

Chapter 41

“Too Good to Be True”: Semi-Naked Bodies on Social Media

Anke J. Kleim

University of Strathclyde, UK

Petya Eckler

University of Strathclyde, UK

Andrea Tonner

University of Strathclyde, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how body image deception is created and understood in social media. The authors focus specifically on the beach body, which is a narrower form of bodily representation online, but where deception is especially likely to occur. Focus group discussions with young adults revealed that editing and perfecting the beach body is commonplace and even normalized on social media. However, participants distinguished between celebrities and friends in expected use of manipulation and seemed to place a limit on the acceptable types of manipulation: body tan but not body shape, for example. The authors discuss the implications of these discussions and how applying deception theory in body image research can provide useful insights.

INTRODUCTION

Media images, such as of the ideal beach body, increasingly undergo digital alteration and enhancement, so that most pictures we see online represent an idealized version of reality. This trend applies to celebrities and regular users alike. In this “online appearance culture” (Williams & Ricciardelli, 2014), users seem obsessed with posting, sharing, liking and commenting on pictures, and appearance seems to be of growing importance. Through these behaviors, users contribute to the normalization of unrealistic body and beauty ideals, which can be damaging to body image, self-evaluation and overall wellbeing (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-6307-9.ch041

The beach body is an especially interesting niche in the larger body image literature, due to the high expectations placed on individuals offline and online, and the likelihood that those expectations cannot be met. Thus, the mediatized beach bodies of young people online are not only photographic versions of their real bodies, but an improved and perfected representation, which agrees with the cultural standards of the day and which sometimes is quite removed from the original. Through photo manipulation, accessorizing and body positioning, these “easy lies” (Harwood, 2014) become possible.

In this chapter, we will examine mediatized images of the beach body in the context of social media through the conceptual lenses of deception, a unique combination of concepts, which has not been explored together previously, and which can expand significantly the current range and depth of research on body image and deception. We will explore what motivates young people to engage in online deception about their beach body and how they achieve it.

BACKGROUND

Body Image and the Beach Body: An Online Culture of Perfectionism

Body image is “a person’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body” (Grogan, 2017). The dimensions, determinants and processes of body image are complex and multifaceted, given that a person’s body parts and vital organs form fundamental components of the human self and identity (Belk, 1988). Cash (2012) differentiates between body evaluation, i.e. the (dis-)satisfaction with one’s appearance, and body investment, i.e. the affective, cognitive and behavioral relevance of the body to a person’s self-evaluation. In the context of the beach body, the behavioral component is fundamental for understanding how individuals try to control their bodies in order to look as perfect as possible during summer.

Body image attitudes form and develop throughout a person’s life, starting in early childhood and changing across the lifespan (Cash, 2008). They are based upon four factors: personality traits, physical characteristics and changes, interpersonal experiences with family and peers, and cultural socialization (Cash, 2008). The latter is particularly important in the context of this chapter, as it is through acculturation that young children learn what is considered attractive and beautiful in society. To conform to society’s expectations, individuals, most notably women, often invest heavily into their looks, and that may involve subtle forms of deception.

Historically, societies have focused on people’s outward appearance and even considered it a symbol of a person’s (dis-)ordered lifestyle (Bordo, 2013). A slim female body has been associated with positive socio-cultural qualities, such as success, social appreciation, and happiness (Grogan, 2017), and muscular male figures have been linked to strength and heroism. Overweight, in contrast, has been associated with negative attributes, such as lack of discipline and laziness (Murray, 2016). Equally, bodies that do not conform to beauty standards, such as fat, disfigured, disabled, or ageing figures, are marginalized and stigmatized (Wardle & Boyce, 2009). While slenderness has endured as the most salient bodily feature for women to aspire to over the decades, trends have also developed within body ideals. The 1990s were characterized by enlarged breasts and slender hips, while the 2000s saw a shift towards more voluptuous bottoms. Recently, muscularity has affected both men and increasingly women (Grogan, 2017).

19 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/too-good-to-be-true/308636

Related Content

Power of Social Media Influencer Credibility on the Influence of Brand Attitude

Shweta Saini and Rohit Bansal (2023). *Influencer Marketing Applications Within the Metaverse* (pp. 167-177).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/power-of-social-media-influencer-credibility-on-the-influence-of-brand-attitude/323908

Unveiling the Continuum of Intended and Unintended Consequences: Exploring Social Media's Impact on the Connections Made by Individuals who Self-Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Queer (LGBQ)

Connie S. Barber and Silvia Cristina Bettez (2013). *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking* (pp. 1-15).

www.irma-international.org/article/unveiling-the-continuum-of-intended-and-unintended-consequences/111355

Snacking Around the World: Evolving an Inductive Image Categorization and Research Query Approach for Image Sets From Social Media

Shalin Hai-Jew (2021). *Research Anthology on Strategies for Using Social Media as a Service and Tool in Business* (pp. 734-765).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/snacking-around-the-world/283001

Automated Data Extraction from Online Social Network Profiles: Unique Ethical Challenges for Researchers

Sophia Alim (2013). *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking* (pp. 24-42).

www.irma-international.org/article/automated-data-extraction-from-online-social-network-profiles/110966

Frugal Living for Our Collective and Mutual #Bestlife on a Distributed and Global Electronic Hive Mind

Shalin Hai-Jew (2022). *Research Anthology on Usage, Identity, and Impact of Social Media on Society and Culture* (pp. 736-768).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/frugal-living-for-our-collective-and-mutual-bestlife-on-a-distributed-and-global-electronic-hive-mind/308635