activities. Respondents needed to ascertain the extent to which social media was infringing on other aspects of their lives (Couldry, 2015). As one respondent said: *"I love how my feed is so much more inclusive and positive now, but I don't want to spend all of my time looking down at my phone, you know? The days are happening; my eyes need to be on the horizon and my mind thinking about what is happening out there, not on a screen"* (NZW37). This, in turn, helped them impose limitations that kept social media as a tool that enhanced their life and not one that dominated it.

Digital detoxes appeared to positively impact respondents' body image by removing opportunities for them to *"scroll past these flawless people"*, who negatively impacted their body image. However, digital detoxes will also remove the aspects of social media that are beneficial for their body image. As Buckingham (2019, p. 43) contends, "it is difficult to minimise risks without also reducing potential benefits". This point suggests that removing oneself from social media may not be the best protective body image practice. Instead, while it is unlikely there is no simple equation that can balance the relative risk and reward social media presents for body image (Buckingham, 2019), these respondents, and people more broadly, may benefit more from being critically aware of the risks social media present for their body image and how they can implement practices to diminish negative impacts while still accessing parts of social media that are helpful for their body image.

### 7.3: Users of Social Media

In this section, I focus on the way respondents purposefully used social media to improve their body image. While many of these respondents became aware of body positive communities by accessing 'realistic' body representations on social media, as noted in Chapters 3 and 4, it was their social media 'friends' and 'followers' that pushed these alternative body types into their newsfeeds and lives, so to speak. Therefore, it may not be that social media is creating and facilitating entirely new forms of participation but that it is making it easier for people to access longstanding practices and further enhance the scope and scale of these existing practices. In the following section, I outline the beneficial impact of being a part of body positive communities on respondents' body image.

#### **Body Positive Communities**

One of the most frequently cited aspects of social media that helped enable the process of developing a positive body image was becoming a part of body positive communities. While many of the respondents came into contact with this research via 'The Moderation Movement', respondents were also a part of multiple body positive social media pages such as 'Eff Your Beauty Standards', 'Body Positivity Movement', 'Curvynyome', 'Alex Light', and 'Bodyposipanda', along with social media pages run by intuitive eating coaches and anti-diet dietitians such as 'Christy Harrison', 'Laura Thomas', 'Break Binge Eating', 'Jess Rann Nutrition', and 'Amanda Howell Health'. While respondents mentioned a number of different pages, they were united by a shared reason for becoming a part of such groups: to surround themselves with others who have, or who are working to, diminish body image dissatisfaction and promote a more positive body image. Interestingly, when it comes to positive body image, the most commonly cited individuals and groups were American and British – apart from 'The Moderation Movement'. This may suggest there is space for the body positive groups operating in Australia and New Zealand. Doing so may mean body representations from people's homelands can be represented to them. This may further enhance the 'realistic' nature of such pages' body representations and content.

A key element for these respondents being a part of these online communities was having a space where they could talk without being judged, bullied, or made to feel like an object that needed fixing—being able to have an online space where they could share their thoughts and feelings without fear or worry about being judged, bullied, or excluded because of their body. A key element to being a part of these groups centred on being able to ask for advice on how to deal with certain situations where their appearance was perceived as being used against them or share stories about times when they felt they were victimised, isolated, or stigmatised because of their appearance. These online spaces

provided them with the ability to connect with others which showed many respondents that they were not alone in having these experiences and feelings. This is typified by the respondent who commented: *“just knowing that there are others out there all over the world who face the same problems as me, made me feel a little less alone... a little less scared, I guess. To know you’re not the only one gives you a feeling that it’s not like there is just something wrong with me”* (NZM47). Many respondents described how finding friends who were similar to them in their interests and/or personality represented a turning point for them. By feeling supported and accepted by peers and experiencing belonging, the respondents became more confident in their bodies and their body image. One respondent, who had been bullied at school, described how finally finding new friends on social media was a turning point for her: *“After having gone through a long time of no positive input at all, I found people who respected me, who said that ‘you’re OK and we like you for who you are.’ To me, it was like finding another family. I found a place where I was accepted, and I felt like ‘wow, this is where I belong”* (AUW36). For these respondents, being a part of body positive communities was more than being able to see ‘realistic’ bodies; it was a space where respondents held a strong belief that their contributions mattered and felt some degree of social connection with other members (Jenkins, Mizuko, & boyd, 2016). This point should not be understated as it represents a key part in how social media could help enable respondents experience their body image in a more positive way. The above respondent’s comment that finding body positive communities felt like *“finding another family”* (AUW36) and represented a space where *“accepted”* are not trivial comments. After having spent much of their lives being stigmatised, excluded, or belittled because of their appearance or working tirelessly to ensure they had a body that closely aligned with the ‘ideal’ body to make sure they were not stigmatised, excluded, or belittled, to be surrounded by others who unreservedly accepted them demonstrates how social media does not always drive disconnection as Turkle (2017) contends but can introduce profound social possibilities that can enrich people’s lives (boyd, 2014).

These respondents experienced a significant increase in their body image satisfaction by connecting and communicating with like-minded others. This was especially relevant for those who felt they lived in areas where body positive discourses were considered to promote being ‘fat’ and ‘unhealthy’: *“I live rurally, and most people in my area see body positivity as being a waste of time. Whenever I’ve talked about it with some people, I live by and see a bit they think it’s just about justifying being fat and lazy. I know not everyone gets it, but it’s been really encouraging to have my Facebook groups where I can talk to people and just be around positive vibes. It’s a lifesaver”* (AUM55). Being a part of these groups played a big part in respondents’ lives. This may have been the case because of the historical trauma many experienced because of their body. Respondents have spent much of their

lives treating their bodies as objects that need to be observed, managed and regulated. However, this began to change as they became more immersed in body positive communities.

For these respondents, being able to join groups on social media was the ability to be with others that shared the same beliefs about the body. Private groups were a place they could free themselves from the oppressive, financially motivated use of 'idealised' body types and immerse themselves in 'realistic' body representations. Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009, p. 729) contend that 'Facebook' groups are "related to higher levels of social involvement than to entertainment purposes...the social needs of these online groups strengthen social contacts, community engagement, and attachment by connecting the whole community through networks". Using social media to strengthen social connections was a point many of these respondents raised. It was common for respondents to comment about joining body positive social media pages and groups because it provided them with a space where they could come together and support others who are working on further developing and regulating their positive body image: *"having positive body image is as much about being around others who have one themselves and don't contribute to a negative body image with fat talk and stuff like that"* (NZW28). A benefit of being part of body positive communities was being exposed to discourses that celebrated a diverse range of body types. As noted in Chapter 2, different cultures and sub-cultures can have their own 'ideal' body. This is readily highlighted in the literature regarding New Zealand Māori and Pacific Island nations and their positive attitudes toward 'bigger' bodies (McCabe et al., 2011). This point illustrates the importance of acknowledging that what is considered 'ideal' will likely vary across individuals, cultures, and sub-cultures. For these respondents, becoming a part of body positive communities helped to demonstrate the variability of what is considered 'ideal' and how it is socially, culturally, politically, and historically situated. Importantly, this helped respondents to see that their body was not inherently 'wrong' but inscribed with harmful meanings due to the time and space they were situated in (Paquette & Raine, 2004). It is notable how the respondent commented about having *"my Facebook groups"*, her use of 'my' suggests the body positive pages are not simply pages frequented for ideas and tips to improve body image, instead they provide a sense of belonging.

For these respondents, learning about the social construction of 'beauty' and the fact that what is considered 'ideal' has varied greatly over time was a helpful part of their body image journeys. In an article by Arnot (n.d, para. 7) the author reminds their followers that body 'ideals' are culturally and historically bound: "they are shaped by a multitude of influences, but the fact that they change supports that there is no inherent and true 'best body'. Body ideals are socially contrived.



Understanding these ideals and the messages that perpetuate them is an important step in being able to recognise them for what they are, critically evaluate them, and then choose to reject them". For these respondents, learning about the historical variability of 'ideal' body types played a large part in helping to remove 'ideal' bodies from their dominant sociocultural position.

The positive impact of learning about the historical variability of 'ideal' bodies is highlighted by the respondent who said: "*since I started following The Moderation Movement, I've learnt a lot about how what we believe the body to flow on to body image*" (NZW58). A key point of contestation for several respondents was the use of BMI to classify body weight and health. For instance, one respondent made a comment: "*years ago, the banding numbers were changed so overnight, I think to be normal BMI was like 20-27 or 28 and then overnight they change it to 18.5 to 25 so all of a sudden, you've got tens of millions of people who go from normal to overweight*" (AUM62). This particular respondent went on to say: "*BMI is a flawed indicator .... When I was ridiculously fit and active, I was still considered overweight using the BMI scale just because I had a high muscle mass. It just doesn't make that much sense*" (AUM62). As noted in Chapter 2, discussions about 'obesity' rates dominate popular and academic discourse throughout many parts of the world. These respondents came to be critical of the connection between 'fatness' and 'health' in a way that demonstrates a critical understanding of the political meanings associated with the body, 'fat', and 'health'. However, this particular respondent was able to critically reflect on the accuracy of BMI as a classification for 'health' and how changes in BMI's classification criteria can instantly reconfigure people's 'health' status (Monks et al., 2021; Liimakka, 2014). How the respondent deconstructed BMI's validity as a 'health' measure had a flow-on impact on how he meaningfully understood the body. It acted as a protective filter against the 'health' discourses often used to justify the 'ideal' body's prominence in our mediascape and social life. For this respondent, there is no need to accept 'ideal' bodies as a normative representation of what a body 'should' be because it is incongruent with what is known about body size and 'health' (Piran, 2019). Importantly, this knowledge may help people become curious about why the 'ideal' body is so desirable despite it not being a representation of 'health'. It may help people realise the 'ideal' body is a constructed representation of stylistic desire (Silchenko & Askegaard, 2020; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019).

Being a part of body positive groups and pages persuaded many of these respondents to reflect upon and examine their own body talk critically. Respondents differed in the topic of their body talk; while some were focused on weight and shape, others were preoccupied with tone or a particular body part. The following respondent comments illustrate this: "*I can be the worst critic of myself. This little*

*voice that says you're too heavy and you need to lose weight, but these groups are so helpful in reminding me to clap back and say, hey, I'm in a healthy weight range. I don't need to do anything differently" (AUW50), while another contended, "I've spent the past 20 years avoiding mirrors, so I didn't have to see how pudgy I am...and I think it's because I'd spent so long having these thin minnies shoved in my face from every which way that I thought my body was 'wrong'. I get inspired by seeing others in bigger bodies talking so positively about themselves. It's radical...and helps me be a little kinder to myself. They remind me to give myself some slack" (NZW58). Positive self-talk was a difficult task considering many had spent years and decades being highly critical of their perceived appearance problems. Thus, being able to access and be a part of body positive communities meant these respondents had a group of role models that could demonstrate it was possible to be happy in a 'bigger' body.*

Being able to participate in body positive groups has played a significant part in improving respondents' body image; however, it is important not to get too carried away with the positive aspects of social media. Jenkins (2006, p. 10) reminds us to "not assume that participatory culture always has positive effects...pro-ana sites are a great example of the community that...probably meets all of my criteria for a participatory culture but does not necessarily make the world a better place". There is often the sense that body image researchers position user-generated content as being inherently positive and take it as being produced to challenge and resist oppressive 'ideal' body representations. For instance, Cohen et al. (2019) argue that "unlike traditional media, social media are unique in that their content is user generated. This feature allows for bodies that are typically marginalised by society's dominant appearance standards to finally have a voice and be seen". User-generated content can certainly be used as a tool for resistance; however, it can also be used to promote further and entrench existing forms of power (Lazuka et al., 2020). This point is highlighted by the following respondents who commented on their friend's efforts to become 'Insta famous': "*one of my good friends is trying to become a little celebrity or something online. She has what you would call a socially 'ideal' body, and she flaunts it to try and get likes and build a following. It's hard for me because it's obviously triggering, but she's my friend as well, so I don't want to unfollow her" (NZW27). This respondent went on comment about the positive aspects of social media curation: "I can stop seeing her post in my feed but every now and then check out her page because we're still connected just so when she asks about her posts, I can talk about them" (NZW27). This respondent's comment illustrates why body image researchers would benefit from continuing to explore the relationship between social media and body image holistically. As boyd (2014, p. 10) contends: "It's important to understand how technology introduces new social possibilities and how these challenge*

assumptions people have about everyday interactions". That said, it is crucial to avoid researching a discrete area of social media and position and present it as being a total representation of how social media works or influences people. As noted in the literature review, there are competing ideas regarding the type of relationships and messages social media platforms enable. According to Van Dijk (2013), social media sites primarily incite interpersonal contact, while Turkle (2017) proposes the opposite and contends that social media is unsettling and warping the relationships we form with ourselves and others. Based on many of the experiences described by respondents, social media played a role in promoting interpersonal contact by helping respondents come into contact with like-minded others through body positive social media pages and driving disconnection by becoming too invested in social media to the point respondents felt they were missing out on part of their broader, 'offline' lives. It is not a case of arguing what experience is 'right' or 'wrong'. Instead, this highlights the need to think multi-dimensionally about the shifting and contradicting relationship people can have with social media.

The finding that respondents were simultaneously users of and used by social media suggests that some body image researchers may need to rethink their research conclusions about social media 'effects'. For instance, according to the recent study by Jarman et al. (2021), appearance-focused social media use is correlated with poorer well-being in general and poorer body image satisfaction in particular. However, the finding does not acknowledge the complexities of social media and broader influences that can shape people's relationships with social media and body image. Such research findings can position social media as either 'bad' or 'good'. Doing so could lead to extreme outcomes (boyd, 2019). On the one hand, it may incite people to avoid using the platform altogether. On the other hand, if social media is positioned as a platform that focuses only on the positive parts, people will not be prepared to deal with the potential risks. Improving the relationship between social media and body image is likely to be based on balancing the risks and rewards it presents for body image as best as one can. This balancing act will undoubtedly vary from one individual to the next and will be unlikely to ever be in a 'perfect' balance. However, for the respondents of this research, it seems many were on the path to making social media a more positive space for their body image by diminishing the troubling aspects through curation practices and the removal of 'ideal' body representations. This further instilled the positive aspects by increasing the diversity of bodies being represented, focusing on bodily functionality, self-care, and mastery while developing a greater awareness of the broader contexts and influences that could persuade them into making harmful appearance assumptions.

## 7.4: Conclusion

One of the key findings of this chapter is that social media can simultaneously present a series of risks and rewards for body image. Respondents were able to exercise some autonomy through shaping social media content flow, curating their newsfeeds and removing undesired, 'ideal' bodies; however, the limitations of their autonomy were readily highlighted by the fact that 'ideal' bodies were still the dominant body type they viewed. Even with these respondents consciously shaping their social media practices to facilitate a more positive body image, while many were successful in doing so, some felt they still became body image dissatisfied from their social media use.

Social media has given way to an excess of grandiose rhetoric - as is often the case with new media technologies. There have been assertions about how social media can change the world, save democracy, or empower the powerless. There certainly are cases where this is true. For instance, the body positive movement has burgeoned into a global phenomenon partly due to social media's technological affordances. However, such instances cannot serve as the basis for a total rethinking of social media. To do so would be morale-boosting, but only in the short term. Such overblown rhetoric does not serve people in the long run, as issues concerning platform ownership and commercial interests and motivations will always be a dominant factor in social media. The polarising aspects comprising social media highlight why it is essential to research and understand social media and how all of its components (representations, power, social and technological affordances) reflexively work to influence one another (Couldry, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2013). Doing so will help develop a comprehensive understanding of social media's conditional and limited influence on body image.

The findings in this chapter stand as a call to move beyond positioning social media's impact on body image in a binary distinction between risk and reward (Buckingham, 2019). Cordoning aspects of social media as being 'good' or 'bad' for body image means the complexity and diversity of the respondent's routine social media practices go ignored and render social media as having determinate effects on body image. It is essential to readily acknowledge and deal with intersecting influences that can shape the relationship between social media and body image in ambivalent ways if we are to effectively understand and balance the liberating and constraining aspects to make the relationship as productive as possible. This means presenting a critical analysis of the consequences of body image in a mediated era requires probing into the technological affordances of social media to understand the deep tensions, conflicts, and nuances of control and freedom surrounding social media platforms and its users (Jenkins et al., 2013).

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### 8.1: Introduction

The final chapter is broken into three sections. In the first section, I will reflect on the research questions, provide some final concluding thoughts on them, and consider how well I answered them across the analytic chapters. The second section will address the limitations of this thesis and provide some concluding reflections on my growth as a researcher. Finally, in the third section, this thesis will be ended with a final word on the findings and how they may shape research on social media and body image in the future.

## 8.2: Research Questions

In this section, I reflect on the research questions that have guided this empirical study. I pay particular attention to research questions one and two while drawing on answers to the four research sub-questions where it is necessary. I begin with research question one, which I have broken into three parts to provide more concise reflections.

### **How do people experience their body image through social media, and what can these findings tell us more broadly about the relationship between social media and body image?**

The research findings have illustrated that social media, 'ideal', or 'realistic' body representations depicted in social media did not have discrete or uni-directional impacts on respondents' body image. Bodies, body image, and social media are not separate entities that act upon one another. These phenomena are reflexively entwined and embedded within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Respondents' comments showcased how negotiating with the multiple and contradicting yet interwoven meanings 'written into' 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies shaped their own body image 'becomings' (Coleman, 2008) in highly ambivalent ways. This means respondents' body image experiences were not simple derivatives of 'ideal' bodies inciting body image dissatisfaction and 'realistic' bodies inciting body image satisfaction. Instead, the respondents' body image was characterised by reflexive judgements, perceptions, beliefs, experiences, feelings, and reflections concerning the multiple meanings associated with 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). Social media played an important role in shaping respondents' body image. Social media could simultaneously reinforce and intensify problematic appearance-salient body meanings. However, social media also helped such messages to be challenged and resisted by enabling respondents to access and engage with alternative, body positive messages and 'realistic' bodies. This point is a key reason why the respondents spoke on a micro level about social media having negative and positive impacts on their body image, and at a macro level, social media ultimately having an ambivalent influence on their body image.

The tension respondents experienced may have come from their bodies not being isolated or singular; instead, they were multiply situated (Boero et al., 2020). Respondents were caught between wanting to conform to the demands of sociocultural appearance expectations because they were aware of the rewards and punishments associated with meeting the outlined standards or not. This point contrasted with their subjective experiences of wanting to experience their embodiment in a 'new way' because of the physical and emotional pain many often experienced while trying to develop an

'ideal' body as their life circumstances changed; and their newfound pleasures of focusing on bodily functionality, self-care, mastery, and posting self-representations illustrating newfound joyful ways of experiencing their body. Thus, aligning their embodiment with either 'ideal' or 'realistic' bodies had perceived positives and negatives, which appeared to drive their constant negotiations.

The 'Critical Body Image Model' helped frame the multidimensional influences shaping the respondents' relationship with social media and body image; and showcase how bodies, body image, and social media are not static, cross-situational, separate entities that act upon one another (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). The number of converging influences that reflexively shaped how respondents understood 'ideal' and 'realistic' bodies highlight why Couldry (2019, p. 37) is highly critical of "psychological approaches that interpreted media effects like a stimulus-response in a laboratory". It illustrates why it is essential to probe into how people critically interpret bodies and social media representations from their world. These findings give more weight to critical body image research and contemporary screen and media scholarship that emphasises the need to explore qualitatively how these phenomena operate and are shiftingly experienced and shaped within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts at different times, for specific people (Jarman et al., 2022; boyd, 2014).

Notably, the findings of this thesis have shown that respondents were simultaneously users of and used by social media in ways that helped and hindered the promotion of a positive body image (Buckingham, 2019). In the face of these respondents' contrasting and conflicting experiences, making definitive statements about the broad relationship between social media and body image is challenging. These respondents have many similarities in how they have used and been used by social media; however, they were united in trying to use social media to improve body image. In analysing these respondents' relationship between social media and body image, it is crucial not to infer that social media will affect all people's body image in all situations the same way (boyd, 2014). I am mindful that particular parts of the broader population will likely have other motivations to be on social media and bring different experiences, beliefs, and feelings that shape their relationship with social media and body image in unique ways (Couldry, 2019; Lealand & Zanker, 2006). With this in mind, it may be fair to contend that these findings can highlight more broadly the relationship between social media and body image: it will vary from one population and individual to the next. The variability of this relationship is a key reason why the 'Critical Body Image Model' may be helpful for future research. The model can be 'overlaid' in different populations and contexts where researchers can probe into each of the particular dimensions, include additional influences if necessary, and trace specific relationship configurations and body image 'becoming's'.

While the respondents' ambivalent relationship between social media and body image is a notable finding, another guiding aspect of this thesis has centred on identifying particular practices that enabled and challenged the production of body image satisfaction. In the next section, I reflect on the ways social media helped and hindered respondents' body image.

### **How does social media enable and challenge the process of developing a positive body image?**

This findings in this thesis have showcased how complex and nuanced the relationship between particularly situated individuals, social media, and body image can be. It has been an insightful exercise to explore how the respondents' relationship with social media and body image was not reducible to any particular experience. However, within the ambivalent relationship, it has been essential to understand how specific aspects of social media could positively and negatively impact the respondents' body image. Doing so meant I could gain insights into the particular practices that helped these respondents develop a more positive body image and become better able to resist becoming body image dissatisfied.

There are research findings that suggest viewing 'realistic' bodies on social media can enable the process of developing a positive body image; however, such a finding can imply social media has deterministic 'effects', ignores the broader context in which people view these bodies, and how multiple influences can converge to shape people's social media practices and decoding processes (Couldry, 2012). This point is prevalent here. For many of these respondents, social media helped improve their body image by bringing 'realistic' bodies into their lives. But, it is simplistic to argue that the respondents overrode years of body disdain by just viewing 'realistic' bodies on social media, focusing on self-care, functionality, or mastery. It is simplistic because it suggests that discrete, singular cognitive changes lead to broad, positive improvements in embodied experiences. It is also incongruent with these respondents' body image experiences that centred on multiple and often contradicting influences converging to shape their body image. With this in mind, I believe it is essential to note the broader context in which the respondents were operating to illustrate that meaningful body image improvements may come from multiple, converging positive influences working together to reconfigure problematic bodily meanings.

For these respondents, social media platforms played a critical role in enabling them to be a part of body positive communities. Notably, body positive social media pages were about more than being able to see 'realistic' bodies; it was a space where the community welcomed them, regardless of their body size, shape or appearance, they could connect with other like-minded members and firmly believed that their contributions and experiences mattered (Jenkins et al., 2016). This point should



not be understated, as it represents a vital part of how social media could help respondents experience their body image more positively. These respondents needed to overcome a hesitancy to identify with such a widely stigmatised group of people, i.e., people with 'larger' bodies on their body image journeys. Body positive communities represented a space where this could happen, and other members of the communities accepted the respondents for who they are regardless of their appearance. The respondents who commented that finding body positive communities felt like "*finding another family*" (AUW36), that "*it made me feel like I wasn't alone*" (AUW41) and represented a space where "*accepted*" are not trivial comments. After having spent much of their lives being stigmatised, excluded, or belittled because of their appearance, or working tirelessly to ensure they had a body that closely aligned with the 'ideal' body, to be surrounded by others who unreservedly accepted them demonstrates how social media does not always drive disconnection as Turkle (2017) contends but can introduce profound social possibilities that can enrich people's body image and lives (boyd, 2014).

It may be that focusing on body functionality or posting un-filtered self-representations may be beneficial and empowering for body image temporarily; however, these practices in themselves may not be enough to overturn years of experiences and beliefs that one's 'non-normative' body is the source of their life's woes. Focusing on their body's functionality or posting self-representations of their 'un-ideal' body *and* being part of body positive communities where their bodies are accepted, welcomed, and embraced pushed them to confront their corporeality to see that the body they had spent so much time and effort to hide, modify and 'rectify' to be accepted, embraced, and loved was capable of achieving that all along. Thus, body image improvements may have arisen due to multiple, converging influences working together to showcase how their problematic body beliefs are flawed and help the respondents reconfigure what it means to 'be in' and experience their bodies.

While social media did help to improve respondents' body image, it also played a role in challenging their process of developing a positive body image. One of the key reasons social media could challenge respondents' process of working to develop a positive body image centred around social media being embedded in the textures and routines of many aspects of their everyday lives. Many of the respondents curated their newsfeeds to remove 'ideal' bodies, but they could not be rid of them entirely because they did not have total control over how their social media newsfeeds operated (Buckingham, 2019; Couldry, 2012). This point meant the respondents would see 'ideal' bodies, could seamlessly reengage with social media pages dedicated to 'ideal' bodies, and be faced with situations that could trigger body image dissatisfaction. Alongside this, many of the respondents had an underlying fear that the social capital built trying to develop and maintain an 'ideal' body would

dissipate, leaving them to be teased or excluded due to their 'non-normative' body. This fear made it difficult to fully embrace exercising to build and develop bodily functionality, self-care, and mastery, or post self-representations that did not reflect an 'idealised' appearance. These two points meant that social media could draw these respondents into thinking about the supposed importance of 'ideal' bodies and incite body image dissatisfaction.

While social media had an ambivalent influence on respondents' body image, there were particular aspects characterising the relationship that appeared to have clear positive and negative impacts on body image.

### **What solutions can be employed to address these challenges?**

While it is evident that social media could impact the respondents' body image in problematic ways, they did not abandon social media because of the negative dimensions; instead, they learned to navigate in a way that diminished the negatives and promoted the positives as much as possible. Despite respondents' best efforts in strategically curating their social media newsfeeds to include more diverse body representations, this work and effort had the potential to be undone by influences operating 'outside' of social media. Respondents learned to deal with problematic situations by confronting other people's harmful bodily beliefs, role-playing these situations to establish an effective way to deal with them ahead of time, or recognising particular moods that would lead to body image dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that developing a positive body image through social media will be shaped, in part, by the particular social, cultural, and political contexts people are in and how they can successfully navigate and operate within them. This finding is important because it illustrates the conditions and limitations social media has in enabling the promotion of a positive body image.

Respondents' experiences have illustrated the importance of moving away from binary ways of thinking at nearly every level of the relationship. People must be critically aware of the risks and, importantly, how they can implement practices to diminish or at least lessen any negative impacts. I align with Buckingham (2019, p. 27), who contends that "the awareness of risk does not necessarily translate into the avoidance of harm: we may know in principle what we should do to be safe, but what we do in practice is another matter". A key task for social media users may be distancing themselves from social media to critically reflect on and assess how to balance the relative risks and rewards it can present for their body image as best they can (Couldry, 2015).

Assessing and creating balance is no easy task. The respondents felt their body image was improved, in part, by viewing and engaging with 'realistic' bodies on social media. On the one hand, this process highlights how the rise of social media has reinvigorated discussions about the nature of the audience and media power. Social media has supposedly given rise to a new 'participatory culture' where grassroots users, such as 'The Moderation Movement', can produce and distribute media content that challenge the dominant position of 'ideal' body representations. This is why some media theorists argue that the age of institutional media corporations has finished as top-down content production gives way to a greater propensity for network communications (Jenkins et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2006). However, there will likely be a disparity in content visibility depending on whether circulation centres on organic posting (which relies on audiences following a particular page) or has a marketing budget to drive its audience reach. Herein lies a critical problem with arguments that grassroots producers can challenge 'big business'. Such views do not consider how 'top-down' producers typically have the fiscal resources to produce new content regularly and push their messages in front of a mass audience. While the 'traction' of grassroots social media users may be on a smaller scale and cannot necessarily compete with the budgets of large corporations, it does not mean their efforts are in vain. As shown in this thesis, many respondents benefited greatly from the work of grassroots content producers.

One possible way of creating 'balance' may lie in researchers, activists, and educators helping encourage people to think critically about how to live within today's social media ecology; and better understand how to navigate the possibilities for body image liberation and constraint successfully. This will not be easy because, as Couldry (2019, p. 23) aptly contends, the "new balance of power between larger and smaller actors that results from everyone being more connected through media is profoundly uncertain". Grappling with social media's impact on body image means embracing all of the complexities. This point is raised by Buckingham (2019, p. 43), who contends that "it is difficult to minimise risks without also reducing potential benefits...there is no simple equation that can balance these things out for each individual. What counts as positive or negative (as a benefit or a risk) depends upon the context and on the purposes of the user".

This means it is not a simple case of identifying the parts of social media that are oppressive and constraining and separating them from the rest of the social media that liberate and inform. There are however undoubtedly clear instances of what constitutes social media's constraining and liberating aspects, for example, pro-anorexia content is clearly harmful and should be removed from social media sites (Chancellor, Lin, & De Choudhury, 2016). However, as noted in chapter six, more often than not, the line dividing oppressive and liberating content cuts through much of social media, and the risks and rewards of social media use and body image are highly interconnected. For instance,

while many of these respondents found being a part of body positive communities beneficial for their body image, they were on social media and ran the risk of 'scrolling' past images of 'ideal' bodies that may incite body image dissatisfaction. With this in mind, it may be best for people to subjectively reflect on their social media use and identify the relative risks and rewards to orientate their practices so that the rewards are increased and the risks mitigated as best as possible (Buckingham, 2019; Couldry, 2012).

### **Can the 'Critical Body Image Model' be a helpful way to frame the complex, multidimensional and fluid relationship between social media and body image?**

I begin my reflection on the usefulness of the 'Critical Body Image Model' with a note of caution. One problem I found with the 'Critical Body Image Model' was overtly using it to try 'pin-down' the respondents' body image 'becomings' by creating a deterministic pathway of influence through the model. This resulted in an analysis where I tried to consistently connect dimensions of respondents' body image experiences to the 'Critical Body Image Model' and contend their relationship with social media and body image was mechanistically and formulaically shaped by a particular ordering of influences. Doing so created an analysis that was incongruent with the fluid body image 'becomings' I was trying to illustrate. I needed to abandon the urge to simplify the respondents' experiences by creating formulas and begin to appreciate and revel in their relationship with social media and body image being complex (Peck, 1993). The 'Critical Body Image Model' was better utilised as providing a 'theoretical skeleton' that structured the analysis without being overtly present. Its background structure reminded me to remain aware of the multiple and particular influences this thesis dealt with and to fluidly draw upon and bring certain relationships together across each of the analytical chapters to illustrate the tensions and ambivalences characterising the respondents' relationship with social media and body image.

The 'Critical Body Image Model' has helped illustrate respondents' body image ambivalences; however, future research may benefit from exploring the impact of power in shaping the relationship between particular aspects of social media and body image. Tracing struggles over power may help demonstrate why particular body image experiences can be enduring and stable or fluid and changing. It may be that a specific individual's body image (dis)satisfied only in certain situations or life stages where particular relations of power help to promote and sustain certain practices.

One unintended consequence of using the 'Critical Body Image Model' to explore the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of the respondents' body image is that it has raised concerns over terminology. A key finding in this thesis has centred on respondents' body image ambivalences and

their embodied 'becomings'. I believe there is an incongruence between respondents' body image and terms such as 'body image dissatisfaction' and 'body image satisfaction'. These two terms are prominent across academia and public discourse, but they may be reductive and ultimately unhelpful in framing the complexities of people's relationship with their bodies. For instance, is it accurate to label someone as being body image dissatisfied or satisfied when it applies to one context or situation? I agree with Trujillo (2017, p. 204), who argues that a new corporeal vocabulary is needed to understand and discuss the complexities and tensions regarding the converging and intersectional aspects of people's embodiment. The term 'embodiment' may represent a helpful alternative because it is based on the reflexive embedding and influence of bodies within particular social, cultural, political, and historical epochs. Using the 'Critical Body Image Model' in future research may help drive a terminological change. It can highlight how various influences converge to shape peoples' embodiment without reducing body image as a derivative of a particular influence.

In this thesis, the 'Critical Body Image Model' served as a framework for thinking about social media and body image from a Critical Realist perspective rather than a method of analysis. This point means throughout this thesis, the 'Critical Body Image Model' has been used as a prompt to bring together and remain aware of the different influences shaping the respondents' social media practices and body image experiences. It is important to emphasise that the 'Critical Body Image Model' did not provide a rigid body image framework but represented a heuristic model for outlining the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of body image experiences. This is a key reason why the 'Critical Body Image Model' helped frame the complexities between social media and body image in this research and why I believe it will be helpful for future body image researchers. I see the 'Critical Body Image Model' being useful in two ways:

- 1) Researchers can explore each of the points in the existing model in greater detail. For instance, while this thesis has paid more attention to social media; however, future body image studies may emphasise other dimensions influencing body image. For example, in our contemporary environment, what constitutes a family has fundamentally changed from traditional notions of the 'nuclear family' (Bengtson, 2001; Pilkauskas & Cross, 2018). A great deal of research shows the impact family has on body image; it would be interesting to research if different family structures shape body image experiences differently. For instance, parental role modelling has been shown to influence body image by generating ideas about how a gendered body 'should be'. However, for instance, with 'traditional' nuclear families becoming less dominant and same-sex parents becoming increasingly common, it stands to reason there may be differences in how a child learns to interpret the body meaningfully.

2) It is important for body image researchers to remain aware of new possibilities concerning body image influences (Lucibello et al., 2021); and to that end, the 'Critical Body Image Model' should be seen as a malleable framework. The particular influences (i.e., cognitive, physiological, and so forth) included in this version of the 'Critical Body Image Model' are not 'concrete' prescriptions for future body image research. Viewing and treating them as such may mean researchers lose sight of different embodied experiences or transformations by ignoring influences not included in the current model. This is problematic because it risks creating a silo surrounding body image and reproducing a problem the model was developed to mitigate (Haigh et al., 2019). It is important to note that different influences can be removed and replaced relative to the population and context under examination. This point means it is vital for researchers using the 'Critical Body Image Model' to remain aware of how body image may 'become' in different ways as social life changes or in situations and contexts this thesis has not explored. While the particular influences shaping body image can be altered, amended or replaced, the broad structure of the model will help the researcher remain aware of the inherent complexities, multidimensionality, and fluidity characterising body image.

### 8.3: Research Limitations

This research has unearthed some curious findings; however, it is not without its limitations. In the following section, I outline several problems I faced during the research process and how they may have impacted the research findings.

I began this thesis with binary views of body image and believed body image was a unitary and fixed phenomenon; and that people were body image dissatisfied or body image dissatisfied. After spending more time immersing myself in critical psychological body image research, my understanding of the body and body image began to diversify, and I found it easier to more readily engage with it as a complex, fluid, and multidimensional phenomenon. As I read more, I began to abandon my urge to create and use mechanistic formulas to find 'The' relationship between social media and body image. I began to accept and embrace that the relationship is complicated, complex, and fragmented because that is what it is, not that there was a 'piece to the puzzle' that I was missing.

My early limitations as a researcher may have shaped the research materials produced in the questionnaire and interviews. Working as a personal trainer may have pushed me to pay more attention to the respondents' social media practices and body image experiences related to exercise, health, and fitness. Probing the ways exercise can help or hinder the development of body image satisfaction had an initial appeal because the insights gained could have enabled me to help my clients who were dealing with body image problems. It is essential to note this bias because it may have led me to overlook other influences that shaped the respondents' body image experiences. However, my subjectivity and experience as a researcher, particularly as a personal trainer, put me in a unique position to readily emphasise with many of these respondents' exercise-related body image experiences. This highlights why it is vital to remain aware of researcher subjectivity as it can shape the tone and orientation of insights put forward.

While this thesis has explored the relationship between social media and body image, it has not entirely captured the relationship. There are many elements that this thesis did not touch on, and there was an ever-present worry that I had not provided a robust enough analysis of all the aspects that can shape body image. For instance, the issue of gender has been shown to shape the way people experience their body image. I did not explicitly explore gender within this thesis because questionnaire results showed it was not an essential factor for these respondents. However, to say gender was of no concern to them would be foolish. As Fisher (1990) argues, there are aspects shaping people's body image operating under their conscious awareness. Would the inclusion of a more

gender-focused analysis change the research findings? If I had my time again, I would focus more on the impact of gender. I worry that there can still be a lack of recognition surrounding men's body image problems in our current age. For instance, according to Monks et al. (2021, n.p), the "media can have a profound influence on body image, particularly among women...It is likely that the appearance standards presented to women are more rigid compared to the more flexible appearance ideals than those presented to men." The results of this thesis have shown social media can indeed have a profound and problematic impact on men's body image. I do not wish to argue women or men have 'worse' body image problems. Instead, while I acknowledge there has been critical body image research carried out on men (Gill, 2008), I write this as a small reminder that no one must be 'left behind' as the field continues to progress into a new frontier of critical body image research. On reflection, this is the nature of any study on multidimensional constructs such as social media and the body. There will never be enough space or time to explore every facet critically so researchers need to engage with the complexities of body image while remaining pragmatic.



## 8.4: A Final Word

Body image research has developed and diversified markedly over its lifespan. However, there is still more research to be done. Despite critical psychologists opening up the topic of body image and its influences, much of this work remains siloed – a problem that has plagued body image research for some time (Fisher, 1990). Due to some of the prevalent methodological shortcomings across the body image field, there is a need for a new wave of body image research to be conducted that builds on the critical and qualitative research that illustrates how body image is a complex, multidimensional, and fluid process opposed to a static product (Gill, 2008; Gleeson & Frith, 2006).

Throughout this thesis, I have challenged notions of simplistic and binary relationships between social media and body image. Taking an interdisciplinary approach has helped showcase that the relationship between social media and body image is not 'good', 'bad', uni-directional, or totalising in influencing body image. Instead, the relationship is characterised by near-constant negotiations surrounding the simultaneous risks and rewards social media can present for the respondents' embodied experiences. The findings of this thesis have illustrated that bodies, body image, and social media are not separate entities that act upon one another. These phenomena must be understood as reflexively entwined and embedded within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. While this research has moved the field forward, the work exploring and understanding the relationship between social media and body image is not done.

It is likely that this area of research will forever remain 'unfinished' as there is no such entity as 'The body image' (Fisher, 1990), nor can there be a 'pure' theory of social media (Couldry, 2012). The findings of this thesis suggest that the range of possibilities surrounding social media's impact on body image will be particular, historically embedded, and contextually dependent. People are multiply situated (Boero et al., 2020) and can have different motivations for using social media and diverse habits and patterns of use; they can interpret and respond to social media (images, social or technological affordances) differently partly because of differences relating to historical experiences, physiological makeup, cognitive dispositions, desires and beliefs, family structure and so forth; and people can use and engage with these platforms in various social settings alongside other everyday activities. It stands to reason that every one of us will have a unique way of using and being used by social media. Therefore, revealing and understanding the influence social media can have on body image means embarking on a contextual study of particularly situated bodies, body image, and specific dimensions of social media.

Research on social media and body image is uniquely positioned as the relationship is a 'moving target' (Lucibello et al., 2021). There appears to be no shortage of opportunities to explore how the relationship between social media and body image varies across and between diverse populations in different situations, life contexts, and stages. Research on social media and body image will also need to be 'updated' as new social media iterations and platforms emerge that may bring innovations, features and affects that shape the possibilities for body image in ways not seen before - for good or worse. Body image researchers cannot be dismayed by the multitude of interweaving causes and consequences, and appreciate that the relationship between social media and body image is complex, multidimensional, and fluid (Jarmen et al., 2022; Riley et al., 2022; Peck, 1993). I ardently believe that body image researchers must readily embrace this complexity for research to progress and generate meaningful insights that can help people experience their embodiment in more liberating ways.

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# Appendix 1: Research Materials

## 1.1: Questionnaire

**This questionnaire is part of a PhD research project entitled:**

**Are People Really What They Post to be? A Comparative Study of Social Networking Sites and Body Image Engagement.**

Thank you for taking the time to share some of your thoughts about Social Networking Site's impact on body image. I do sincerely appreciate your help. If you may, please answer the following questions in relation to the Social Networking Site you use the most out of 'Facebook' or 'Instagram'. Please answer to the best of your ability and as accurately as you can. Please check the box corresponding to your preferred answer or elaborate in the sections provided. Please answer as many of the questions in as much detail as you want where possible. Thank you once again, kind regards, Darren.

***The following questions are about the kind of images you see on Facebook.***

1. *Whose body images do you see most often on Facebook? (Select as many as required)*

- Family
- Friends
- Friends of Friends
- Co-workers
- Acquaintances
- Professional Sportspeople
- Body Builders/Sculptors
- Fitness Models
- Fashion Models
- Music Stars
- Film Stars
- Celebrities
- Television Stars
- Other
- (Please Specify).....

2. *In your opinion, on Facebook what dominant **male or female** body image do you see most often? Please cut and paste an image that represents this body type into the space provided; or describe what that body image looks like.*

3. *In relation to the body image identified in question 2, what best describes your attitude toward this kind of body image?*

- Significantly appealing
- Somewhat appealing
- Indifferent/ Don't know
- Somewhat unappealing
- Significantly unappealing

What parts or attributes of this kind of body image do you find appealing or unappealing? (Select as many as required)

- Face  
(Please specify).....
- Hair  
(Please specify).....
- Clothes  
(Please specify).....
- Body weight  
(Please specify).....
- Body size  
(Please specify).....
- Body shape  
(Please specify).....
- Body tone  
(Please specify).....
- Particular body part  
(Please specify).....
- Wellness of the body i.e. fitness, health etc.  
(Please specify).....
- The skills/traits of the particular *person* being shown i.e. sporting, film star etc.  
(Please specify).....
- What the body image's gender *represents* to you i.e. masculinity, femininity etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- How the body is held i.e. demeanour, pose, gesture etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- Lifestyle and surroundings a body is set in i.e. occupation, financial situation, material possessions etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- Lead to fitting in with social groups/friends
- Digital manipulation
- Don't know
- Other
- (Please Specify) .....

4. Do you see body image's on Facebook that are different to this?

- Very frequently
- Somewhat frequently
- Unsure / Don't know
- Somewhat infrequently
- Very infrequently
- Never

-Please explain

5. In relation to the body image identified in question 2, do you actively find and 'follow' this kind of body image?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know/Not Aware

6. *In your opinion, how often do you think body images you see on Facebook are digitally manipulated? (i.e. photo-shopped or filtered)*

- Very frequently
- Somewhat frequently
- Unsure / Don't know
- Never
- Somewhat infrequently
- Very infrequently

7. *In your opinion, does digital manipulation (i.e. photo-shop or filters) of body images on Facebook make them more or less realistic?*

- Significantly more realistic
- Somewhat more
- No difference/ Don't know
- Somewhat less
- Much less realistic

***The following questions are about social media images and influence.***

8. *Do you compare yourself to the body images you see most often on Facebook?*

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know/Not Aware

9. *How often would you compare yourself to the body images you see most often on Facebook?*

- Very frequently
- Somewhat frequently
- Unsure / Don't know
- Never
- Somewhat infrequently
- Very infrequently

*If you compare yourself to Facebook images, please specify what you specifically compare yourself against? (Select as many as required)*

- Face
- Hair
- Clothes
- Body weight
- Body size
- Body shape
- Body tone

- Particular body part  
(Please specify).....
- Wellbeing of the body shown i.e. health and fitness etc.  
(Please specify).....
- To be like/have the skills of the particular *person* being shown i.e. sporting, television or film star etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- What a body image gender *represents* to you i.e. masculinity, femininity etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- How a body is held i.e. demeanour, pose, gesture etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- Lifestyle and surroundings a body is set in i.e. occupation, financial situation, material possessions etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- Don't know
- Other
- (Please Specify) .....

10. *If you don't compare yourself to these body image, please specify why?*

11. *In relation to the body image identified in question 2, how important is it for you to have a body like that?*

- Significantly important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral / Don't know
- Somewhat unimportant
- Significantly unimportant

*-Please explain*

12. *How does viewing this kind of body image make you feel?*

- Significantly Body Satisfied
- Somewhat Body Satisfied
- Neutral / Don't know
- Somewhat Body Dissatisfied
- Significantly Body Dissatisfied
- Other (Please specify).....

13. *How long do these feelings last?*

- Short Term
- Long Term
- Don't Know/Not Aware

14. *Do you ever act on these feelings? (i.e. go to the gym, diet or wear/not wear make-up)*

- Yes
- No

- Don't Know/Not Aware

-Please explain

**The following questions are about the ways viewing these images influences your own representation**

15. *In relation to the body image identified in question 2, does this kind of body image influence the way you present yourself on Facebook?*

- Very frequently
- Somewhat frequently
- Unsure / It doesn't
- Somewhat infrequently
- Very infrequently

*In what ways do these body images specifically influence the way you present yourself on Facebook?*

- Face
- Hair
- Clothes
- Body weight
- Body size
- Body shape
- Body tone
- Particular body part  
(Please specify).....
- Wellness of the body i.e. fitness, health etc.  
(Please specify).....
- To be like/have the skills of the particular *person* being shown i.e. sporting, television or film star etc.  
(Please specify).....
- What a body image *gender represents* to you i.e. masculinity, femininity etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- How a body is held i.e. demeanour, pose, gesture etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- Lifestyle and surroundings a body is set in i.e. occupation, financial situation, material possessions etc.  
(Please specify) .....
- Lead to fitting in with social groups/friends
- It doesn't
- Don't know
- Other
- (Please Specify) .....

16. *In relation to the body image identified in question 2, if this kind of body image doesn't influence the way you present yourself on Facebook please explain why?*

17. *Have you ever used a filter, photo-shop or other digital technologies to alter your own body image photo's?*

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

18. *Have you ever tried to mimic or recreate a body image you've seen on Facebook?*

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

*-Please explain*

### ***Media Use and Demographic Questions***

- What social networking sites do you use most often? Please rank in order of use.

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snap Chat
- You tube
- Reddit
- Tumbler
- Vine
- Other, Please Specify.

- How often do you use Facebook in a typical day?

- Once a day
- 2-4
- 5-10
- 11-15
- 15-20
- 20+

- How long would you typically spend on Facebook in a singular session?

- 5 min >
- 5-15 min
- 15-30min
- 30-45 min
- Hour +

- How do you identify yourself?

- Male
- Female
- Other (Please Specify)

- How old are you?

-18-21

-22-25

-26-30

-31-40

-41-50

-51-60

-61 or over

- What is the highest level of education you have completed?

-Masters or Doctoral degree

-Bachelor's degree

-Professional qualification

-Baccalaureate or A-levels

-University entrance

-High school diploma or leaving certificate

-I did not complete secondary/high school

- Which of the following best describes the nature of your present or former employment?

-Student

-Homemaker/caregiver

-Manual worker

-Tradesperson

-Clerical or administrative worker/ service and sales worker/ office worker/ call-centre worker, etc

-Salaried or self-employed creative worker: artist/ musician/ media producer/ graphic designer

-Self-employed technical or professional worker

-Small business owner-operator

-Manager or executive in public or private sector

-Salaried professional: e.g. school teacher, nurse, accountant, public servant

-Higher level professional: e.g. doctor, lawyer, lecturer/professor, scientist, engineer

-Military

-Unemployed

-Other

- Have you completed any media studies to an advanced (tertiary) level?

-Yes

-No



- Have you completed any gender studies to an advanced (tertiary) level?  
-Yes                      -No
  
- Are you a regular gym/fitness centre user? (use a gym at least once a week)  
-Yes                      -No
  
- Relative to the average income, which of the following best describes your income level?
  - Lower income/ unpaid
  - Lower-middle income
  - Middle income Higher-middle income
  - High income
  - Decline to answer
  
- What is your Ethnicity?
  
- What is your current country of residence?

If you would like to be involved in a one-hour interview, in person or over Skype, please leave your contact details below:

Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire it is very much appreciated. If you wish to contact me regarding the questionnaire please do so using the details listed below. Darren Elliott email: [darrenelliott2@gmail.com](mailto:darrenelliott2@gmail.com)

## 1.2: Participant Information Form

### UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO FACULTY OF ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

**Project title:** Are People Really What They Post to be? A Study of Social Networking Sites And Body Image.

**Research Question:** What kinds of body focused images are social networking site users (Facebook, Instagram and Snap Chat) engaging with and how does this impact users sense of body image? What the research is about: The research is centred on how Social Networking Site users (Facebook, Instagram and Snap Chat) are being impacted and influenced by body focused images.

**What will be required of you:** Participants will be asked to meet for around sixty minutes. The location and starting time will be made known to you at least ten days prior to the interview taking place. I will contact you by means of email. The location will either be a room in the University of Waikato's library, which I will book, or a location closer to you with arrangement and agreement with you. Interviews may also be carried out over Skype should that be more convenient. If so, a time and date of the call will again be arranged by email ten days ahead of time. As an interviewee you will be asked to discuss a series of pre-set questions and asked to draw what you see gendered body types as looking like. The interview audio will be digitally recorded.

**What will happen to the data provided:** The data will be used to assist in writing a PhD thesis for the University of Waikato's Screen and Media Department. The data will be kept anonymous and destroyed once the research project is complete. No individuals will be named at any point in the publication of the data. The comments you make as an interviewee may be used within a written report but comments will not be attributed to you by name or any other personal inference. The drawing will also be kept and used should you provide permission to do so.

**As a participant:** You have the following rights as a research participant. You are able to refuse answering any question during the interview, withdraw from the research at any point and have your input cleared from the research data. Should you wish to have your contributions withdrawn from the data set please notify the researcher within one month of the interview. Without any notice from you your contributions will not be removed from the database. You are also able to request a copy of the research findings.

Should there be any questions or problems that you wish to discuss, please feel free to contact me, or the research supervisors through the details listed below:

Researcher-Darren Elliott: [darrenelliott2@gmail.com](mailto:darrenelliott2@gmail.com) Supervisors- Associate Professor Geoff Lealand- [lealand@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:lealand@waikato.ac.nz) Dr Lisa Perrott- [perrott@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:perrott@waikato.ac.nz) Screen and Media Department: 07 8562889-ext 6828

"This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email [fassetethics@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:fassetethics@waikato.ac.nz), postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240."