ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Diet Culture and Instagram:

A Feminist Exploration of Perceptions and Experiences Among Young Women in the Midwest of Ireland

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Abstract   This article provides a feminist exploration of the perceptions and experiences of diet culture on Instagram among young women in the Midwest of Ireland. It discusses why young women continue to engage with diet culture and how it has translated to Instagram. This research was conducted through qualitative semi-structured interviews. Eight women between the ages of 18-30 living in the Midwest of Ireland were interviewed in this study. Through engaging with feminist research methods and utilising a feminist lens, this research prioritises the female voice in social research. It is revealed that the women interviewed perceive and experience diet culture on Instagram in various ways but overall it has a negative influence on their wellbeing. This article highlights this issue as a gendered side effect of social media that is inherently harmful to women. It generates new knowledge of this issue in the Irish context and identifies further areas of research.

Keywords Diet culture · Dieting · Social Media · Instagram · Feminist Exploration · Midwest of Ireland

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, feminists began to draw attention to the gendered nature of weight loss and disordered eating. Orbach's (1978) foundational text *Fat is a Feminist Issue* is one of the most influential on this topic. She suggests that dieting is fundamentally rooted in the social constraints placed on women, especially their lack of autonomy. Other writers of that time discussed fat, and particularly fat bias, as being primarily a woman's issue. They argued that women experience diet culture more than men and are more likely to engage in 'corrective' measures such as dieting and to developing eating disorders. They proposed that women pay a higher price for occupying a plus-size body due to discrimination (Wooley et al., 1979). Many studies regarding dieting practices of women have drawn on feminist theorisations. Gailey (2014)

drew upon Foucault's theory of governmentality and found that women are expected to become 'docile bodies' through the disciplinary power of diet culture. The Theory of Governmentality applies to diet culture in several ways. Foucault (1977), argues that governmentality creates power and this power disseminates through scientific, medical, social and cultural narratives. These narratives produce knowledge that determines how women's bodies are perceived and regulated. Foucault theorises the docile body as one that can be surveyed, transformed and improved; he builds on Bentham's idea of the Panopticon. The idea of a prisoner under surveillance, changing their body to please the warden and wider society applies to the surveillant nature of diet culture, especially on a visual platform such as Instagram. Prominent feminist theorists Bartky (1993) and Bordo (1990) discuss dieting as a gendered issue and position women who diet as self-policing agents. They argue that women diet to achieve a standard of femininity that derives from patriarchal inequalities and internalised male standards of female beauty. This makes diet culture a feminist issue.

'Diet Culture' is used in this article as it is a popular term for a collection of activities and ideas regarding dieting among the generation of women interviewed for this research. Drawing upon its meaning and utilisation in popular culture and media, diet culture is defined, for the purpose of this research, as a system of societal or cultural beliefs, customs and behaviours that place an increased level of value and importance on visual appearance, specifically weight and body size rather than overall physical and mental wellbeing. It conflates a slender body as a healthy body without examining context. It emphasises behaviours such as calorie counting and dieting to lose weight as a lifelong body project. It places a higher moralistic value on people who fit the thin ideal (Harrison, 2018). The cultural and social obsession with women's body shape and the pursuit of the ideal female body has created a diet culture. In 2012, an Irish study found that 17% of girls reported trying to lose weight in comparison to 10% of boys (Kelly et al., 2012). In an increasingly technological world, diet culture has translated to Instagram. This is evident by accounts dedicated to dieting, 'thinspiration' accounts, 'fitspiration' accounts, marketing of weight loss products and weight management narratives.[1]

Instagram is a social networking site (SNS) founded in 2010. It enables users to upload photos, apply filters, and enhance images from any mobile device. It has one billion active monthly users (Instagram, 2019). Recently there has been an increase in the number of studies conducted examining links between internet use and negative body image. These studies found evidence of disturbances in body image perception directly correlated with increased internet use (Tiggeman & Miller, 2010; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013). Multiple studies have shown that spending more time on social media is associated with an increased drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, internalisation of beauty ideals particularly the thin ideal, disordered eating, and comparison of appearance and dieting among women (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Fardouly et al., 2015).

The pursuit of the thin ideal as displayed on Instagram has correlations with postfeminist theories. Postfeminist Sensibility describes an emphasis on the body as an indication of femininity, a shift from objectification to subjectification, a refocus on self-regulation and self-surveillance and emphasis on transformation of the body through neo-liberal routes of empowerment (Gill, 2007). This theory resonates with the practices of diet culture, particularly how it displays on Instagram. These include, but are not confined to, weight loss journey accounts documenting transformations, 'fitspiration' accounts,

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[1] https://www.instagram.com/thinspirationstation/
https://www.instagram.com/_weightloss.motivation_/
https://www.instagram.com/skinnybunnytea/
https://www.instagram.com/thinteadetoxtea/
https://www.instagram.com/slim_with_mel/

documenting food diaries and exercise routines, weight loss 'before and after' pictures and the promotion and commercialisation of weight loss products and supplements. McRobbie (2008), emphasises that postfeminist sensibility is intensified though consumption and technologies of the self. Consumption of hyperfeminine products and practices such as supplements, weight loss surgery, weight loss exercise regimes and clothing such as shapewear, have become the norm of femininity. Instagram provides an instant portal to these images and therefore a pathway to comparison.

One of the most recent studies in this area looked specifically at Instagram use and its associations with body image concerns, comparison, and self-objectification among young women in the United States and Australia. Overall, the study concluded that Instagram usage may negatively affect body image and women's appearance-related concerns (Fardouly, Willburger & Varatainan, 2017).

Methodology

Design

This research emphasises women's voices in order to unpack the complexities of diet culture on Instagram and is guided by feminist standpoint methodologies. Feminist standpoint theory places women's voices at the centre of the research process and values their perceptions and experiences as transformative knowledge (Letherby, 2003). This research is qualitative and utilises semi-structured interviews comprising of five questions. Each participant was asked the same five questions.

1. How long have you been using Instagram?

2. What do you use Instagram for?

3. How do you think diet culture is communicated on Instagram?

4. Does Instagram influence how you view your body? How so?

5. Have you ever followed an exercise/weight loss plan or account on Instagram? How did you find it?

Piloting

The interview questions were piloted among two volunteers who did not participate in the formal study. The two women interviewed met the same criteria as the formal study participants. Both interviews took place in cafés. Piloting in this instance highlighted the importance of the setting when conducting interviews. It was determined that there were too many interruptions throughout the interview and the participants did not feel comfortable discussing sensitive subjects in this setting. During the formal study, the main priority when picking a location for the interview was ensuring that the interviewee felt comfortable and therefore could speak freely. Seven of the interviews took place in the participants' home and one took place in a quiet café as per the participant's preference.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants were selected according to the following criteria: they identify as a woman, are aged between 18-30 as this age group of women are most active on Instagram (Grogan, 2018), they must use Instagram, and live in the Midwest of Ireland (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary). This geographical area was chosen as the study site as it encompasses a varied selection of settings including small rural villages, larger satellite towns, and the city of Limerick.

As this research is social-media based, recruitment of participants was through Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Eight women (n=8) were interviewed for this research. Participants were asked to read and sign two copies of the consent form. The participant retained one copy, and the researcher retained a copy that was stored securely in a locked cabinet to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Each participant chose their own pseudonym - Annie, Claire, Sophie, Erin, Maria, Caroline, Lorna and Maura. These were maintained throughout data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. As this is feminist research, the use of pseudonyms was particularly important. It maintained anonymity and contributed to the women's agency within the research process and cultivation of their own identities. Each interview was recorded on a digital audio recorder. The interviews were individually transcribed and matched with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed through thematic analysis. The transcripts were analysed carefully and colour-coded to identify prominent statements across the eight interviews. These were organised under broader themes, consistent with the research questions and will be explored in the findings and discussion sections.

Findings

Perceptions and Experiences of Diet Culture on Instagram

What Women Use Instagram For

Seven of the eight participants cited using Instagram to follow friends. Four of the interviewees used Instagram to keep in contact with family members. Five of the participants followed celebrity accounts. Four of the participants used Instagram for their jobs. Six of the women used the platform to follow social media influencers. Three of the women used Instagram to specifically follow diet and fitness accounts.

How Women Feel Diet Culture Is Communicated on Instagram

All eight participants stated that diet culture is pervasive on Instagram. Six of the participants specifically referred to diet culture as 'everywhere on Instagram' while the remaining two stated that Instagram was 'heavily-loaded' with diet culture. All eight participants discussed celebrities on Instagram and positioned them as promoters of diet culture. They linked celebrities with the promotion of weight loss products such as detox teas, slimming shakes and capsules. The Kardashians were cited in half of the interviews as promoters of diet culture through their Instagram accounts.

The activities of social media influencers were discussed as examples of how diet culture has translated to Instagram by all eight participants. The consumerism of the diet industry on Instagram was discussed at length by all participants. Three of the women voiced concerns about the authenticity of social media influencers' testimonies of products when it is clear that they are paid to promote them on Instagram. Maura and Erin displayed concerns at the nutritional and exercise advice promoted on Instagram by social media influencers and celebrities, labelling it as 'dangerous'. The consumerism of diet culture also extends to 'targeted ads' on Instagram, mentioned by all participants. Four of the women discussed how the consumerism of diet culture on Instagram contributes to the pressure to conform to the ideal body image through weight management processes.

The eight participants discussed following friends on Instagram who are dieting or adhering to specific fitness regimes. Diet culture in this way is perceived through 'before and after pictures', 'transformation' pictures, food posts and videos of workouts in the gym. Lorna discussed people who set up 'slim with..' accounts to document their weight loss journey. She positioned this as 'fitspiration'

and 'thinspiration' accounts, terms used by four of the interviewees. Five of the participants perceived hashtags as elements of diet culture on Instagram. Marie, Erin and Sophie positioned the use of filters on Instagram as negative.

Why Women Engage With Diet Culture On Instagram

All eight women followed numerous weight loss and exercise plans on Instagram. Seven of the women followed these accounts because they wanted to lose weight. The remaining one participant, Erin, did not want to lose weight but wanted to 'tone up'. Seven of the participants repeatedly cited that as a woman, there is an expectation to diet, it is a central part of 'being a woman'. They linked this to societal notions of the ideal women and striving to attain the 'thin ideal'. Two participants felt dieting was expected of them because of assigned gender roles.

Instagram's Diet Culture and Its Influence On Women's Wellbeing

Three of the participants stated that following these accounts motivated them at first and this had a positive effect on their wellbeing. However, in the long term, all eight participants stated that these accounts produced negative effects on their wellbeing. Five of the women cited feeling guilty, ashamed and 'down about themselves' when they did not have the same weight loss as the person running the account. All participants constantly felt the need to 'check in' on Instagram. Lorna, Caroline and Sophie describe this practice as 'obsessional'.

Four of the participants reported skipping meals deliberately to lose weight while following these accounts. If they ate something not 'on plan' they would compare themselves to others on Instagram. All participants reported these accounts were unrealistic and difficult to follow. Four of the participants unfollowed certain diet culture related accounts because of their negative impact. However, it still affected them due to algorithms, targeted ads, and account suggestions.

All eight women positioned Instagram as having a negative influence on their body image by producing feelings of guilt, shame, low self-esteem and comparison. Five of the women directly linked comparing their bodies to other bodies on Instagram as leading to poorer mental wellbeing. Five of the interviewees felt ashamed of their bodies because of what they saw on Instagram. They also discussed judgement, or fear of judgement on Instagram. All participants felt that Instagram negatively influenced how they viewed their bodies. Four of the participants perceived Instagram to be female-driven and that this contributes to women judging other women. Four of the women interviewed discussed algorithms on Instagram as problematic and as a driving feature of diet culture on Instagram.

Seven of the women cited body positivity and seeing 'plus-size' women on Instagram as a positive thing. However, Erin and Caroline viewed body positivity as objectifying women in the same way as diet culture. They remarked how the central message is sometimes construed as promoting obesity and this leads to ambiguity regarding the movement.

Discussion

Diet Culture as a Significant Feature of Instagram

All participants perceived diet culture on Instagram through celebrity accounts, social media influencers, and peer accounts. All participants discussed advertisements for 'slimming aids' as an element of diet culture on Instagram. There is a large corpus of feminist literature on the regulation of female bodies through dieting and losing weight (Orbach, 1978; Bordo, 1993; Bartky, 1990). However, much of the focus of this literature is analysing and critiquing the mass media portrayal of the female body and perpetuation

of the 'thin ideal'. This research reveals Instagram as another platform in which female bodies are criticised and regulated. It is a platform that previous generations of women did not have to contend with. Diet culture exists on Instagram, not in a vacuum, but as an extension of an already pervasive culture that dominates in society; it is embedded into the very fabric of Instagram.

The variety of ways in which the women in this study perceive diet culture to be communicated on Instagram means that the likelihood of it appearing on your newsfeed is high. The nature of Instagram's algorithm means that previously visited websites or posts generate targeted advertisements. Two of the participants expressed concern at the algorithm and noted that they unwillingly had interaction with a lot of diet culture related accounts. For the participants of this study, it reduced their autonomy and agency when online and produced negative effects, for example, Annie stated, 'It (diet culture) is everywhere on Instagram….it makes you feel bad about yourself'. The participants consistently positioned Instagram as a female-driven platform. The gender dynamics of Instagram are of interest because they parallel the gender dynamics of diet culture in wider society. Previous studies have found that the characteristics of diet culture, for example dieting for weight loss, are disproportionately aimed at and undertaken by women as opposed to men (Gailey, 2014). This research indicates that diet culture both in society and on Instagram is gendered and female-orientated. Therefore the influence of diet culture on Instagram will be more significant to women, making it a feminist issue worthy of in-depth investigation.

The women in this study ranged in ages from 18-30 and had different occupations. Overall, their occupations did not significantly alter their perceptions or experiences of diet culture on Instagram. It also did not mediate the influence it had on their overall wellbeing. This is significant because it demonstrates the universality of this issue for women.

Diet Culture on Instagram in a Neoliberal Paradigm

The diet industry is estimated to be worth $70.3 billion (Rabasca Roepe, 2018). All eight participants discussed celebrity and social media influencer promotions and endorsements of food and slimming aids as central to diet culture on Instagram. As Claire explains:

> They are paid to sell whatever slimming aid, and they're constantly trying to plug it. They give discount codes all the time, trying to get you to buy those kinds of things….it's all about selling. (Claire)

When applying a feminist lens, it is clear that Instagram has entwined with neoliberalism and postfeminist ideals. This has contributed to a whole new generation of 'social media influencers'. The theory of postfeminism celebrates the rhetoric of the self-branded individual who employs modes of self-expression embedded in the consumer marketplace (Gill, 2007). While social media influencers have embraced the postfeminist ideals of individualism and autonomy by creating a following on Instagram, they must be mindful of what they promote. Banet-Weiser (2012), discusses postfeminism and the emergence of digital technologies such as Instagram, and positions their interaction as constitutive of a 'neoliberal moral framework'. Instagram has provided a platform to make money through commercialisation, ultimately contributing to women's agency; however, it is a double-edged sword. Are women conforming to the oppressive patriarchal assumptions of the ideal female body by promoting these products? Maura highlighted that this created pressure to be able to afford certain products and when unable to do so it had a negative influence on her overall wellbeing.

This research reveals that the commercialisation of dieting on Instagram is made possible by the mobilisation of gender norms around regulation of the female body. As previously discussed, Foucault's Theory of Governmentality (1977) can be applied to this research. Instagram acts as a mode of

governmentality through the promotion of dieting products and targeted advertisements, and in this way displays power. Instagram makes it easy to buy slimming products through 'swipe up' links that bring you directly to the merchant's website. In this way, Instagram works as a commercialised disciplinary power and urges women to undertake practices of diet culture such as buying slimming aids. Maura bought detox tea that made her feel unwell, 'I got so run down…I just felt really uncomfortable on it.' If this aspect of Instagram remains unregulated, there may be detrimental physical and psychological effects for women as consumers of these products.

Claire felt an increased pressure to attain the ideal because of her age, thirty. She discussed the notion of women 'having it all…husband, house, career, babies and the body' by the age of thirty and how this was reinforced by Instagram. This research positioned Instagram as a postfeminist environment wherein the notion of 'having it all' is encouraged. Gendered heteronormative expectations persist on Instagram. In a postfeminist environment women must also maintain independence through careers while also 'bouncing back' to the ideal body post-pregnancy as in Claire's case. Diet culture on Instagram proposes that female empowerment and autonomy is gained primarily through modification of the body. Maintaining the female body is construed as individualism and as an achievement. However, maintenance costs money. It is a sort of neoliberal governmentality and something McRobbie (2009) calls 'consumer citizenship', it involves constant and intense surveillance and this had negative influences on the wellbeing of the women in this study.

The Female Body as a Lifelong Project

All participants feel or have felt pressure to diet, simply because they are women. Butler (1990) positions gender as performative; she argues that people must *do* gender through various actions in order to *be* that gender. The women in this study utilised dieting as a way to *do* their gender. Gender as a concept is deeply entrenched within society and this makes it difficult for women to abandon the performative actions of gender. All of the women discussed the 'thin ideal' in their interviews. Annie highlighted that even as a young girl, the message she received from society portrayed women as thin 'We played with barbie dolls and were given this perfect image of a woman….tall and skinny'. They discussed the constant pressure to live up to the ideal female body. All eight participants felt that as a woman, their bodies needed to be continuously worked on or improved. The promotion of detoxes, slimming capsules, shakes and weight loss regimes on Instagram created a pressure on women in the study to 'always be doing something' to change their bodies.

Caroline discussed dieting as ongoing and highlighted Instagram's role: 'It's another extension of our role as women, to apparently be on a diet 24/7 or always looking for improvements….we're never enough and Instagram regulates it'. The participants also felt that because of Instagram, body expectations changed more rapidly, almost akin to fashion trends. Two participants spoke of how skinny was once portrayed as the ideal and this was due to the influence of high-end fashion models. However, now with the influence of celebrities such as the Kardashians, wider hips and small waists are 'on trend'. The women in this study felt pressure to continuously change their bodies. This is similar to previous work by Shilling (1993), which positions the body as something that needs to be worked on every day – 'the body project thesis'. This continuous dieting ultimately produced a negative influence on participants' wellbeing.

Comparison

The women in this research continually compare themselves to other women on Instagram. The participants discussed how they have compared themselves to images of friends and celebrities. Ultimately, all the participants discussed this as a negative experience. Five of the women stated that comparing themselves to other women on Instagram led to poor mental health. The visual nature of Instagram means that women

are consistently bombarded with images of the female body and generally it is 'the ideal female body'. As Caroline discussed, 'You can't look at Instagram without seeing a body…'. Previous research examined the influence of Instagram on body image and found comparison as a key process in producing negative perceptions of body image (Fardouly, Willberger & Varantanian, 2017). This research revealed similar findings. All participants of this study internalised the ideal body image and used it as a measure of comparison. From a feminist perspective, this can be discussed as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The women in this study view themselves as only bodies, made up of body parts that require monitoring and comparison. This is unsurprising, but worrying nonetheless.

The participants spoke of the 'obsessional' nature of Instagram, specifically when following weight loss or exercise accounts. Monitoring daily posts of breakfast, lunch, and dinner was a frequent feature in the experiences of the interviewees. They compare what they had eaten in a day to the person who is running the account. If what they had eaten had a higher calorie content, or was considered "bad" in comparison, feelings of guilt and shame were triggered. This led to overall negative effects for the women interviewed. For four of the participants, comparing what they had eaten to someone on Instagram also led to disordered eating in the form of skipping meals to counteract feeling 'bad' or 'falling off the bandwagon'. Claire highlights this, 'I ate a breakfast roll…after looking on Instagram I felt so guilty…. I skipped lunch'.

Marie identified herself as a feminist in her interview. It was interesting to see if identifying as a feminist provided any buffering or protective factor when it came to internalisation of body ideals and comparison on Instagram. Feminism rejects cultural standards of body ideals and criticizes the objectification of the female body. However, when focusing particularly on Marie's interview, she spoke consistently of comparison and the internalisation of the 'thin ideal', just like the other participants. Overall, it was found that comparison was a key feature of diet culture on Instagram and age or occupation did not mediate the processes of self-objectification, surveillance, and comparison in this study. In all cases, comparison led to feelings of guilt and shame, which had negative influences on the women interviewed.

Judging and Being Judged

Five of the eight women interviewed discussed judgement and fear of judgement on Instagram in direct relation to diet culture. The proliferation of apps that slim your body and alter your appearance has increased self-surveillance among women. It has encouraged women to see themselves within a 'pedagogy of defect' (Bordo, 1993). The use of filters on Instagram by participants of this study is an extension of diet culture on the platform. Instagram is a tool of surveillance and has changed the politics of appearance. It is a technology that is focused on digital self-monitoring within a society structured by neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. The findings of this study indicate that Instagram has produced a new form of regulatory gaze through our mobile phones. It is a gaze more dangerous than previously because it fits right into our pockets. As Claire puts it:

> Women put up everything, before and after pictures, I see a lot of that. I think the main reason women document this stuff is that you're waiting for comments and likes from other women to validate your achievement of losing weight. It's heavily loaded with judgement though. (Claire)

The women in the study who discussed competitiveness felt that, because of this, there was a pressure to keep up with weight loss or the diet or exercise plan. If they were 'not getting results' (losing weight), they could not put up photographs of themselves on Instagram as they assumed they would be judged. They also judge other women on Instagram, based on the size and shape of their bodies. Three of the participants

highlighted the danger of judging other women's bodies through comments on Instagram posts that were often offensive and hurtful.

Winch (2013) discusses *looking* between women as the 'girlfriend gaze'. It is socially constituted, regulatory and judgemental and is used by women to critically evaluate themselves and other women. It is a gaze that is powerful and produces the potential for recognition of successful femininity or failure. Winch (2013) discusses the value placed on a 'girlfriendship culture' in a postfeminist environment. This culture, she argues, places women's relationships with each other at the core of their feminine identities. The culture of 'girlfriendship' is exploited through media and marketing as a form of governance between women, for example, dieting to achieve the ideal body. Within the girlfriend gaze, male approval is no longer the priority. The pursuit of the ideal body through dieting, becomes a way of proving feminine worth to a circle of female friends. Mulvey (1975) discussed the male gaze within the cinematic environment in which the target audience is men. Women in film and media, she argues, are viewed from the heterosexual male perspective and primarily as passive objects for men's desire and pleasure. However, within the girlfriend gaze, women are framed as the target audience (Winch, 2013).Women are *doing* the looking and are *active* beings. However the results of this research reveal that the girlfriend gaze has produced negative influences on the wellbeing of the women and has preserved misogynistic discourse regarding the female body.

Women's Agency

Heyes (2006), argues that dieting can be a form of self-care for women. She argues that women choosing to diet demonstrate independence, and therefore, it is an act of rebellion against the oppressive ways of the patriarchy. This draws on ideas from Foucault's theory of technologies of the self. Technologies of the self, encourage self-discipline and allow people to produce desired versions of themselves, albeit these versions generally adhere to normative beauty ideals. It is in this context that Heyes theorised dieting as both constraining and enabling for women. This research has revealed that diet culture on Instagram is a 'technology of the self'. The women in this study use Instagram as a tool for weight loss to enable them to achieve their desired outcome, a smaller body; however, it raises questions which warrant further research. Did they enact agency by choosing to follow these plans on Instagram to lose weight or did they follow these plans because the societal pressure to fit the ideal was overwhelming? This produces interesting questions regarding how women use technologies such as social media - are they ultimately tools of the patriarchy or can women utilise them as a form of protest? The positioning of Instagram as a female-driven platform by the participants is particularly interesting when situated within wider feminist scholarship regarding technology. Haraway (1975) argues that women should be technology proficient and that the internet can be a place for women to create new identities and be free from patriarchal constraints of society. However, cyberfeminism scholars such as Wilding (1998) have challenged this perspective. She argues that the internet is not a utopian world that obliterates hierarchies. Technologies exist within a social framework that is essentially sexist. She proposes that technologies are not gender free spaces without regard to sex and assigned gender roles (Wilding, 1998). While women should make use of new technologies such as Instagram, power structures are embedded within these spaces and these must be critically analysed by the women that use them. This is particularly relevant for this research, as the results clearly reveal gendered effects of technology and point to the importance of continued feminist analysis of this topic.

The women interviewed for this study portrayed awareness of this issue and recognised that for them, diet culture on Instagram was problematic; it had negative effects on their overall wellbeing. They also had knowledge regarding the societal notions of the ideal female body and acknowledged that it is a gendered issue with many dynamics. Some of the women felt they enacted agency by unfollowing accounts which made them feel bad about their appearance. However, they also acknowledged that societal pressure to

conform to the thin ideal meant that they kept returning to these accounts. In this way diet culture on Instagram restricted their agency.

Conclusion

Women in this study engaged with diet culture on Instagram because they '*wanted* to lose weight'; however, they wanted to lose weight in a society that is dominated by a culture of the 'thin ideal' and places value on women who diet to fit this ideal. For the women interviewed in this study, weight management practices, like dieting, are lifelong occupations and are considered part of 'being a woman'. The pursuit and the attainment of the 'ideal body' are framed by periods of intense scrutiny, hard work, and financial expenditure. Social media sites, including Instagram, have become integral parts of our lives, and this research illuminated connections between society's 'addiction' to social media and women's body regulation through dieting. Instagram as a platform for diet culture, reinforces the cyclical nature of dieting in women's lives. The obsessive nature of Instagram means always returning to it and thereby always returning to diet culture. This research concludes that the social and cultural representation of the normative female body as slender and toned in Irish society has not gone away. It has become more dominant and pervasive with the establishment of Instagram which has acted as a platform for diet culture. This research revealed that diet culture on Instagram has a significant influence on the everyday lives of the women interviewed; overall, this influence is negative. The visual imagery on Instagram encouraged comparison and triggered feelings of guilt and shame. This had a negative effect on body image, self-esteem and overall mood and mental wellbeing. In some cases, experiences of diet culture on Instagram led to disordered eating in the form of skipping meals and prolonging periods of fasting in order to lose weight. This is particularly concerning in terms of the development of eating disorders and an area that urgently requires more research and resources in Ireland.

This study has revealed diet culture to be pervasive on Instagram. Overall, it has had a negative influence on the daily lives of interviewees. From a feminist perspective, it is essential to conduct larger-scale research on this issue in order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and identify strategies to reduce the harm caused to women by diet culture on Instagram.

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