

# Media@LSE Working Paper Series

Editors: Bart Cammaerts, Nick Anstead and Richard Stupart



# Beauty and the Blogger

The Impact of Instagram Bloggers on Ideals of Beauty and Self-esteem

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the possible impact that exposure to Instagram bloggers has on the creation of standardised notion of beauty and on women's self-esteem. With over one billion users, the platform's popularity and influence are immense, creating the need for academic research on the topic. Instagram has facilitated the rise of fashion bloggers, who are micro-celebrities with millions of followers. Drawing upon theories of media effects, socio-culturalism, and internalisation, this study seeks to explain the effect of media, and Instagram in particular, on the creation of a standardised ideal of beauty. A review of existing literature is presented to offer support to the claims. The study adopts a quantitative method of research, and uses a between-subjects web survey priming experiment (N=653). Using the analysis of variance test (ANCOVA), the researcher measured differences in respondents' scores on beauty and self-esteem after having been shown images of Instagram bloggers. The results of the research suggests that exposure to such content results in more negative perceptions of beauty and lower levels of self-esteem. This dissertation contributes theoretical and experimental insights towards understanding the linkages between Instagram usage, beauty ideals, and self-esteem, and aims to put forward a robust analysis of the same.

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to contextualise this study by providing a background of the topic along with its contemporary relevance. It will also highlight the purpose and motivation to conduct this research, and state the two research questions.

#### 1.1 Background

As of June 2018, Instagram boasts of over one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018, n.p.), making it one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. It's meteoric growth rate of 5% rise in daily users per quarter, trumps that of both Snapchat and Facebook (Constine, 2018, n.p.). Due to the constant presence that the platform has in the life of consumers, it's impact and influence are undeniably strong. Instagram has evolved into an endless stream of photographs, comprising every possible subject matter. However, the one kind of photograph that has most saturated the feeds of users is that of the beautiful and glamorous Instagram fashion blogger. Instagram fashion and lifestyle blogs occupy an extremely 'prominent position in the popular and scholarly imaginations' (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 3) and the top style bloggers often feature in books, magazines, films, and billboards.

A cursory glance at the Instagram bloggers, or influencers as they are popularly known, would reveal that the ones with the highest number of followers 'overwhelmingly conformed to a Western, heteronormative beauty aesthetic' (ibid, p. 4) i.e. they are thin, young, and possess light skin. Chiara Ferragni (@chiaraferragni), Helena Bordon (@helenabordon), Negin Mirsalehi (@negin\_mirsalehi) and Chiara Biasi (@chiarabiasi) are examples of such top bloggers, each having a follower base of over one million. This propagation of a Eurocentric, linear ideal of beauty encourages women to copy this look to fit in and be deemed beautiful. Those with low self-esteem are particularly vulnerable. (Young, 2017, n.p.).

Media has long been held responsible for shaping ideals of beauty and impacting the body image of consumers. However, social media has a keen advantage here as it allows for twoway communication between consumers and companies through liking, sharing, and

commenting (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, n.p. as cited in Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017, p. 2). This allows for higher reach and more frequent exposure to the aforementioned ideals. (Frost, 2001, n.p.; Swist, Collin, McCormack & Third, 2015, n.p.; Tiggemann & Mcgill, 2004, n.p., as cited in Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017, p. 2-3).

#### **1.2** Purpose Of The Study

The goal of this study was to understand the possible linkages between exposure to Instagram bloggers, and beauty ideals and self-esteem. There are limited previous studies focused on understanding the effects that social media platforms, and Instagram in particular, have on women's standards of beauty and body image. Existing research based on understanding women's envy towards social media influencers (Chae, 2017, p. 246-262), women's response to thin-ideal media (Ashikali & Dittmar, 2012, p. 514-533), and the impact of Facebook on the self-esteem of college students (Raymer, 2015, n.p.) formed the impetus for this dissertation. The existing scholarly works on Instagram are largely focused on the branding and marketing aspect of the platform, and there is insufficient theoretical writing on it. Instagram was chosen partly due to prior research in this sphere being focused on Facebook, and partly due to the platform being a visual medium.

Through this study, the researcher wishes to draw attention to this pertinent issue and the implications that constant consumption of the products of 'influencer marketing' may have on audiences. As more and more brands resort to these bloggers for their advertisements, their command and influence over users will continue to rise, as will their power to shape beauty narratives. Given the potential associations between media consumption and body image and self-esteem, further and more focused research into these media sources is required, in both females and males. Marketers and organisations must be made aware of the possible ethical concerns of such forms of brand promotion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter first outlines the key theories that are essential to understanding this study – Priming, Agenda Setting, Sociocultural Theory, and Internalisation. The theories have been arranged in pairs to prevent overlapping and for easier understanding. This is followed by a discussion on the dominant beauty ideal as seen in mass media, and existing literature on self-esteem and self-image. Lastly, the chapter unpacks the influence that social media, and Instagram in particular, has on the ideals of beauty and self-esteem.

### 1.3 Priming and Agenda Setting

Over the years, researchers have often pushed the limits to test how brief and indirect exposure to socially relevant stimuli can alter people's choices and perceptions (Molden, 2014, p. 2). In 1951, Karl Lashley was the first to use the term *priming* when he introduced the idea of 'residual activation of a mental representation' during his analysis of language production (Bargh, 2006, p. 5). He insisted that there must exist a mediating state that takes place between the intention to do something and the actual production of the intended behaviour. He termed this to be the 'priming of response' (Molden, 2014, p. 220). Priming theory suggests that when one views, hears, or reads something, it causes the activation of similar parts of one's memory. The common element in most contemporary definitions of priming is that activated mental constructs (or 'primes') remain 'temporarily accessible and applicable' to how present stimuli is interpreted, leading to the 'priming effect' (Marquis, 2007, p. 187). This activation is involuntary and the cognitive processes caused by priming are not controlled by the individual.

Priming, as a part of the theory of media effects, originated in 1982 from research regarding agenda setting conducted by Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (Morris, 2013, p. 19). The assumption here was that the common person is not well educated in matters of politics and does not utilise all of her knowledge when taking political decisions. Instead she considers what comes to mind more readily. Using controlled experiments wherein participants were exposed to edited versions of television news programmes, the researchers highlighted two observations.

First, news media was persuasive in telling audiences what to think about, and second, by means of directing attention to certain issues, news media were able to determine the standards by which audiences evaluate political issues (Holbrook & Hill, 2005, p. 278). The former is representative of agenda setting, while the latter exemplifies priming effects.

Priming can be viewed as an extension of agenda setting. This is because: a) both effects are based on 'memory-based models of information processing' i.e. people form attitudes based on the most accessible information at the time of taking decision (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Formation of perspectives is directly linked to 'the ease with which instances or associations could be brought to mind'' (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 208); b) both the models have common theoretical foundations (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11).

These explanations of media effects can trace their roots back to an associative network model of knowledge storage (Anderson, 1983, as cited in Holbrook & Hill, 2005, p. 279). The model states that humans do not store information hierarchically in their memories. Instead, it is arranged in successions of links and nodes that form complex associations with one another. If a certain node is brought into focus, it is probable that the nodes connected to it will also get activated. Thus when people receive some information via forms of media, concepts having similar meanings are triggered, which then activate other semantically linked thought processes (Willnat, 1997, p. 54). This 'principle of spreading activation' explains how media emphasis on certain issues results in a change of opinion on an individual level, and by aggregation, on a community level (Holbrook & Hill, 2005, p. 279).

There are several caveats when considering priming and agenda setting. The accessibility of an idea stored in memory is determined by several factors including frequency and recency of the concept being used, the individual's goals at the time of processing the information, the level of prior knowledge on the topic, and the applicability of the concept to the current stimulus (Willnat 1997, p. 54). Moreover, while the social function of forms of media such as Instagram differs from that of the traditional news media used in the aforementioned research, one can expect the media effects to occur in a similar manner.

#### 1.4 Sociocultural Influences and Internalisation of Values

Sociocultural theories originate from the social constructivist paradigm that considers knowledge to be constructed socially through interactions and something that is shared by individuals (Bryman, 2001, as cited in Wang, Bruce & Hughes, 2011, p. 2). Renshaw postulated, 'The sociocultural perspective suggests that learning is a process of appropriating 'tools for thinking,' that are made available by social agents who initially act as interpreters and guides in the individual's cultural apprenticeship' (1992, p. 2). Vygotsky's seminal work on sociocultural theory, is understood by contemporary scholars to mean that people understand and navigate the world according to their social understanding of it. Thus, it is not possible to separate human cognitive development from the historical, social, and cultural contexts within which it emerges (Johnson, 2009, as cited in Wang, Bruce, and Hughes, 2011, p. 3).

Social and cultural forces influence our perceptions of the world, including those of beauty ideals. The prevailing sociocultural context has witnessed the emergence of an unhealthy beauty ideal that is highly unrealistic and unattainable. A study by Dittmar et al. (2006, n.p.) showed that in Western societies, girls as young as 3 years old begin internalising stereotypes of 'body perfect' ideals and body size (Dittmar et al. 2006, as cited in Perloff, 2014, n.p.). Thompson and Heinberg (1999) identified sociocultural influence media to be the largest contributor towards creating body image disturbances and this was strengthened by Groesz et al.'s (2002) declaration of mass media as the most powerful sociocultural influence (as cited in Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017, p. 6). By being exposed to unrealistic body ideals through ways of interaction with one's sociocultural environment, individuals feel pressured to conform to these norms. The sociocultural environment consists of all forms of media, peer groups, colleagues, and family (Dittmar, 2005, p. 1083). Comparing one's body to existing cultural norms, and being aware that one's body will be subject to such scrutiny, is a part of women's experience (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 192).

Within sociocultural literature, Vygotsky's concept of internalisation was used to explain how by engaging in social interactions with others, one develops their individual ability to reason (Wegerif, 2000, n.p.). Internalisation was defined by Campbell as 'a condition of incorporation

of norms and/or roles into one's own personality, with a corresponding obligation to act accordingly or suffer guilt' (1964, p. 392). Accepting and incorporating the beauty ideal refers to the process of internalisation, wherein the internalised ideal forms the guiding principles. (Thompson, Van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda & Heinberg, 2003, as cited in Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017, p. 7). Individuals tend to internalise values that are validated by those who are respected or in power, as this provides them with social reinforcement.

Research regarding the internalization of societal concepts of beauty is often focused on 'thinideal internalisation'. Thin-ideal internalisation refers to 'the extent to which an individual cognitively buys into socially defined ideals of attractiveness and engages in behaviours designed to produce an approximation of these ideals' (Thompson et al., 1999, as cited in Thompson & Stice, 2001, p. 181). The majority of women report that they are aware of the thin ideal standard that is perpetuated by society and tend to carry forward these values through their peers (Milkie, 1999; Nichter, 2000, as cited in Balcetis, Cole, Chelberg & Alicke, 2013, p. 100). The social context of attractiveness established by society and immediate social groups thus has a strong impact on self-image. Awareness and internalisation of such ideals can also affect other notions of self, such as self-esteem. A study of 791 girls in 2007 revealed that internalisation of media ideals led to young girls being unhappy with their bodies (Knauss, Paxton & Alsaker, 2007, as cited in Osadan & Hanna, 2015, p. 39). According to a study by Klaczynski, Goold & Mudry, women are more likely than men to internalise cultural values of thinness being desirable, and are thus more susceptible to suffer from lower self-esteem if there is a conflict between their internalized values and their physical self (2004, p. 315).

However, it must be recognised that sociocultural influences and internalisation effects do not apply to all individuals in the same way. While all women are vulnerable to possible adverse effects of the beauty ideal by being exposed to images of 'beautiful women', not all of them develop preoccupations with physical appearance or self-esteem problems (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004, p. 25). Internalisation of beauty ideals is also dependent on many factors including demographics, prior personal experiences, mental well-being, physical attributes, and sexuality (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 196). Sociocultural theories are more considerate

of the various factors, and thus do not use a single determinant to establish causal relations. This is because they recognise the existence of the many nuanced factors that affect our perceptions and attitudes, and take them into account while undertaking analysis.

#### **1.5** The Dominant Beauty Ideal

Beauty is an extremely nuanced concept with no single stated definition, but with several implied meanings and very real consequences for those who do not conform to its standards (Anderson-Edwards, 2013, p. 23). One way to trace trends in standards of beauty is to examine various depictions of beauty in the media, ranging from portraits or sculptures in the precamera age, to commercial advertisements and photographs in the present (Lakoff & Scherr, 1984, as cited in Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992, p. 85). As recognised by Saltzberg and Chrisler (1997, as cited in Anderson-Edwards, 2013, p. 18) "beauty ideals are those which are constantly changing and therefore ensuring that not everyone can be beautiful". A survey of 1,027 women conducted by Dove showed that 29% of women said that their conception of beauty is shaped by 'women in the public domain' and 25% named social media to be their source of inspiration (Katz, 2015, n.p.). A study of several cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys (see Botta 1999; Harrison and Hefner, 2006; Stice et al., 1994) has found that exposure to media is key in predicting body dissatisfaction, thin body ideals, and eating disorder symptomatology among preadolescent girls and young women (Perloff, 2014, n.p.). Grabe, Ward and Hyde (2008, p. 470) conducted a meta-analysis to examine seventy seven experimental and correlational studies that tested the relationship between media exposure and women's body dissatisfaction, thin ideal internalisation, and eating behaviours; and found that higher media consumption resulted in negative body image.

The current, and widely accepted standard of beauty is majorly translated through white models and is not representative of ethnic diversity and minority communities. The beauty ideal propagated by Western media is a woman who is light-skinned, excessively thin and tall, with 'a small waist, long legs, flat stomach, narrow hips, in combination with large breasts and toned muscles' (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Harrison, 2003, as cited in Bertilsson & Gillberg, 2017, p. 5).

In the few instances where the visual media industries allow for the participation of minority women, they include those who are bi-racial or relatively lighter skinned, especially with light brown or blond hair that is long and straight. 'The non-white models appearing in these (fashion) catalogues must resemble as closely as possible their White counterparts so as not to detract from the racialized subtext' (Hooks, 1992, p. 72). Even celebrities are not exempt from the pressure to confine themselves to this limited definition of beauty. Beyoncé, Halle Berry, Rihanna, Priyanka Chopra and several other women of colour have been 'anglicized and whitewashed overtime, with lighter-coloured, straighter hair, lighter makeup, coloured contacts and often shrinking figures (Cicci, 2014, n.p.).'

Park (2005, p. 597) noted through content analyses that the average body size of women portrayed in mass media has been progressively getting smaller over the years. Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, and Ahrens (1992, p. 87) conducted a study of the portrayal of female beauty icons and observed that the majority of them met the medical criteria to be diagnosed with severe eating disorders. The dominant ideal of privileging the thin female physique has important ramifications for women. Across all genres of visual media - movies, magazines, and television programs, thinness is constantly emphasized and rewarded for women, and thin characters are overrepresented on television shows while overweight characters are severely underrepresented (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008, p. 460). The majority of the United States adult population could be classified as either overweight or obese, which draws attention to the widening sense of discrepancy between real female bodies and social norms of female body beauty (Pesa et al., 2000, as cited in Wagner, Aguirre, & Sumner, 2016, n.p.).

With the increased use of new technology and digital alteration techniques, the beauty ideal is further deviating from reality as photoshopping and editing pictures is becoming easier to do. Attractive models are often positioned to be 'natural,' and effortless, but Consalvo (1997) observed 'the natural look promoted is itself a fake, the result of airbrushing and digital enhancements' (p. 109). This is further suggested in a study conducted by Posavac et al. (2001), who defined two conditions; The 'Artificial Beauty' and the 'Genetic Reality' (as cited in Bertilsson and Gillberg, 2017, p. 6). The former implies that the desired look is dependent on

several processes such as make-up, lighting, and airbrushing, and these together create inappropriate and unachievable standards for the ordinary woman. The latter argues that most regular women are simply not genetically predisposed to resemble the flawless models that appear in media. Researchers also highlight the damaging theoretical importance of emphasizing a woman's physical appearance to the extent of sacrificing her personal identity (Olson, 2009, p. 11).

#### 1.6 Self-esteem

Self-esteem is commonly referred to as 'the extent to which one prizes, values, approves, or likes oneself' (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991, p. 115, as cited in Chatham-Carpenter & DeFrancisco, 1998, p. 468). Sigelman defined self-esteem as 'your overall evaluation of your worth as person, high or low, based on all the positive and negative self-perceptions that make up your self-concept' (as cited in Bailey, 2003, p. 388). According to Mann et al. self-esteem is 'a person's global appraisal of his/her positive or negative value, based on the scores a person gives him/herself in different roles and domains of life' (2004, p. 357). Some academics consider self-esteem to be a stable personality trait as it is developed over many years through individual experiences, while others consider it a variable characteristic that can be manipulated by events (Lordello et al., 2014, p. 37-38). There also exists a third theory which proposes that self-esteem is both, a personality trait and a condition. Patrick, Neighbors, and Knee (2004), and Park and Crocker (2008) have distinguished contingent self-esteem from 'true self-esteem', stating that while the latter reflects attitudes of self-worth that are independent of attaining certain outcomes, the former is dependent on external or internal demands such as academic success and appearance (as cited in Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010, p. 108).

There exists several scales to measure self-esteem in individuals; many adopt a global assessment that produces either an overall self-esteem score (e.g. Rosenberg, 1965), while others use a summative score based on qualities such as attractiveness and self-worth (e.g. Coopersmith, 1967) (Chatham-Carpenter & DeFrancisco, 1998, p. 468).

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Self-esteem is an important factor in studies on health, body image, and adolescent development (Thompson & Hammond, 2003, p. 231). According to Pesa, Syre & Jones (2000), body image issues may be used to explain low self-esteem in overweight female adolescents (ibid, p. 232). Self-image includes certain aspects of self-esteem but tends to give more focus to the physical and outward appearance. It considers how one feels about their body and how they believe others view them. An Australian study conducted by Kostanski and Gullone (1998) found self-esteem to be more strongly associated with one's perceived body image dissatisfaction than their actual body size. An individual's self-image is influenced by their status within socially and culturally established norms and socially imposed stereotypical beauty ideals can result in severe emotional suffering (Lordello et al., 2014, p. 38).

Due to the constant idolisation of thin bodies and perfect features of media, people are highly vulnerable to problems regarding self-esteem and self-image (Gallagher, 2017, p. 4). 'Depression and low self-esteem have been consistently linked in social comparison research and low self-concept clarity has been strongly associated with lower levels of self-esteem' (Durkin, Paxton & Sorbello, 2007, p. 1096). A study conducted by Duffy (2011) to investigate the role of media on self-esteem on two different ages groups (15-17 and 24-26) found that women were influenced by media and self-monitoring (as cited in Meshioye, 2016, p. 9). Herbozo and Thompson (2006) found that undergraduate women who received appreciative cues about their weight and appearance were reported to have higher levels of self-esteem (as cited in Romo, Mireles-Rios & Hurtado, 2015, p. 478).

#### 1.7 The Social Media Influence

Over the last decade, social media has been celebrated for being revolutionary, as it has championed diversity and created a space to showcase different notions of beauty; one that was beyond the control of magazine editors and powerful media houses. Yet over time, social media's central message of 'you do you' seems to have been forgotten, as capitalist forces and sociocultural norms are pushing everyone to 'look the same' (Nouril, 2017, n.p.). This has taken place due to marketers discovering the immense power of social media. The power of digital referrals to increase audience engagement with brands has been proven to be extremely

successful, and has become a mainstream tactic for most companies (The Yale Tribune, 2017, n.p.). This has led to the rise of bloggers, or *influencers*, who collaborate with brands to promote a wide range of products. This can be problematic, as the photographs on the platform have become more targeted for the consumption of certain products, and caused the reproduction of specific ideal bodies to be consumed.

Influencer marketing is a marketing practice based on influence theory, which states that a 'small percentage of key individuals can be effective at persuading a great amount of others' (Braatz, 2017, p. 6). Simply put, influencers are content creators who successfully manage to gather a large base of followers, by creating engaging posts. Through blogging, vlogging or creating short-form content, they provide their audience with an insight into their personal lives, experiences and opinions (Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017, p. 801). Amongst the several platforms on which influencer marketing takes place, Instagram seems to be the frontrunner due to the visually stimulating and engaging nature of the platform (Braatz, 2017, p. 5), the active user base of over one billion (Statista, 2018, n.p.), and daily photo uploads of over ninety five million (Aslam, 2018, n.p.). 28% of the users open the app several times in a day, and spend approximately 28 minutes Instagram every day (Jargalsaikhan & Korotina, 2016, p. 17). A study on influencer marketing (Woods, 2016) conducted using in-depth interviews with thirteen advertisers, found Instagram to be the primary social media channel to come to mind when the topic was mentioned (p. 11).

Instagram influencers are the 'masters of their niches', allowing them to earn a high level of trust and establish two-way communication with their followers (Knowledge@Wharton, 2017, n.p.). Uploading regular content and maintaining a unique visual aesthetic on their feeds allows these influencers to forge close connections with their followers. By doing this, they become 'micro-celebrities' and are idolised by their audience (Braatz, 2017, p. 7). The influencers appear to be approachable and accessible by allowing their audience to participate in their everyday lives, and are sometimes perceived as friends by their followers thus establishing a high level of trust and influence. (Jargalsaikhan & Korotina, 2016, p. 20; Isosuo, 2016, p. 12). Instagram bloggers are also very likely to contribute to societal norms of

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attractiveness. Since the app focuses on images instead of text, the photographs can produce ideas around body image and reinforce prevailing attitudes (Rassi, 2016, p. 7). More women use social media as compared to men (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016, n.p.) and thus they are more likely to be targeted by the notions of beauty developed and communicated through it.

Instagram has evolved into a platform where individuals can create an 'ideal' online image of themselves and spend plenty of time doing so (Sunstrum, 2014, n.p.). Users tend to post pictures and videos where no flaws are apparent, often utilising the app's photo-editing tools, and different picture filters. A study conducted by Duffy and Hund (2015) showed how top ranked bloggers depict the illusion of 'having it all' through three interrelated tropes: the destiny of passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 1). The photographs uploaded by these influencers appear to be taken effortlessly and naturally, but few realise the massive amount of time and effort that goes into taking these 'psychotically contrived, faux-spontaneous images' (Annand, 2016, n.p.), thus making the portrayal seem attainable. When the ordinary woman is unable to match these unrealistic standards, it can negatively affect her self-esteem and her perception of her body. A study by Clay, Vignoles and Dittmar (2005) found that girls who were exposed to images of models with their lavish lifestyles, perfect bodies, and pretty faces, scored lower on body satisfaction and self-esteem as compared to the control group who were not exposed to the same (p. 468). If such a short exposure can influence levels of body satisfaction and self-esteem in females, then prolonged exposure by following influencers on Instagram and viewing images of beauty and lavish lifestyles could intensify these effects, and can play out in many ways.

The second potential risk to users' body image is the lack of representation on the platform in terms of race, body size, sexuality, and able-bodiedness. A study of the top ten style bloggers (Liu & Suh, 2018) found that all the bloggers on their list were white (with some Asian representation) young women with 'disciplined bodies'. There was not a single African-American or plus-sized blogger featured. 'The suffocating similarity, lack of diversity and

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curated realities of today's bloggers has set an impossible standard for travelers today, particularly women' (Vargas, 2018, n.p.). This problem has been noted by those within the industry as well with one such lifestyle blogger, Annika Ziehen (@midnightblueelephant) taking to social media to call out the saturation of feeds by 'pretty, skinny, white girls' (Ziehen, 2018, n.p.). Revolve, an e-commerce fashion site with an active Instagram presence, was criticised for patronising a group of influencers that excludes plus-sized and dark skinned models, and this raised several debates about the severe lack of representation in the blogger and influencer community (Domino, 2018, n.p.). Further contributing to this homogenisation of beauty is the fact that the algorithm used by the app gives prominence to pictures with higher engagement, created a phenomenon termed 'Instagram face' (Nouril, 2017, n.p.) - smooth poreless skin, sculpted cheekbones and bee-stung lips.

## **1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

As indicated by the literature review, - *Priming Theory, Agenda Setting Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Internalisation Theory* have been used to understand the impact of the exposure to Instagram bloggers on beauty and self- esteem. A web survey priming experiment has been used to determine whether people feel differently about their self-worth after exposure to bloggers who represent an 'ideal standard of beauty'. To address this purpose, the researcher's project will attempt to answer the following research questions:

What is the impact of Instagram bloggers on the propagation of a standardised ideal of beauty?

Does exposure to the posts of Instagram bloggers have an effect on the self-esteem of women?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, one can find all the relevant aspects of the methodology and research design. The chapter starts with an overview of the method used and then provides details on the rationale behind choosing it, along with the design itself. This is followed by sections discussing the sampling method, the ethical considerations and self-reflexivity. The chapter concludes with a brief introduction to the different scales used to measure the dependent variables.

#### 2.1 Overview

Using a between-subjects web survey priming experiment, the researcher aimed at comparing exposure to images of Instagram bloggers (test), or neutral images with no bloggers (control), with beauty ideals and self-esteem as the dependent variables.

#### 2.2 Rationale and Research Design

The decision to use quantitative research in this study was almost instantaneous, as the goal was to 'establish general laws of behaviour and phenomenon' and use statistics to describe connections, patterns, and relationships (McLeod, 2017, n.p.). The scientific nature of such methods make them less prone to ambiguities and allow for measured data to be retested by others. Within the scope of quantitative research, a between-subjects web survey priming experiment was found to be the most appropriate method for this particular study.

Surveys allow researchers to collect data in a 'relatively standardized format' (Moy & Murphy, 2016, p. 18) and the online versions can be administered in a time-efficient manner, reducing the effort and time required to go into the field for data collection (Evans & Mathur, 2005, p. 198). The web-survey provided for flexibility in design, and also provided motivation to the respondents to complete the questionnaire, along with the option to include audio and visual stimuli to enhance the survey questions (Couper, Traugott, & Lamias, 2001, p. 250). The survey was designed to be interactive, wherein participants completed one set of questions at a time, and were then taken to a new screen with the subsequent set of questions. The advantage of this design is that it offers more control to branching and skipping questions (ibid, p. 240). A

study by Couper, Traugott, & Lamias (2001) also found a small increase in completed surveys where a progress indicator was present (p. 243). Thus, a graphic progress indicator was included in this survey design.

'Priming, the act of influencing another's behaviour via indirect cues, is a common experimental manipulation in social psychology' (Gilder & Heerey, 2018, p. 405) and has been used in several studies (see Leyva, 2018; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Bauer et al., 2012; Dreisbach & Boettcher, 2011). A particular strength of experiment based media exposure is the potential for causal inferences regarding the nature of the relation between the media manipulation and the outcome measures (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008, p. 461). The exact purpose of the study was not indicated to the respondents, it was simply stated to be a study on women's use of Instagram. This was done because past studies (Marquis, 2007, p. 214) have indicated that when subjects were 'aware of the persuasive intent' it resulted in lower levels of priming.

The test group was exposed to seven images of popular Instagram influencers, each chosen due to their following of over one million (as of 12/08/2018). The images selected were typical of the content generated by these influencers (see Appendix D). These were images of Alexandra Pereira with 1.6 million followers (@lovelypepa), Leonie Hanne with 1.8 million followers (@leoniehanne, formerly @ohhcouture), Maria Helena Bordon with 1 million followers (@helenabordon), Jessica Stein with 2.6 million followers (@tuulavintage), Julie Sarinana with 4.9 million followers (@sincerelyjules), Negin Mirsalehi with 4.9 million followers (@chiaraferragni). The control conditions included neutral images which were taken from the public Instagram accounts of magazines, book publishers, animal pages, coffee shops, and Instagram's own account. The criteria for these images was that they should not feature a human being as the subject matter, and not be related to beauty or fashion (see Appendix E). The associations would thus be with nature, coffee, and reading.

All the images were presented as screenshots taken from the app itself, which try to recreate the same effect that viewing them on the Instagram mobile application would have. They were only shown briefly to the respondents (five seconds each), as users on Instagram tend to scroll through their feed and not deliberate on individual images for a long period of time.

The questions on self-esteem were taken from the *Rosenberg self-esteem scale* (SES) (1965), which is the most popular measure of global self-esteem and has widely been accepted as a reliable instrument to measure self-esteem in research settings (Schmitt & Allik, 2005, p. 623). This is due to its high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Blascovich & Tomaka, 2013, p. 120). The scale, (see Appendix C), is designed to uncover people's general feelings towards themselves, and does not stress on any specific attributes or traits. Out of the scale's ten four-point Likert-type items (*1=strongly agree*, *4=strongly disagree*), five statements were included in the survey. These were: 'on the whole I am satisfied with myself;' 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities;' 'I am able to do things as well as most other people;' 'I take a positive attitude toward myself;' and 'I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others'. The chosen items were not reverse scored, as this would allow for ease of analysis in the overall study. The scores were averaged to create a composite variable (M = 2.16, SD = 0.88).

There are several aspects to the definition of beauty, and thus there was a need for a scale that incorporated all of these. *The Broad Conceptualization of Beauty Scale* (BCBS) was developed by Tylka and Iannantuono (2016) which is used to measure 'the extent women define female beauty widely within external and internal characteristics' (abstract). The scale has been tested for internal consistency, test–retest reliability, and construct, and in each of these, the validity of its scores were upheld. While the scale used seven-point Likert-type items (*1= strongly agree*, *7= strongly disagree*), these were converted into a four-point scoring method for this study (*1=strongly agree*, *4=strongly disagree*). This was done to create continuity and uniformity in the questionnaire. Of the scale's nine items (see Appendix B) five statements were selected. The included items were, 'I think that a wide variety of body shapes are beautiful for women;' 'Even if a physical feature is not considered attractive by others or by society, I think that it

can be beautiful;' 'I appreciate a wide range of different looks as beautiful;' 'A woman's acceptance of herself can change my perception of her physical beauty;' and 'I define a woman's beauty differently than how it is portrayed in the media'. The scores were averaged to create a composite variable (M = 2.19, SD = 0.88).

#### 2.3 Procedure

Using the mentioned web survey method, a between-subjects priming experiment was designed. The test design was split into (a) exposure to images of Instagram bloggers and (b) neutral control conditions. On opening the link to the survey, the respondents were presented with a screen containing the consent form, which contained information about the study and data usage. The purpose of the study was stated in more general terms so as to not pre-prime the individual. On providing their consent and confirming that they were (i) female and (ii) aged eighteen years or above, the participants began the survey. The respondents were randomly allocated into one of the two groups, without any indication of an existing alternative. The initial questions for both groups were ones regarding basic demographics such as age, education, relationship status, ethnicity etc. Following this, they were presented with the instructions, 'Please pay close attention to the following images. Each image will appear on your screen for 5 seconds. There are a total of 7 images.' The purpose of these images was again not indicated, to prevent pre-priming.

After the respondents were exposed to either the test or control stimuli, they were shown statements regarding self-esteem to which they had to respond based on their level of agreement. There were five items in this section, split into two separate pages to ensure that the respondents were paying attention and not just following a pattern of clicks. This was followed by five items to test the participants' attitudes towards beauty standards and the responses were again arranged in a Likert-scale format. The participants were specifically instructed to respond to each statement based on their individual beliefs. Random distractor questions were placed in between the stimuli and the outcome measures to mask the purpose of the study.

#### 2.4 Sampling

It is essential that choosing the method of obtaining data and deciding from whom the data will be acquired be done with sound judgment, since no amount of careful analysis can compensate for improperly collected data (Tongco, n.d., p. 147). The method of sampling that was found most suitable for this study was purposive sampling. Sharma (2017, p. 751) writes,

'Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective or subjective sampling, reflects a group of sampling techniques that rely on the judgement of the researcher when it comes to selecting the units ... that are to be studied'.

While random sampling often results in a more representative data set, this research required a sample of people with particular characteristics i.e. they had to (i) identify as female and (ii) be over the age of eighteen. This was done to avoid ethical issues of dealing with minors and recruit those participants who would be able to provide more relevant information. By using the anonymous survey distribution link provided by Qualtrics, the survey was distributed and posted on several groups on different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and via email.

Data was collected from a total of 653 individuals. Out of these, the respondents were randomly assigned into the control group (N = 328) or the test group (N = 325). In this sample, the majority of the respondents (60.8%) were aged between 18 and 24, while 30.6% were in the age bracket of 25-34, and only 8.6% were over the age of 35. This is consistent with the fact that most social media users tend to be between the ages of 18 and 34 (Statista, 2018, n.p.). In terms of ethnicity, the sample was fairly representative. 22.4% of respondents identified as white, 16.1% as black or African-American, 2.8% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 34.3% as Asian, 5.8% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 13.8% as Hispanic or Latino, and 4.9% as 'other'. When considering relationship status, it was found that the majority (64.3%) had never been married, while 27.4% were married, 3.7% were divorced, and 4.6% were separated. About half (48.2%) of the respondents had received an undergraduate degree, 38.2% had received a graduate degree or higher, and only 13.4% identified high school as their highest

level of education. 51.8% of participants were students, which corresponded with the fact that 49.3% of respondents chose their annual income level as less than  $\in$ 10,000. The sample seemed to have a good amount of diversity within it. It was essential to obtain this demographic information due to the fact that factors such as gender, age, income, and ethnicity have been shown to influence consumption and perception of media (Jha & Ye, 2016, p. 5).

#### 2.5 Ethics and Reflexivity

My approach to ethics was guided by the 'LSE Research Ethics Policy and Procedures' (2014). The Research Ethics Checklist was filled in detail and submitted, and subsequently approved by my supervisor. Each web survey began with a consent form, which informed the respondents about the usage and storage of their data. Respondents were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and that no individual results with identifying information would be published. Respondents were also instructed to confirm that they were above the age of eighteen, so as to prevent any ethical issues. The data was stored on a password protected external drive and kept securely, only used for the purpose of this dissertation. To ensure the objectivity of the responses, no direct compensation was provided for participation, and it was reiterated that participation is voluntary. The decision for the surveys to be distributed online and conducted remotely was based on two factors: (i) the participants could answer the questionnaire at a location of their choosing, where they felt comfortable, and (ii) the presence of a researcher can reduce the validity of results due to 'experimenter expectations' (Gilder & Heerey, 2018, p. 405). A copy of a blank consent form has been included for further information (see Appendix A).

The next ethical consideration arose when the images for the experiment were being selected on Instagram. Obtaining permissions from those who owned these images was not feasible. In their study of mass media, Wimmer and Dominick stated, 'if the site is intended to reach the general public (...) the material may be freely analysed and quoted to the degree necessary in the research without consent' (2011, p. 81). To ensure that no copyrights were violated and that adequate credit was given to the owners of the images, the Instagram handles of those who posted them were included alongside each image. Moreover, the images were only

selected from 'public profiles' i.e. those that are available for public viewing, as these are a part of the public domain.

Reflexivity is an ongoing process by which researchers reflect on their value systems and by means of which they recognise how their 'social background, location and assumptions affect their research practice' (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 17). In order for the findings to be deemed authentic, it is essential for the researcher to be as transparent as possible, and thus I have long deliberated over this issue. A great amount of time was spent in determining which pictures to choose, and I tried to use the same factors across pictures to ensure consistency. As a woman of colour belonging to the South Asian region, it would be possible to have inherent predispositions and preconceived notions towards this topic. I also identify as an intersectional feminist, making it difficult to approach issues of gender and racial discrimination from an objective standpoint. However, to prevent researcher bias and minimise demand effect, great care was taken when choosing appropriate literature, framing the questionnaire, and structuring the web survey in a neutral manner, so as to not inadvertently skew the results.

## 3. RESULTS

This chapter describes the statistical findings of the study. It begins with a description of the reliability test used to validate the scales. This is followed by a detailed report of the analysis of variance (ANCOVA) tests conducted, along with the results.

After cleaning and organising the data set, composite variables ('self-esteem' and 'beauty') were created for both the outcome measures. First, the reliability of both the outcome measures was tested. Cronbach's Alpha is used to see if multiple-question Likert scale surveys are reliable. It tests the internal consistency i.e. 'it describes the extent to which all the items in a test measure the same concept or construct and hence it is connected to the inter-relatedness of the items within the test' (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011, p. 53). A score above 0.70 is seen to be an acceptable reliability coefficient (Reynaldo & Santos, 1999, n.p.). The alpha coefficient for 'self-esteem' was 0.93 and the alpha coefficient for 'beauty' was 0.91, thus suggesting high internal consistency.

To test the two original research questions, a hypothesis was derived from them:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a relationship between momentary exposure to images of Instagram bloggers (as compared to exposure to neutral stimuli), and lower self-esteem and a more linear conception of beauty ideals.

Accordingly, a null hypothesis was derived:

*H*<sub>0</sub>: *There is no relationship between momentary exposure to images of Instagram bloggers (as compared to exposure to neutral stimuli), and lower self-esteem and a more linear conception of beauty ideals.* 

Next, two analysis of variance (ANCOVA) tests were conducted, using SPSS version 25. A grouping variable 'treatment condition' was created to distinguish between the control group and test group (*1= treatment group*, *0 = control group*). Momentary exposure to the images of the Instagram bloggers was the independent variable. For the first test, beauty was selected to be the dependent variable. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the control group and the treatment group. The treatment group got a higher score, thus indicating

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their acceptance of the standardised ideals of beauty ( M = 2.57, SD = 0.89 vs. M = 1.75, SD = 0.64), F (1, 651) = 185.21, p < 0.001, partial  $\eta 2 = 0.22$ ). For the second test, self-esteem was entered as the dependent variable. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the control group and the treatment group. The treatment group got a higher score, thus indicating lower self-esteem. ( M = 2.63, SD = 0.90 vs. M = 1.76, SD = 0.60), F (1, 651) = 211.06, p < 0.001, partial  $\eta 2 = 0.25$ . For both the tests, the H<sub>0</sub> could be rejected at all statistically significant levels.

A second analysis was conducted, with demographics entered as control conditions These were age, ethnicity, education level, income, employment level, and relationship status. The results of these tests were largely similar to the first set of tests. When using beauty as the dependent variable, the treatment group again scored higher (here the estimated marginal mean has been used): (M = 2.58 vs. M = 1.74), F(1, 653) = 199.57, p < 0.001, partial  $\eta 2 = 0.24$ . Similarly, using self-esteem as the dependent variable, the treatment group scored higher, which signified lower levels of self-esteem. (M = 2.63 vs. M = 1.75), F(1, 653) = 222.15, p < 0.001, partial  $\eta 2 = 0.26$ . By rejecting the H<sub>0</sub> at all statistically significant levels, the H<sub>1</sub> was said to be accepted in all cases.

### 4. DISCUSSION

In this chapter one can find an in-depth discussion of the theoretical implications of the results stated in the previous section. By analysing the statistics through the lens of priming, agenda setting, sociocultural, and internalisation theories, it provides the real world implications of the results.

The aim of this study was to analyse the impact (if any) that exposure to Instagram bloggers has on women's ideals of self-esteem and beauty. By carrying out a web-survey priming experiment, it was demonstrated that there is evidence of a relationship between momentary exposure to images of the bloggers and the aforementioned attitudes. Using the analysis of variance tests (ANCOVA), it was shown that there was a statistically significant difference between the test group and control group when using beauty and self-esteem as dependent variables, indicating that the test group possessed lower self-esteem and had a more negative understanding of beauty. This was true even when the tests were controlled for the various demographics such as age, gender, income etc. These covariates were used to exercise stricter experimental control and give a more 'pure measure of effect of the experimental manipulation' (Field, 2018, p. 592). The experiment was thus successful in answering both the research questions indicated at the start of this dissertation.

While the statistics provide for numerical explanations to both the research questions, one must return to the theoretical framework to understand the possible reasons for getting these results. The basis of priming theory is the acceptance that people are cognitive misers who will not, and often cannot, consider all relevant information before taking a decision (Borah, 2016, p. 6). Attitudes towards the world are often formed on the basis of those stimuli that we are exposed to most frequently, as these activate many interconnected nodes within our conscience. This relates to previous studies wherein it was stated that judgements of oneself or others are taken on the subset of cognitions that are 'most readily accessible' (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, as cited in as cited in Srull & Wyer, Jr, 1979, p. 1660). By setting the standards of what women should look like, and then constantly displaying this norm to women, media plays a massive role in the creation of the accepted form of beauty. Media, in many direct and

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subtle forms, puts an emphasis on the thin female body and being evaluated based on one's outward appearance. This has been validated in studies where a woman exposed to a thin female model, may feel shame and unhappy about not looking similar to the model (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, as cited in Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008, p. 281). As individuals are spending more and more time on social media platforms, they are constantly consuming the ideals and attitudes that these apps propagate. The 'intimacy' and 'immediacy' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012, p. 61) of social media platforms make them more effective in creating narratives, and setting *agendas*. Social media platforms such as Instagram also result in incidental exposure, wherein information is disseminated to users who are not actively seeking it, thus strengthening media effects.

The results of the test must also be viewed through a sociocultural lens. Vygotsky's view that the individual shapes their understanding of the world through social and cultural influences is especially pertinent when discussing beauty ideals. Globalisation has led to the emergence of a 'global culture' (Featherstone, 1990, p. 1), leading to further homogeneity and Eurocentric influences in beauty standards. By consuming Western-dominated media, women from all over the world are subject to these standards. Despite the fact that the survey sample was fairly representative in terms of ethnicity, the results indicate that the majority of respondents largely agree with the beauty ideals advocated by mass-media, and tend to evaluate the female body as per those norms. Though sociocultural theory lists media, peers, and family as the main transmitters of narratives, it must be recognised that the latter two also absorb information through media, and reinforce it in daily interactions.

The popular fashion and lifestyle bloggers imbibe the beauty traits that are considered desirable by society; tall, thin, and fair, with light brown or blonde hair. Their large team of stylists and makeup artists constantly help them look 'camera-ready', whether they are at the airport or at a fast-food restaurant; making it appear as if that is how they look at all times. Their pictures are often taken in very exotic and luxurious locations, indicating that such an extravagant life is the norm that people should aspire for. The test group in the experiment was exposed to pictures that fit in to this description. Sociocultural theory suggests that when

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individuals compare their perceived appearance with another idealised person, anxiety and distress occurs regarding personal body image (Hsien-Jin, 2000, p. 15). When individuals internalise the widespread attitude that one can only be considered beautiful if they possess certain physical characteristics, they contrast their looks with the 'ideal looks'. Previous studies (see Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995) also suggest that the link between media exposure and women could be mediated by the tendency to internalise messages pertaining to ideals of thinness and attractiveness. Instagram users are constantly consuming content that encourages them to make comparisons amongst their peers, and even between themselves and celebrities. The success, fame, and celebrity status that such bloggers have received by posting aesthetically appealing pictures is enough to make other women aspire to be like them. This in turn increases the demand for such influencers and the content they produce, and the cycle perpetuates itself. Even within the audiences, ordinary women strive to portray an ideal version of their lives, whether it is by dressing in a certain manner, or choosing certain locations for their pictures. This puts an enormous amount of pressure on women to maintain a high standard of their Instagram presence, which is made more problematic by the number of likes they expect as validation for their picture. Upon not receiving the kind of validation they expect, women often feel inferior and negatively about themselves.

As more brands are looking at influencers to promote their products, their influence is further increasing, both in terms of resources and power. Having been incorporated into the capitalist market, they push out content that subtly promotes makeup companies, designer fashion brands, and hair products. By citing these companies as the sources for their flawless skin and perfect looks, they encourage their audiences to purchase these products in order to look as 'beautiful' as them. Studies have revealed that 'when women are exposed to materialistic advertisements, appearance becomes more salient and more central to their self-concept, at least temporarily' (Ashikali & Dittmar, 2012, p. 526). Instagram has thus evolved into the perfect platform for beauty brands to benefit from the users' insecurities and further perpetuate unattainable standards of beauty. Several studies have been conducted in the past

to gauge the effect that fashion magazines had on young women's body image, e.g. a study conducted in 1999 found that 68% of college-going women reported feeling worse about their physical appearance after reading women's magazines (Winston, 2006, p. 74). Instagram can be seen as having this same pervasive effect in the contemporary context, where its impact is tangible .

The experimental design of this study brings one closer to finding a tangible effect of the aforementioned theories. By combining sociocultural and psychosocial theories with statistical findings, it is possible to see the enormous, and potentially harmful, influence that Instagram bloggers have on women. The findings of this study are supported by previous research (see Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002) that found robust support for general negative effect of 'body perfect' media on body image of women and men, consistent with sociocultural theory and the impact of media effects.

## 5. LIMITATIONS

In spite of the several advantages of using quantitative research, the method is not without its flaws. The main disadvantage is that it 'fails to ascertain deeper underlying meanings and explanations' (Rahman, 2016, p. 106). While the methodology is useful in exploring the social world using statistical techniques, it can only provide results in terms of frequencies or rates. It cannot account for why individuals feel a certain way, or how people interpret things (ibid). Due to many restrictions on time and resources, this thesis was conducted using only one method of data collection. To get a more accurate and rounded insight into the impact of Instagram bloggers on women's self-esteem and beauty, a future study could combine the quantitative methods used here with qualitative techniques such as one on one interviewing or focus groups.

A second limitation of the study is that it focused solely on Instagram bloggers and influencers. While Instagram has seen the largest rise of influencer culture, other social media platforms such as Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook, and Tumblr, also have a large number of such

influencers and bloggers. These could be considered in further studies to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of such individuals, and how they carefully create and curate their presence across various media. Another factor to be considered is the potential of expanding the scope of related research by including male users, queer users, and older age groups, in order to have a broader perspective.

The complex nature of the subject matter itself, is something that cannot be overlooked. Individuals may not be completely honest when reporting on factors such as self-esteem and beauty image. Previous studies have found that when individuals are asked to provide a judgement of themselves, they are 'unlikely to perform an exhaustive search of memory for all cognitions that have implications for this judgment' (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, as cited in Srull & Wyer, Jr, 1979, p. 1660). Self-esteem and beauty also have several cultural nuances. Rubenstein (1992) noted that since modesty is valued in many American and Asian cultures, these women tend to score themselves lower on self-assessment scales (as cited in Chatham-Carpenter & DeFrancisco, 1998, p. 468). This reflects the need for more inclusive and less Eurocentric measures of research, where other perspectives would not only be welcome, but are necessary at this point.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer two research questions: (i) *What is the impact of Instagram bloggers on the propagation of a standardised ideal of beauty?* and (ii) *Does exposure to the posts of Instagram bloggers have an effect on the self-esteem of women?* The results of the quantitative research indicate that there is indeed a negative influence of Instagram bloggers on both the dependent variables, standards of beauty and self-esteem. These findings are supported by several different theories – priming, agenda setting, sociocultural theory, and internalisation values. When put together, the theory and statistics help one make sense of the real world impact that these bloggers have on women who consume their content. The bloggers, through their uploaded posts, propagate a homogenous and Eurocentric ideal of beauty, which is considered attractive by society and audiences at large. By establishing flawless skin, silky

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hair, and skinny bodies as the norm, they tend to lower the self-esteem of women who don't share the same physical attributes, and thus don't consider themselves 'beautiful'. While it is true that media and society have been having this impact on women for countless years, it is the frequency and ease of accessing social media that make this issue highly relevant today. Through a simple click on their phone, users now have access to new media at an unprecedented rate.

Despite the attention to accuracy in this research, the results are not deterministic and cannot be used to draw overarching conclusions. This is partially mitigated by the experimental design of the web-survey, which provides a 'better design for inferring causal relationships than correlational ones' (Levya, 2018, p. 17). The method of research takes advantage of the fact that by systematically manipulating what people are exposed to, one can make causal inferences based on said manipulations (Field, 2018, p. 439). The study thus, does not aim to provide concrete evidence, but rather to be used a springboard for further studies and future research.

As mentioned in the previous section, this study is not without flaws and is limited in its scope due to time and resource constraints. Regardless of these limitations, the present study makes an effort towards a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, and examining the relationship between the exposure to such content and body-image. As the prominence of social media continues to rise in today's culture, the risks to women (and other populations) continue to grow along with it. The present study thus provides a foundation for future research in this sphere, where researchers could make use of this method in combination with qualitative research to conduct a more in-depth analysis. The researcher hopes that future research will analyse ways to prevent and control such negative influences, and be more inclusive of different sections of society. The ultimate aim of study in this field should be to make marketers and brands realise the possible ethical implications of influencer branding, and encouraging the growth of more representative, and more relatable bloggers.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would have not been possible without the constant guidance and support of my supervisor, Dr. Rodolfo Levya. Your unique perspective on academia and research allowed me to push my boundaries and challenge myself.

I would also like to thank the entire Department of Media and Communications at the LSE who have been crucial to my holistic development.

I am immensely grateful to my father, mother, and brother, who have provided me with a positive outlook throughout the duration of my studies and have encouraged me at every step. I appreciate everything that the three of you have done for me.

Finally, I would like to thank Varun for his utmost patience and consideration during the course of this project. You made it all so much easier.

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#### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a research study to understand the usage of Instagram by young women. The survey is intended for females only. The study is being conducted by a graduate student at the London School of Economics as part of the required dissertation. The whole survey should take 4-5 minutes to complete.

The data gathered through this survey will be kept strictly confidential and stored in a password protected format and will only be accessed by the researcher and the dissertation supervisor. No names or identifying information will be shared in the final published results. Participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You may choose to leave the survey at any point of this survey. You will be given no direct compensation for your participation. In case you have further questions about the research topic, storage of data, or any other related matter, please feel free to reach out to the researcher at 123@lse.ac.uk. (*Name removed in appendix for anonymity reasons*). In case of any complaints or queries regarding the survey, you may also contact the dissertation supervisor at r.levya@lse.ac.uk.

By consenting to the survey through the option below, you declare that you are above the age of 18, you identify as female, you are participating in this survey out of your own free will, and understand how your data will be used.

I consent, begin the study

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I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

#### **APPENDIX B**

#### Broad Conceptualization of Beauty Scale (BCBS; Final Version)

For each item, the following response scale should be used: Strongly Disagree (scored as 1), Moderately Disagree (2), Slightly Disagree (3), Neither Agree Nor Disagree (4), Slightly Agree (5), Moderately Agree (6), Strongly Agree (7).

*Directions for participants:* How do YOU define women's beauty? Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement. We are only interested in YOUR beliefs, which may or may not be reflected by others or society.

- 1. Even if a physical feature is not considered attractive by others or by society, I think that it can be beautiful.
- 2. A woman's confidence level can change my perception of her physical beauty.
- 3. I think that a wide variety of body shapes are beautiful for women.
- 4. I think that thin women are more beautiful than women who have other body types.\*
- 5. A woman's soul or inner spirit can change my perception of her physical beauty.
- 6. I define a woman's beauty differently than how it is portrayed in the media.
- 7. A woman's acceptance of herself can change my perception of her physical beauty.
- 8. I appreciate a wide range of different looks as beautiful.

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9. I think that women of all body sizes can be beautiful.

\*Reverse score.

*Scoring Procedure*: Reverse score Item 4, and then average participants' responses to Items 1-9.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale**

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

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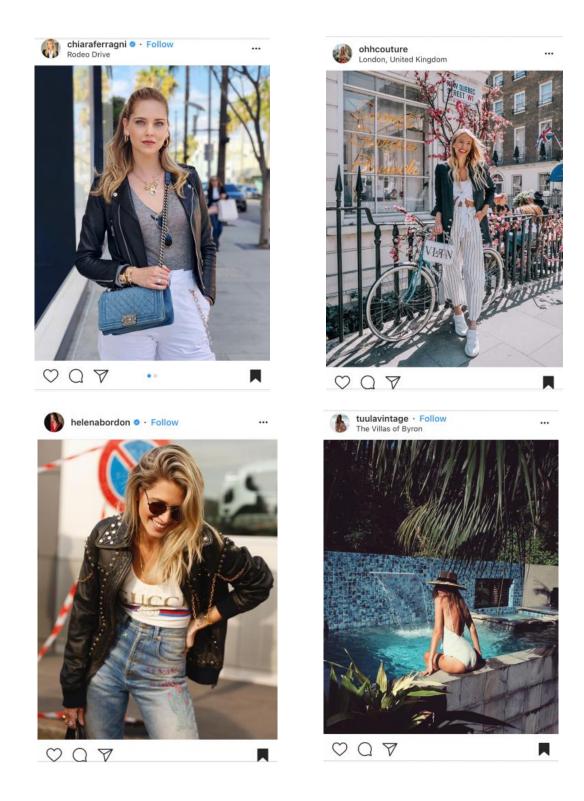
		1	2	3	4
		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1 v	feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	SA	A	D	SD
2	feel that I have a number of good qualities.	SA	A	D	SD
3 / <sub>f</sub>	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.**	SA	A	D	SD
4	am able to do things as well as most other people.	SA	A	D	SD
5 t	feel I do not have much to be proud of **	SA	A	D	SD
6    t	take a positive attitude oward myself.	SA	A	D	SD
7 5	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	SA	A	D	SD
	wish I could have more respect for myself.**	SA	A	D	SD
9   t	certainly feel useless at imes.**	SA	A	D	SD
10 /	At times I think I am no good at all.**	SA	A	D	SD

Scoring: Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 are reverse scored. Give "Strongly Disagree" 1 point, "Disagree" 2 points, "Agree" 3 points, and "Strongly Agree" 4 points. Sum scores for all ten items. Keep scores on a continuous scale. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

## **APPENDIX D**

#### **Images Used in Test Group**

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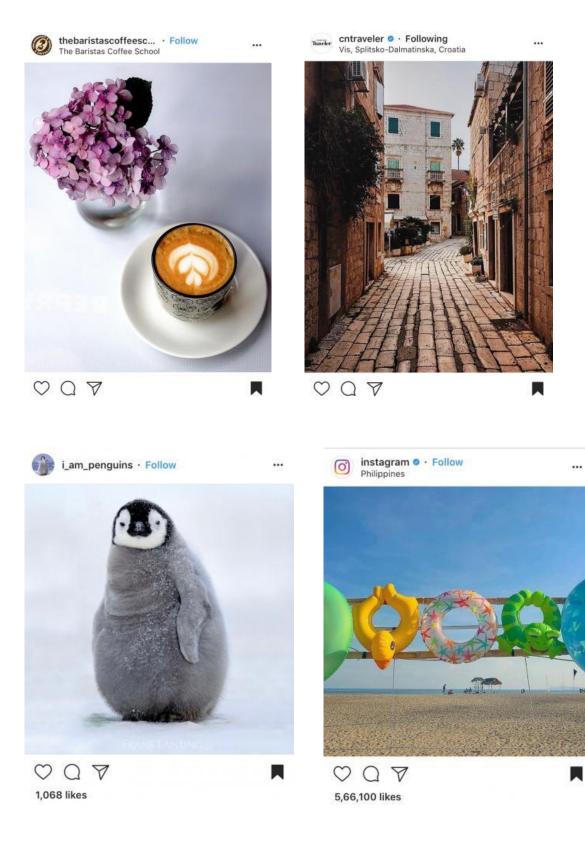
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## **APPENDIX E**

### Images Used in Control Group



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 $\bigcirc \bigcirc \bigcirc \land$ 6,412 likes