



## **Title Page**

An exploration of student's perception of the link between social media and body image. Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) as a case study site

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### **Declaration**

I, Jasmine Moss, declare that this dissertation and the research involved in it are entirely the work of the author. This work, or part of it, has not been submitted for a qualification to any other institute or university.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



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## **Abstract**

Social media is a major part of daily life for many people. Although there are some positive benefits to using social media, such as, interacting with relatives and friends across the world. It also holds the possibility of some negative elements, such as, increased body image dissatisfaction.

This study proposes to acquire, a third level student perspective of social media and its link to body image.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To determine what type of social media student's use.
- To examine the extent to which student's think there is a link between social media and body image.
- While also identifying supports, that student's feel could be put into place to promote positive body image, when using social media.

Previous literature reveals that there is a connection between social media and body image. The researcher analysed both international and national research, which helped conduct this study. However, there is a lack of knowledge about how third level students feel about this issue, particularly in Ireland. Therefore, the researcher decided to conduct a case study in the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). AIT is located in the midlands of Ireland and the institute attracts people from all areas of the country and internationally. Case studies enable the researcher to closely explore and gain understanding of complex issues, which is a main aspect of this study.

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, consisting of two separate single gender focus groups. The researcher directed one female focus group consisting of four participants, and one male focus group consisting of 4 participants. This study only includes students aged between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, as the dissertation is being completed for a Master of Arts in Child and Youth Studies. The age criteria are relevant due to the United Nations definition of 'youth'. The United Nations define 'youth', as "those persons between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member

States” (United Nations, 2013). The focus groups explored the student’s perception of the connection between social media and body image. The focus groups looked at six different areas. They include: determining if the students use social media, the types of social media they use and the amount of time they spend on social media. While also examining, if there is a connection between social media and body image, determining possible effects and lastly identifying possible solutions, that could be put in place to promote positive body image, when using social media.

The results were broken up into five themes and many topics were explored. The results indicated that all participants used social media and felt that there is a strong connection between social media and body image. All of the participants use social media every day and are frequent social media users. Image-based social media such as, Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, appeared to be the most common social media platforms, that increased body image dissatisfaction. Students perceptions of body image were explored, and it was found that social media often portrays people with an unrealistic body image. Social comparison was found to be a common theme in students, as they compare how they look and how many likes they get for a picture, to others. Lastly, solutions for promoting positive body image, while using social media was discussed.

Based on the results of this study, recommendations will be illustrated by the participants within the study and the researcher. Further exploration of the link between social media and body image would be beneficial.

## Introduction

Since its creation in the mid nineteen-nineties, social media has continued to rapidly develop and evolve. At current, there is approximately over three billion people using social media around the world (Williams, 2017). Any website that includes the possibility of social interaction, is a social media website. Social media websites include for example; Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, etc. (O’Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). In the Twenty-First century, social media has become a major part of everyday living for many individuals of various ages. However, a relatively new phenomenon is the use of image-based social media sites. More people, especially young people, are encouraged to post pictures of themselves online. Such images often portray an unrealistic view of men and women, which in turn causes added pressure, to reach a “perfect” overall body image. Existing literature suggests that social media can have an impact of individual’s perception of body image and as a result increases body image dissatisfaction (Griffiths, Murray, Krug and McLean, 2018).

There has been much international research on the impact of social media on body image, however, national research is quite limited. The purpose of conducting this piece of research is to explore third level students perception, of the extent of the link between social media and body image. The research is conducted in an Institute of Technology in the midlands in of Ireland. The research aims to add to the current body of knowledge in this area.

The literature review will examine past research, on social media and body image. It will explore both international and national literature on this topic.

The methodology will discuss the research design, while giving details of the participants, materials, the research process and ethical considerations.

The results section offers a summary of the data collected, while using quotes to help illustrate the results.

The discussion section will further explore the results and their implications. The discussion will refer to the current literature, while also examining the results of the data collected, from the qualitative research.

Lastly, the conclusion will describe the results of the research. The conclusion will also explain how the research results relate to the aims and objectives. The research will then come to a close, by offering recommendations from both the participants and the researcher.



## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This section discusses the current literature regarding, the connection between social media and body image in young people. The following literature review begins with an overview of social media usage, from creation in the late nineteen nineties to the present day. The word body image will then be examined, following a section that will highlight gender differences relating to body image. Social media has a major impact on individual's body image and this will be examined. After this, theories regarding both social media and body image, including the social comparison theory and the sociocultural theory, will be analysed. Peer pressure can contribute to people's perception of their body image and therefore this will be reviewed. And finally, before concluding, this literature review will discuss image-based social media.

### **Social Media Usage**

Social media has come a long way since its creation in the late mid nineteen-nineties (Martin, 2015; Hale, 2015). Any website that includes the possibility of social interaction, is a social media website. Social media websites currently include, for example; Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, etc. (O'Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). Social media first emerged from websites such as 'Six Degrees' which was developed in 1997 (Martin, 2015; Hale, 2015). This site allowed people to create a profile and add other users. Six Degrees attracted millions of people (Economic Times, 2012). However, it was not a great success and as a result it shut down in 2000 (Economic Times, 2012). Since its closure, social media usage began to increase, and many other websites were developed. By the year 2000 approximately one million people had internet access, and therefore, began to create online profiles (Hale, 2017). By 2005, Facebook and Twitter were introduced. It was at this stage, that social media began to become a part of everyday life (Martin, 2015).

Currently, there are over three billion people using social media around the world (Williams, 2017). This means that approximately forty percent of the world's population use social media, as there is roughly seven and a half billion people occupying the earth (Williams, 2017). In the present day, social media is

everywhere, and usage continues to increase each year. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the world, with approximately two billion users who are active monthly (Williams, 2017). Similarly, in Ireland, Facebook is the most used form of social media (McCanna, 2017; Statista, 2018). Instagram is Ireland's second most popular social media platform and its membership continues to increase each year (McCanna, 2017; Statista, 2018).

Adolescents are regular social media users (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). Therefore, social networking is a massive part of young people's lives (O'Neill and Dinh, 2012). It is estimated that nine out of ten Irish young people use social media (O'Neill and Dinh, 2012). The definition of youth extends up until to the age of twenty-four, which therefore, indicates that this figure relates to third level students also (United Nations, 2013). Research conducted in 2015 by the Pew Research Centre, in the United States, found ninety-two percent of young people are online every day, while twenty-four percent of these are almost respectively check social media sites (Burnette et al, 2017; Kettle, Gilmartin, Corcoran, Byrne and Sun, 2016). Another study published in 2017, in the United States, revealed that young people spend up to 9 hours a day on social media sites (Asano, 2017). The majority of the time spent on social media is accessed through a mobile phone device (60%). Interestingly, the time spent on social media beats the time spent eating and socializing for many individuals (Asano, 2017). Both of these studies were conducted in the United States however, indicating the need for further research nationally.

Before the use of social media, individuals enjoyed the use of traditional media. Traditional media carried the world news, various notices for example death notices, while also providing entertainment for readers, listeners and viewers. However, in the present day all of these features can be accessed from social media at the touch of a button. Body image dissatisfaction is a point of concern when using social media, mainly due to social media's ability to change and edit images. However, before discussing social media and its link to body image, it is necessary to gain an understanding of what body image is.

### **What is Body Image?**

In the 21st century, many people seem to be "at war with their bodies" says Brown (2017). This is due to a large proportion of both men and women who are feeling

pressured to look “perfect” (Cash and Smolak, 2012, p. 208; cited in Brown, 2017). There is a growing body of research that indicates that young people are concerned about their body image (Swami, V., Taylor, R., and Carvalho, C., 2011; DCYA, 2012). Due to the United Nations (2013) definition of youth, this statement also coincides with third level students who are twenty-four and younger. Flynn and Fitzgibbon (1998) and similarly Grogan (2008), define body image as feelings and thoughts people have about their bodies (cited in Greene, 2011). Body image can also be defined as ‘the picture of our own body which we form in our mind’ (Schilder, 1950; cited in Grogan, 2017). The National Eating Disorder Association (2004) says that body image refers to what an individual believes about their appearance, while also including how the person feels about their body while moving (cited in Winston, 2006). According to Pesa, Syre and Jones (2000) body image has two dimensions; an evaluation of the size of one’s body and the attitude towards one’s body.

Ruthelde, Gillmor and Gillen (2013) (cited in Hingerton, 2016) conducted a piece of research, regarding the link between Facebook and body image. Students who were emerging adults aged between eighteen and twenty-five completed a survey. There was a total of two-hundred and twenty-five students who participated in the study. Fifty-four percent were female and the remainder were male. The research was conducted in a non-residential college in the United States. The results found that the more “emotionally invested” the person was to the social media site, the more concern they had with their body image. However, the more friends they had on Facebook, the less they were concerned with their body image, which is an interesting statement.

Voelker, Reel and Greenleaf (2015) state that adolescence is the key stage in developing either positive or negative body image. However, the term youth is defined as anyone between the age of fifteen and twenty-four, indicating that older youth may still be developing their views of body image (United Nations, 2013). Positive body image is where the person knows their body and they are satisfied with it (Cash, 2012; cited in Meshioye, 2016). Negative body image on the other hand, is where the person does not like their body and may show hatred and dissatisfaction to the body (Meshioye, 2016). Negative body image is most likely to be partly due to the media’s portrayal of the ideal body image, and this in turn creates low confidence levels in people, low self-esteem, social anxiety, and so on. (Meshioye, 2016).

### **Gender Differences:**

Women generally have a higher level of body dissatisfaction in comparison to men (Grogan, 2017). However, research and literature currently states that men are also dissatisfied with their body image (Phillips, 2001). This draws attention to the importance of including the views of both males and females in research, relating to body image. Existing literature has revealed a link between body image and self-esteem in young males and females (Olovardia., Pope., Borowiecki, and Cohane, 2004; Fabian and Thompson, 1989). Social media has significantly impacted upon the growing trend of body dissatisfaction (Griffiths, Murray, Krug and McLean, 2018). The media portrays women with an unrealistically perfect level of beauty (Wagner, Aguire and Summer, 2016). The media aims to aspire men to be muscular, yet remain lean. Therefore, men aspire to be built with well-developed muscles in areas such as the chest and arms, which in turn promotes the use of anabolic steroids and other drugs which aid hormone growth (Grogan, 2006; Grogan, 2017). Continued exposure to unrealistic body images in both male and females, may cause insecurity and a high level of body insecurity (cited in Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004).

After establishing what body image is, it is important to connect social media and body image.

### **Social media and body image**

The world of media has undergone major change, while also continuing to evolve to this day. Traditional media consists of prints and broadcasts, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio and so on (UK Essays, 2015). The media is often thought to be the “strongest influencing factor on body image, especially in adolescence” (cited in Hargeaves and Tiggemann, 2004). Adolescence ties in with the term youth, which is defined as anyone between the age of fifteen and twenty-four (United Nations, 2013). It is interesting that this was the perception in 2004. Therefore, it provides a purpose for doing this study now as it will investigate how this may have changed, while providing an opportunity to observe the link between social media and body image. Print advertisements were and still are associated with negative associations of the ideal body image (Myers and Biocca, 1992; cited in Behan, 2015). Tiggemann (2003) conducted a piece of research looking at the

relationship between media exposure (T.V and magazines) and body image dissatisfaction. The researcher carried out an exploratory investigation with one-hundred and four female undergraduate college students (Tiggemann, 2003). The results concluded that exposure to too many “*thin idealised images*” may lead to body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, 2003; cited in Behan, 2015). This study includes only female participants. It would be interesting to now recreate the same study and compare the results from 2003 to the present day. It would also be beneficial to include males in the study and compare male and female perceptions of the relationship between media exposure and body image dissatisfaction.

Unlike the recent past, where traditional media had to be purchased in a retail outlet (for example; newspapers and magazines), social media is now available anywhere at any time at the touch of a screen. As a result, people have continuous access to social media, which contains images that may portray an idealised body image. This, in turn could create increased body image dissatisfaction. People can now use social media on phones, iPads, and laptops and so on. People use social media for many reasons, including; to share personal information about themselves and to share information about their relationship status (Asano, 2017). There are always potential risks to people on social media. The Office of Adolescent Health in the United States (2016), conducted a survey which included 600 teenagers in 2012. The survey found that most teens shared their real names, personal photos of themselves, where they go to school, their birthday and their home town. The survey also found that young people use social networking sites to express their romantic relationships. It would be interesting to recreate this study with older youth and compare the results.

Social media platforms can hold some benefits to individuals, such as supporting socialisation and communication between peers, providing some learning opportunities and helping gain information and resources (Office of Adolescent Health, 2016). However, Gil, Chamarro and Oberst (2015) state that there is an extensive amount of evidence that suggests that social media usage can have dysfunctional and negative impacts on individuals everyday living. A recent phenomenon is the concept of the ‘Fear of Missing Out’ (FOMO). FOMO is described as the feeling that there may be something happening on social media and the person is not a part of it (Gil, Chamarro and Oberst, 2015). This concept particularly affects young people. However, FOMO often causes individuals to have

a negative self-image, which is a result of comparing yourself to others whom seem happier on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram (Leanage, ND). The fear of missing out encourages people to engage more in social media platforms. This may cause an increase of body image dissatisfaction, as people are spending more time on social media comparing themselves to others (Leanage, ND).

The last decade or so has also brought a new addiction to the surface –addiction to social media (Greenfield, 2015; Rao, 2017). Although it is not recognised as a disorder in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), it has been proposed that internet addiction needs further investigation to become a mental disorder (Greenfield, 2015). Individuals who are addicted to the internet often have withdrawal symptoms and are unable to control their internet use, says Greenfield (2015). An increased social media usage may lead to body image dissatisfaction due to the constant viewing of “*idealised images*” (Behan, 2015).

Social media has a huge influence on how people view their appearance and overall body image (Winston, 2006). Research insists that there is a connection between social media exposure and body image dissatisfaction (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). There are certain theories that link to social media and body image, including the social comparison theory and the sociocultural theory.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Theoretically speaking, there are several ideas and beliefs about how individuals determine their self-worth and level of body image satisfaction or dissatisfaction. An explanation of body dissatisfaction may be the social comparison theory (Van den Berg, 2005; Seidel, 2009). Leo Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory believes that people are continuously evaluating themselves (Carlson-Jones, 2001; Kraye, Ingledew and Iphofen, 2008; Seidel, 2009). Social comparison refers to a tendency to feel good or bad about ourselves based upon how we see others (Panger, 2014). When individuals evaluate themselves, they look at other people and compare themselves with them (Seidel, 2009). It is thought that people themselves look to others to fulfil the need for self-evaluation, which is considered a basic human desire (Panger, 2014; Garcia and Halldorsson, ND). Self-evaluation is closely linked with body image (Carlson-Jones, 2001). Therefore, Social comparison is a key factor in body image satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Carlson-Jones, 2001). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

this theory is important to society says Seidel (2009). Social comparison is thought to be a major element of body image anxieties and therefore should be considered when conducting research regarding body image (Halliwell, 2012)

The sociocultural theory looks at how culture and society contribute to individual's development (Tehrani, 2013; Cherry, 2018). The theory indicates that human learning and development is a social process (Cherry, 2018). Children and young people in the twenty-first century spend less time communicating face-to-face, partly due to the fact that social media sites allow online communication at the click of a button (Tehrani, 2013). Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) believed that parents, caregivers and peers were responsible for improving both learning and development of individuals as well as the wider society (Cherry, 2018). However, many changes have occurred within society since Vygotsky's era. The media has become a vital aspect of society (Tehrani, 2013). Therefore, as young people are communicating more through social media platforms, they are taught the social norms and values, through these sites. People are now coached from their peers on social media of how to look and dress. Viewing other people's images on social media can lead to anxieties about dress codes and individuals appearances which impact upon body image concerns (Moy, 2015).

Moy (2015) states that young people continue to try and imitate their peers, predominantly in terms of body image. During adolescence, friends begin discussing the perfect body image (Moy, 2015). Therefore, it is during this time when individuals begin to feel the pressure from their peers.

### **Peer Pressure**

Peer pressure is a type of pressure or influence pushed on a person by a group of their friends, colleagues or others, say Spun-Out (2013). Peer pressure can also happen when people try and change someone's opinions and behaviours. Peer pressure can also refer to the feelings of pressure that young people experience when they are encouraged by others to think or behave in a specific way (Kiuru, Burk, Laursen, Salmela-Aro and Nurmi, 2010; cited in Kenny, 2017). Peer pressure has been known for its role in the development of body image concerns in young people. Peer pressure may influence a young person of when to have sex for

example, drink and smoke, send nude pictures and so on. All of which also contribute to how a person feels about themselves and their bodies (Kenny, 2017).

In recent times, there is an increased pressure to be thin and obtain the 'perfect' body image (especially for females) that is deemed 'acceptable'. This evidently leads to low self-esteem and a low perception of one's body image (cited in Wallis, 2015). Social settings, for example, secondary schools provide an opportunity of exposure to peer pressure. The literature states that adolescents tend to talk about their appearances more than adults (Lawler and Nixon, 2011; cited in Wallis, 2015). Alsaif (2016) states that a proportion of students use social media because of peer pressure and because their friends are using it. Interestingly, Zeitel-bank (2014) believes that all people tend to conform to peer pressure in real life and in terms of social media. Zeitel-Bank (2014) also believes that social media influences people's ability to think independently. According to Kenny (2017), the ability to resist peer pressure does not fully develop until adulthood. The term youth, according to the United Nations (2013) definition is any person between the age of fifteen and twenty-four. This indicates that adulthood does not fully occur until twenty-four years of age and therefore peer pressure is likely to influence individuals within this age category. This also means that social media is likely to have a very impressionable effect on young people and affect body image perceptions, as a result. However, currently research in this area is under-developed.

Adolescence is the most vulnerable time for individuals, and peer pressure is at its strongest (Burnette et al, 2017). Peer pressure can increase body image dissatisfaction as peers continue to imitate each other. Image-based social media platforms are very popular and membership to such sites continue to increase each year. Image-based social media is thought to have a huge effect on body image dissatisfaction.

### **Image-based social media**

Social media sites which are image-centred include for example, Snapchat, Instagram and Tumblr. Communication through Facebook is also becoming reliant on images (Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015). Images play an important role in how we view ourselves and how we shape the world (Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015; cited in Bell, 2016). As previously stated, the social comparison theory states that individuals



make comparisons and self-evaluate themselves based on others around them (Hingerton, 2016) Therefore, it is only natural that individuals compare their physical appearance to others, which damages their perception of their own body image.

Images are predominant in a new phase of communication, known as 'sexting'. Sexting can be defined as "the act of exchanging sexually explicit content online in the form of images, videos and texts" (UCD, 2018). The Zeeko Report (UCD, 2018) is a study aiming to understand trends in the media among teenagers who are in secondary school in Ireland. The study found that 13% of secondary school students have sent a nude/semi-nude photo/video of themselves (UCD, 2018). The Zeeko Report highlighted the most popular forms of social media being; Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook, in that order. Within these four social media platforms, three rely heavily on the use of images. 'Sexting' can have an impact on body image dissatisfaction due to its reliance on images and videos. 'Sexting' generally occurs via social media platforms and people may feel pressured to achieve an ideal body image based upon their peers or images they see on social media.

### **Conclusion:**

Social media has a major impact on young people and their perception of body image. However, it is unclear to what extent and how it may effect males and females differently. Social media usage is continuing to increase, and some young people are addicted to the internet. There are several elements that may impact upon body image dissatisfaction including the social comparison theory, peer pressure and the use of image-based social media profiles.

There is a vast amount of literature on social media and its link to body image internationally. However, national literature in relation to this topic is limited. Research that includes a gender analysis is also quite restricted and many researchers tend to focus on single gender studies. The current research desires to add to the existing body of knowledge by developing a dissertation based on focus groups, with young people aged between eighteen and twenty-four. The focus groups will consist of one male group and one female group, which will highlight a gender analysis within the research.

The main aim of the research is to explore student's perception of the link between social media and body image.

Specifically, the objectives of the research are as follows:

- To determine what type of social media student's use.
- To examine the extent to which student's think there is a link between social media and body image.
- To identify supports that student's feel could be put into place to promote positive body image when using social media.

The literature review has given an overview of general social media usage, the difference between traditional and social media, an insight into what body image is, theoretical perspectives, the influence of peer pressure and lastly image-based social media. The next section will present the methodology used throughout the research process.

## **Methodology**

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of this research is to examine student's perceptions of the link between social media and body image. While also determining what types of social media young people use and identifying supports that could be implemented to promote positive body image, when accessing social media. The methodology section will allow reader to gain an insight into how the research was conducted. The section will be divided into several headings including: Research Design, Participants, Materials, Procedure and Limitations.

### **Research Design:**

There are two methods of collecting primary data in research: quantitative methods and qualitative methods (Bell, 1993; Labaree, 2009). Quantitative research collects the facts and numerical data and then studies the relationship between one thing and another says Bell (1993). It generally focuses on a larger sample (Punch, 2013). Quantitative research uses polls, surveys and questionnaires to help explain a certain trend (Labaree, 2009; Punch, 2013).

On the other hand, qualitative research is more concerned with gaining an insight into people's perceptions, feelings and thoughts out the world (Bell, 1993; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Qualitative methods therefore focus on a smaller sample size (Punch, 2013). Wolcott (1992; cited in Punch, 2013) says qualitative data is collected from "watching, asking or examining". According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research aims to explore and understand individuals and groups, in relation to a social problem. It is an approach that permits the researcher to examine a person's experience by using certain methods, such as interviews, focus groups, observations and visual methods (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011).

This research dissertation will use qualitative research methods, as the researcher aims to get an insight into real life experiences. Quantitative research methods do not allow for the exploration of experiences or any unexpected issues that may arise, both of which are essential for the research. Qualitative research also ties in with the studies aims and objectives, and this was another reason the researcher chose this method. The aims and objectives of the study intend to get students perceptions of

the connection between social media and body image. Qualitative research allows participants to explore this issue. The methodology is developed through two separate focus groups, using one male focus group and one female group. A gender analysis is very important in this research, as current literature suggest that social media effects both male and female user's perception of body image. Focus groups aim to draw upon participant's feelings, experiences and beliefs about a particular subject (Gibbs, 1997). These feelings, experiences and beliefs are more likely to be expressed in a group setting according to Gibbs (1997). Therefore, this was a main reason for choosing this type of qualitative research method. The researcher also looked into conducting one-to-one interviews, however decided against it as the researcher directs the interview too much. Within a focus group context, the participants are encouraged to speak as a group, instead of the researcher asking a question to one participant at a time (Kitzinger, 1995). Therefore, this method is beneficial for gaining an insight into people's experiences and examine how different people think about social issues (Kitzinger, 1995; Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick and Mukherjee, 2018).

Focus group questions were created before the researcher carried out the study (see appendix A). The questions were tested on a small group of people before the participants were obtained.

### **Participants:**

Two focus groups were conducted with a male focus group and a female focus group. The researcher felt that a gender analysis was an important element of the research, given the current literature about the impact of social media on individual's body image. As stated in the literature review, repeated exposure to unrealistic body images in both male and females, may cause a high level of body insecurity (cited in Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004). Social media often portrays unrealistic body images and therefore it must be explored with both male and female participants.

All participants were Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) students. AIT is located in the midlands of Ireland and the institute attracts people from all areas of the country and internationally. The research participants were aged between eighteen and twenty-four. This is due to the nature of the dissertation as it is part of a MA in Child and Youth Studies. The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as

“those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States” (United Nations, 2013).

The male focus group consisted of four participants. The female focus group consisted of four participants. A gender analysis adds greater depth to the research findings, as it will be interesting to include both male and female’s perception of the link between social media and body image. Participants also have a mix of academic disciplines.

A table is presented below with relevant information about the participants.

| <i>Pseudo name</i> | Age | Where person is from | Course of study  |
|--------------------|-----|----------------------|--|
| Mary               | 21  | Co Wicklow           | Bachelor of Science<br>Veterinary Nursing                                    |
| Fiona              | 22  | Tullamore            | Bachelor of Science<br>Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion |
| Anne               | 20  | Co Offaly            | Bachelor of Science<br>Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion |
| Katie              | 21  | Galway               | Bachelor Of  |

|        |    |                        |   |
|--------|----|------------------------|---|
|        |    |                        | Arts Hons In<br>Early Years<br>Care And<br>Education              |
| Eamonn | 23 | Co Mayo                | Bachelor of<br>Business in<br>Sport<br>Management                 |
| Brian  | 22 | Galway                 | Bachelor of<br>Science<br>(Hons) in Bio-<br>veterinary<br>Science |
| James  | 21 | Loughrea, Co<br>Galway | Bachelor of<br>Science in<br>Biotechnology                        |
| Joe    | 22 | Co Mayo                | Bachelor of<br>Business in<br>Sport<br>Management                 |

**Materials:**

A draft of focus group questions was created to ensure that the research aims, and objectives would be addressed. The questions included asking the participants if they use social media, and if so what type of social media? The focus group also questioned how much time the participant spends on social media. More in-depth questions were asked including: is there is a connection between social media and body image? And if so why? What are the effects of using social media on body image? And why? And lastly, what can be done to promote positive body image for students when using social media? All of the questions were inspired by the aims and objectives. The data collected from these questions will be a method of measuring the aims and objectives.

A pilot mini focus group was conducted with fellow classmates three weeks before the data collection stage. This was organized to help address and concerns or misperceptions in the questions. All the participants in the pilot focus group were female, which was not ideal given the real sample. However, it gave the researcher a feel for the focus group dynamic and also allowed for some critical feedback, which was very helpful. The questions, however, did not change after the pilot. The pilot focus group participants also viewed the consent form and information sheet.

A room and a time was organised with the assistance of a lecturer in AIT a week before the commencement of the focus group. Each participant in the focus group was given a consent form (see appendix B). This informed the participants that the focus group would be recorded for analysis purposes. Therefore, all participants involved in the study consented to the recording of the focus group. The consent formed also stressed that the student's participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw from the study at any time. It also states that the participants can view the researcher's transcripts if they wish. A voice recorder was used throughout the process, which allowed the researcher to transcribe the focus group. An information sheet was also given to each participant prior to the focus group (see appendix C). The information sheet notified the participants of key information. It included: the purpose of the study, what some expected topics will include, issues of confidentiality and anonymity, emphasising that the focus group participation is voluntary and also informing participants that it is a recorded focus group. The information sheet also included the researchers name and contact details.

### **Research Procedure:**

The researcher took time to visit BA Social Care practice students and Applied Social care students in Athlone Institute of Technology, after previously contacting various lecturers. Unfortunately, the week that the recruitment process was taking place, both student groups were overwhelmed with deadlines and upcoming exams for their degree. The age criteria for the study also prohibited many students from participating, as there was a high number of mature students, within both if these classes. Due to the lack of participants, the researcher had to rethink the recruitment plan.

After much thought and contact with the research supervisor, a new plan was produced. This research was conducted using a purposive sampling strategy, while also using a snowball sampling approach. The principle of purposive sampling is that the researcher deliberately selects their participants (Denscombe, 2014). Purposive sampling is hand-picked and is based on the participant's relevance and knowledge says Denscombe (2014). Snowball sampling on the other hand, emerges through a process of recommendation from one person to the next and this helps build a reasonable sized-sample (Denscombe, 2014). A student from the Bachelor of Business in Sport Management was identified as a gatekeeper. The researcher knew the student and identified this student as having several contacts, for example from being on various sports teams. The gatekeeper contacted some students to participate and in turn the students passed on the word.

The use of a purposive sampling strategy, with an inbuilt snowball sampling technique produced two single gender focus groups within the age bracket of eighteen to twenty-four, as well as a sample from a mix of academic disciplines. While the gender comparison is very important for this study, as current literature suggest that both male and female's perception of body image is affected by social media. It was also important to include a representation of students in the focus groups and this can be seen by the mix of academic disciplines. The researcher also attempted to include Social Care students as these students may be inclined to already know the impact of social media on body image from their studies. It would have been interesting to see if this affected their knowledge and perceptions. However, in spite of making two presentations to two undergraduate Social Care classes (12<sup>th</sup> April 2018), inviting Social Care students to participate, no students volunteered. This may be due to the assignment deadlines and impending exams both groups facing.

Two days previous to the focus group completion, each student was given an information sheet that stated what the focus group was about and gave reference to the student's responsibilities and rights throughout the data collection process. The researchers contact details were within the information sheet and each potential participant was asked to text or email the researcher if they wanted to participate. Initially, the number of participants involved six males and seven females. However, unfortunately five participants pulled out of the research mainly due to exam stress



and college deadlines. However, although the focus groups are small, the researcher managed to conduct two focus groups consisting of one male focus group and one female focus group. While also accessing students from a mix of disciplines.

The researcher organised a room within the college with the assistance of a lecturer in the college. A time was set for the focus group to take place, after the researcher analysed the student's timetables. The male focus group was conducted on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2018. While the female focus group was conducted on the 13<sup>th</sup> April 2018. The students were informed about this with a few days' notice. The participants were notified that the focus group will be recorded for analysis purposes and permission was granted from all of them before conducting the research. A consent form was given to each student and they were required to sign it if they agreed to take part. The participants were welcomed and informed that their participation is voluntary, and they could leave at any point if they wish. They were also told that they do not have to answer all the questions if they didn't feel comfortable doing so. During the focus group, the researcher asked the participants specific questions, which allowed the participants to answer each question, while also share their views, knowledge and experience. Both focus groups varied in length, the male group session lasting 30 minutes. This was the first focus group the researcher conducted after the pilot focus group. The researcher felt that the male participants were a bit shy and this may have impacted the length of the focus group. The female group session lasted 40 minutes. The focus groups were conducted separately and were conducted on two different days.

Pseudo names were given to all participants to protect their identity. However, the participants overall programme of study is stated. The study does not state their specific year of study, which further protects their anonymity. The female participants will be known as Mary, Fiona, Anne and Katie. Whereas the male participants will be referred to as Eamonn, Brian, James and Joe.

The researcher following the focus groups listened to the tapes and transcribed the conversations, which allowed the analysis of the results to appear. Transcription took place over one week and the researcher spent between half an hour and an hour each day transcribing. The transcriptions were then examined using a method known as thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes and

examining them from the data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (1998, cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006) says that thematic analysis also “interprets various aspects of the research”. These themes will be presented in the results section of the dissertation.

### **Ethical Considerations:**

The research was approved by the Department of Social Sciences Ethics Committee on (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2018), prior to doing any fieldwork, with no changes recommended.

A critical part of the research is the ethical considerations (Center of Innovations in Research and Teaching, ND). Ethics distinguish between what is right and wrong (Center of Innovations in Research and Teaching, ND). The participants were informed of the ethical considerations from the information sheet and the consent form, prior to the focus group process. These considerations included confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research process at any given time. The researcher assured that all the data is gathered for the research process only and the recordings and transcripts will be destroyed in the future (approximately one year after). The recordings and transcripts will be stored securely, and the researcher will be the only one able to access these. As stated participant’s names have been changed to pseudo names and no information presented in the study will reveal the participants real names. This protects the participant’s identity and allows the results to be presented anonymously.

### **Limitations:**

The researcher felt that the main limitation of the study was the number of participants involved. Although the focus groups were small, two single gender focus groups with mixed academic disciplines were created and undertaken.

The researcher hoped to include social care students due to their knowledge of the impact of social media on body image from their studies. Due to their busy schedules, including assignment deadline and upcoming exams, no students volunteered. The recruitment stage should have therefore occurred prior to the Easter break. Although the inclusion of Social Care students was not essential to achieve the Aims and Objectives of the study, it may have been insightful. This creates an opportunity for future research.

**Conclusion:**

The methodology section outlined in detail, the methods used to conduct this piece of research. Firstly, the methodology outlined the research design, while also differentiating between qualitative and quantitative research. The research design was a qualitative study, which aimed to gain an insight into a phenomenon, through the voice and thoughts of the young people themselves. The methodology gave details about the participants and the materials used throughout the process. The exact research procedure was explained in detail, which allows the same study to be redone in the future. Ethical considerations are a big part of any research, and therefore it was discussed in this section. Lastly, the limitations of the study were mentioned.

The following section is the results section. This will discuss the results of the data collected from the focus groups. The data will be broken up into themes and these will be presented in the following section.

## Results

### Introduction:

This section will highlight the key findings and results from the study. The overall aim of the study was to find out student's perception of the link between social media and body image. While also determining what type of social media third level students use and also trying to find solutions for promoting positive body image when using social media.

Pseudo names were given to all participants. The female participants within this section will be known as Mary, Fiona, Anne and Katie. Whereas the male participants will be referred to as Eamonn, Brian, James and Joe. The results were analysed and broken up into common themes.

The emerging themes were:

- Social media usage
- Image- based social media
- Social comparison
- Unrealistic perceptions of body image
- Positive body image when using social media?

### Theme 1: Media Usage:

The study highlighted that, all eight participants within this research use social media on a daily basis. The most common social media platforms used by the sample were Facebook, Facebook Messenger and Snapchat and Instagram. Male and females social media usage varied and will be presented separately below.

#### Female focus group:

##### Time spent on social media

While the female participant's used social media platform such as Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter, Instagram was the most common platform used.

The participants found it difficult to accurately state how much time they spend on social media. The participants all stated, however, that social media is a part of their everyday routine. The majority of participants laughed when talking about how often

they use social media. This may be interpreted in many forms, including for example; that they are embarrassed by how often they use social media, they may assume that this is an obvious answer or they may be confused why the researcher is talking about time spent on social media, due to its popularity in society. Participants may also be laughing for other reasons.

Katie says:

*“Every time I check my phone, I check all of these apps for any updates or notifications. I would say approximately 3 hours a day. Not 3 hours straight now (laughs), but I am constantly checking my phone”.* [Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education, aged twenty-one].

Mary similarly discusses how often she uses social media:

*“I use social media every day and I check my phone constantly throughout the day, so I don’t think I could put a time on it”.* [Bachelor of Veterinary Science, aged twenty-one].

#### Addiction versus habit:

The female participant’s engaged in conversation about their social media usage. Social media is referred to as a habit by the participants in this study which is an interesting choice of words, as constant use of social media is more referred to as an addiction. Anne is one participants that feels social media is a habit, stating that:

*“I suppose it depends what I’m doing during the day. But I am on it every day, there isn’t a day go by when I don’t use social media. I think it’s a habit really (laughs)”.* [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].

Fiona replies to Anne revealing:

*“They say you can have a social media addiction. Don’t they? I am always on social media. It’s bad really but it is a habit more than an addiction (laughs)”.* [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health, aged twenty-two].

Male focus group:

*Time spent on social media*

Similarly to the female participant's, males use social media on a daily basis. However, unlike the female participants, males did not try and specify a specific time spend using social media. Eamonn says:

*"There isn't a day go by that I don't use social media. It's so easy to use because I have the apps on my phone and I always have my phone with me wherever I go. So, I am always checking it to see what's new".* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-one].

Brian simply agrees with this, claiming that he uses:

*"Social media daily".* [Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Bio-Veterinary Science, aged twenty, two].

James comments on his social media usage, stating that:

*"I use social media very often. I don't know an accurate amount of time. Definitely everyday but I could not guess how long exactly.* [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].

Joe makes an interesting statement regarding his spare time. The literature review reveals that teenagers often spend more time on social media than eating or socializing (face-to-face). Joe believes that he uses:

*"Social media all the time. Definitely every day. Especially when I'm off college and work".* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].

**Theme2: Image-based Social Media:**

There are many social media platforms that are image-based. Instagram is one of these that promotes photo and video sharing, where viewers like and comment on various user's content. Instagram was a common conversation point for both male and female participants. However, males view Instagram in a different way to females in this study.

### The absence of Instagram accounts in males

Instagram is not a common social media site for male participants of this study. It is interesting to note that only one participant in the male focus group had an Instagram account. Whereas, all female participant used Instagram. Males tended to use other forms of social media including, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat and Twitter. There are mixed opinions of Instagram from the males within the focus groups.

Joe is the only male participant who uses Instagram. He was shocked to learn that he was the only participant in the group that used it. He says:

“I’m so surprised to hear that no one else here has Instagram. It’s what everyone talks about.... Well and Snapchat”. [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].

The other participants voice their opinions about Instagram. Brain says:

*“Unlike a lot of people, I don’t have Instagram. I don’t really see what all the fuss is about it (Laughs)”.*

Similarly, James says:

*“I don’t have an Instagram account at all. I don’t see why people would want to spend time looking a picture of other people on Instagram. It’s all about getting likes isn’t it? I don’t have time for something like that”.* [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].

Eamonn also does not have an Instagram account.

*“To be honest I don’t have an Instagram account either. Some of my friends tell me it is good, but I just never tried it out”.* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-one].

Joe listens to the comments about Instagram and somewhat agrees with the other participants. However, he also admits that Instagram is his favourite social media site.

*“Instagram is actually the social media I mostly use. I like Instagram best of all social media’s. Although I do not post much on Instagram to be honest, but I like scrolling through it”. [Joe. Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].*

#### Instagram’s impact on Body Image:

Three out of four male participants do not have an Instagram account. Eamonn explains why he chooses not to join Instagram:

*“Everyone always talks about their appearance and what they would love to change about themselves. Social media must have a part to play in this. That’s partly why I haven’t signed up to Instagram”. [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-one].*

Brain feels as if Instagram and other image-based social media sites increase body image dissatisfaction. He argues that:

*“There definitely a strong connection between social media and body image. And these image-based social media sites are making it worse... (Pause) making people feel worse”.*

#### Female Focus Group:

##### A high use of Instagram in females:

Each female participant stated that they had an Instagram account, which is a major comparison to that of the male participants.

*“Instagram seems to be a major platform lately though. Less people are using Facebook and more people are using Instagram, aren’t they?” [Anne] [All female participants nod their heads, with a few letting out an mmm noise]. [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].*

When the researcher asked if there was a connection between social media and body image, several participants of both genders mentioned Instagram. It was highlighted that Instagram’s use of images, permits people to feel dissatisfied with their body image.



Mary points out that Instagram:

*“Is full of selfies and other photos of people who are looking at their best. Let’s put it this way – no one ever posts a picture of themselves looking at their worst”.* [Bachelor of Veterinary Science, aged twenty-one].

### **Theme 3: Perceptions of body image**

The focus group participants highlighted that social media often portrays both men and women with an unrealistic “*perfect*” body image. It is clear that the participants feel a lower level of body image satisfaction when using social media. This is evident from the discussion with both male and female groups, which are presented below.

#### Female Focus Group:

#### *Celebrities influence on body image on social media*

Social media is used by people all across the world, including celebrities. Celebrities are constantly posting images of themselves online which are edited, photo-shopped and not the real image. This in turn creates body image concerns among people who are viewing their images and videos.

Fiona says:

*“Celebrities are always posting pictures too and they are often photo-shopped and then their image is therefore deemed as “beautiful”. This leads to people thinking that they should look a certain way or that they are not good enough”.* [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health, aged twenty-two].

Katie comments on celebrity pictures saying:

*“I think girls like myself are hugely influenced by celebrities and social media influencers such as bloggers”.* [Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education, aged twenty-one].

Katie likewise states:

*“There are so many people across the world with famous accounts on Instagram. They post multiple pictures of their good bodies and their makeup tutorials and travelling the world and so on. These people use makeup and other implements to make their pictures look flawless creating a view of an unrealistic body image”.* [Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education, aged twenty-one].

#### Weight-Loss accounts:

Social media promotes people to lose weight according to the female participants. People who appear to have achieved an accepted body image often promote it. Weight loss accounts are hugely popular on social media currently. Mary talks about the new phenomenon of promoting weight-loss on social media:

*“Talking about being thin, the media is always promoting losing weight. People have begun creating Instagram accounts that share their recipes and weight loss journey. They update their followers daily on how much weight they have lost and share how they have done it”.* [Bachelor of Veterinary Science, aged twenty-one].

Anne replies:

*“People who use social media on a daily basis may feel like they have to live up to this and are pressured to do so”.* [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].

#### Male Focus Group:

##### Pressure to look a particular way:

It is not just females that witness unrealistic body images. Males also see social media accounts that portray men to look a certain way.

Joe says:

*“I play a lot of sports and I am always seeing sports stars and athletes on Instagram and other social media sites. Everyone has six-packs and muscular bodies”.* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].

Unrealistic perceptions of body image have huge effects on people's lives. When asked what the effects are of using social media on body image, Brain says:

*"It affects men and women differently. Often people with desired traits such as good make up or fitness accounts gets higher likes, I think this makes others want to change themselves to achieve the same level of popularity. More men are dieting and joining the gym. It's not healthy. I'd say there are consequences to this such as anorexia and men taking steroids"*

Eamonn responds by saying:

*"Yeah steroids are common in the sports world now. It's too much pressure to build muscle in such a short space of time. The same goes for losing weight. It's impossible to lose weight fast and have no consequences".* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-one].

James says that people hold the ability to decide what they post on social media, which in turn creates an unrealistic view of people.

*"Social media can give people a biased and unrealistic view of people because of their ability to pick and choose what aspects of their life is posted".* [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].

Joe is the only male participant who uses Instagram. After listening to the other participant's comments about Instagram, he begins to agree with the comments the other males are making about body image and Instagram:

*"Well as I've said, I like Instagram, but I also agree with the comments that you are all making. Instagram is a social media site that is based upon images and the amount of likes these pictures get. I like the site, but I can also see why people can begin to have a negative attitude towards their body image".* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].

#### **Theme 4: Social Comparison:**

The concept of social comparison was brought to light from both male and female participants within both focus groups. Social media often portrays individuals to believe that there is such thing as the "perfect" body image. Interestingly both genders agree that there is a pressure to look a certain way. When the researcher

asked if students thought there is a connection between social media and body image, there was a unanimous agreement that there was a connection.

Female Focus Group:

Peer Pressure:

Female participant's highlighted society's pressure to look a certain way, and therefore people continually compare themselves to others.

Fiona states that:

*"Yes, there is [a connection between social media and body image], especially because people constantly compare themselves to other people. People are always posting photos daily on social media". [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health, aged twenty-two].*

She continues:

*"I think people, especially girls, often compare themselves to other girls. I have friends that often scroll through social media and say things like "look how gorgeous she is" or "why can I not look like her". I have to admit I do that myself sometimes too". [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health, aged twenty-two].*

Katie also feels that social media is a platform that encourages comparisons.

*"One may nit pick at their flaws when they are comparing them to someone else's. This makes us perceive ourselves in a very negative way". [Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education, aged twenty-one].*

Anne says:

*"There is such an emphasis on always looking good. And girls that don't think they look good will of course compare themselves to others". [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].*

Further on Anne says:

*“Posting photos online of yourself is such a phenomenon now and no wonder why people are comparing themselves to others”.* [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].

Anne sees social media as a competition between people:

*“It almost feels like people are competing to look better than one another”.* [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].

### Male Focus Group:

#### Peer Pressure:

In the male focus group, the participants also feel social comparison is evident on social media. Joe says:

*“People are always expected to look a certain way. And well if they don’t society sometimes does not allow them to fit in. That’s maybe why everyone is comparing themselves to others?”.* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].

James also feels that social media is a place where people make comparisons:

*“Social media makes people compare their bodies to others. Everyone desires to have six-packs and muscular bodies and so on”.* [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].

The literature review offers an explanation of the theory of social comparison. The theory claims that social comparison is referred to as a tendency to feel good or bad about ourselves based upon how we see others (Panger, 2014). From the focus groups it is evident that social media forces people to compare themselves to others.

However, people do not only compare themselves regarding how they look. Young people also compare how many likes a photo likes, in comparison to another person’s picture.

Eamonn is talking about Instagram when he says:

*“It’s all about the likes and comments on photos. And then people compare how many likes they get to another person’s photo likes”. [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-one].*

*Feelings of Jealousy in both male and female participants:*

Social media brings feelings of jealousy and desire to gain more “likes” for a photo posted on social media. When the researcher asked: *“what are the effects of using social media on body image?”* Mary says:

*“Unfortunately, the result of posting on social media may be jealousy as people compare looks and likes on images they post”. [Bachelor of Veterinary Science, aged twenty-one].*

James agrees that social media allows people to feel envious of what others have:

*“People only post photos that look like their life is great. Other people can get jealous of other people from seeing other people’s lives on social media. Jealousy is very common among people. Of course, it is. People always want what they don’t have and then people compare what they have to what others have”. [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].*

**Theme 5: Solutions for promoting positive body image when using social media**

Social media is a major part of everyday life for many people, particularly young people. As the focus groups have already identified it has a huge part to play in connection with people’s perception of body image. The researcher wanted to talk about possible solutions which may promote positive body image when using social media. Katie says:

*“Social media is just going to continue to develop and grow in popularity. Everyone is going to keep using it. So, what do you do?”. [Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education, aged twenty-one].*

However, the researcher posed the question to all participants - What can be done to promote positive body image for students when using social media? Participants were unsure about this question, as they began looking for answers from other

participant's and some participants hesitated to answer this question. Despite this, they did offer some insight into helping users online promote positive body image. Mary offers a possible way to help promote positive body image, by seeking advocates.

She says:

*"I think that people with a large number of followers online could post natural photos of themselves rather than editing their photos to appear "perfect" for their accounts. Bloggers and celebrities have so much influence over people, so these people would be perfect promoters of positive body image".*

[Bachelor of Veterinary Science, aged twenty-one].

Another possible method of promoting positive body image may be:

*"It should be promoted that being thin isn't the 'ideal' body image either. Therefore, pictures of plus size people should be shown on social media and even in magazines and the TV. It's not all about someone's weight. People should begin prompting all body shapes and sizes" [Fiona]. [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health, aged twenty-two].*

Anne agrees with Fiona and states:

*"The use of more positive videos and pictures of people of all shapes and sizes may be considered and perhaps the more we see the difference in people the more used to it we get and accept that it's ok to have different body images". [Bachelor of Science in Dental Practice Management with Oral Health Promotion, aged twenty].*

Katie feels that a change in attitude is necessary:

*"Disabling the stigma that being of a smaller size is much more desirable". [Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education, aged twenty-one].*

The researcher asked the male participants the same question - What can be done to promote positive body image for students when using social media? James offered a way that may help promote positive body image.

He says:

*“I think it is important to have popular social media personalities show a fair and varied view of their real body images. If people stop using filters and Photoshop aids, people may begin to see that not everything is perfect. People have blemishes and different scars and pieces of their bodies they wish to change. But that is part of life. So, I think eliminating or reducing the use of photo edits will help others”.* [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].

Joe also gives his opinion, stating:

*“It’s so hard to know what can be done. I think social media is too popular to change. However, maybe encouraging students to be more body positive could possibly help. Various media campaigns and talks and getting celebrities on board to promote positive body images may work. [Pause]. Or maybe even encouraging students to drop the phone and social media for a period of time every day and rewarding them for doing so. Although that would be hard to implement, wouldn’t it?”.* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-two].

Brian feels like their needs to be an advocate for change in place. However, unlike Mary he feels:

*“Social media platforms can be a powerful agent in themselves to change people’s perception of their body image”.* [Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Bio-Veterinary Science, aged twenty, two].

Eamonn opinion is:

*“I think it is important for people to realise that no one is perfect, and people will always have someone things that they don’t like about themselves. People with a lot of online followers could post natural pictures of themselves instead of editing their pictures to appear “perfect”. But I don’t know how you go about promoting people to do that.* [Bachelor of Business in Sport Management, aged twenty-one].



James replies to this saying similar to Brian:

*“I think social media sites are the key agents for change. The government too I suppose”.* [Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology, aged twenty-one].

### **Conclusion:**

This section reveals the results of the focus groups conducted with male and female AIT students. It focuses on student’s perceptions of the link between social media and body image. Both focus group participants were regular users of social media and both males and females used social media every day. The results illustrated a consensus on the influence of social media on body image. Females are regular users of Instagram. However, their male counterparts feel as though Instagram is a social media site that increases body image dissatisfaction. Only one male participant in the focus group had an Instagram account. Social comparison is a common element of using social media among young people according to the participants in this study. Both male and female members of both focus groups agreed that promoting positive body image on social media is extremely difficult. Although they all offered possible solutions of promoting this, the implementation of such strategies may be complex.

## **Discussion**

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of the discussion section is to discuss the results of the collected data and connect it with the existing body of knowledge and literature, regarding the link between social media and body image. The results section offered an account of male and female participant's experiences of using social media and gave an insight into social media's connection with body image. The aims and objectives of the study will be presented below with reference from both existing research and the participant's views regarding this research topic.

The results provide perceptions from both male and female students, all of which are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Male and female focus group participants comprised representatives from the two Faculties in Athlone Institute of Technology: the faculty of Science and Health, and the faculty of Business and Hospitality.

### **Social Media Usage:**

The research results provide evidence that the participants were regular social media users. Furthermore, they all used social media daily. Therefore the results supports the idea that young people are frequent social media users.

The literature states that youths are frequent users of social media and the research results coincide with this (Burnette, Kwitowski & Mazzeo, 2017). Burnette et al (2017) state that ninety-two percent of young people in the United States are online every day, while twenty-four percent of these are almost respectively check social media sites (Burnette et al, 2017; Kettle, Gilmartin, Corcoran, Byrne and Sun, 2016). The participants agree with this statement and many of them said that they are on social media constantly.

According to a study published in 2017, young spend up to 9 hours a day on social media sites (Asano, 2017). The majority of the time spent on social media is accessed through a mobile phone device (60%). The majority of the participants did not give a precise amount of time that they spend on social media. The female participant's tried to give a specific time. For example, one participant [Katie], guesses that she spends approximately "*three hours on social media every day*".

However, the male participants simply said that they are on social media every day and that social media usage is a constant process, as they stated that they check their devices constantly. However, there is not a lot of existing research on levels of social media usage among Ireland's third level students (Kettle et al, 2016). Instead, research seems to be more internationally based. Therefore, further Irish research would be beneficial regarding this topic.

An interesting perception was stated by the female participants within this study. They view social media usage as a habit more so than an addiction. However, current literature states that regular social media usage is an addiction (Greenfield, 2015; Rao, 2017). Social media is not currently a part of the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). This indicates the need for further investigation into this particular addiction. Research indicates that people who are addicted to social media show withdrawal symptoms and therefore are not able to control their internet usage (Greenfield, 2015). The participants within this study did not state that they are unable to control their social media usage. However, they did state that they are using social media constantly, which indicates a need to check their social media platforms. Despite this, some female participants (Anne and Fiona) identified that checking social media is more of a "*habit*" rather than an addiction.

In relation to social media platforms, many students indicated their use of Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram. However, one interesting aspect of the results section was that male students, did not engage with Instagram as much as the female students. Instagram is Ireland's second most popular social media platform and its membership continues to increase each year (McCanna, 2017; Statista, 2018). However, not all male participants had an Instagram account. In fact, only one out of four participants currently have an account. The male participants did however, use other image-based social media platforms including Snapchat and Facebook. The male participants only briefly mentioned both Snapchat and Facebook. Instagram was a main point of conversation throughout the focus group, as they seemed to spark conversation when talking about this platform, which indicates a personal interest for the participants involved. While this study uses AIT as a case study site, it would be interesting to conduct a large-scale national study, including all third level education providers. The study should provide

a gender analysis of image-based social media usage, among third level students between the age of eighteen and twenty-four, based on the United Nations definition (United Nations, 2013).

The research did not consider that there may have been a gender difference regarding Instagram. This was a surprising finding, as the researcher did not anticipate a gender difference with regard to image based social media. This may be due to the examination of extensive literature the researcher looked at, and a gender difference was never identified in previous studies regarding Instagram. However, when looking at current literature regarding a gender comparison of Instagram accounts, some researchers also found that more women than men use Instagram (Seligson, 2016). According to Simmons (Cited in Seligson, 2016), *“Young women dominate Instagram and visual platforms in general”*. However, there is limited amount of research that indicates how many males versus females use Instagram. ComScore, which is a company that measures internet usage states that forty-two percent of Instagram visitors in 2016 were male (Seligson, 2016). While on the other hand, fifty-eight percent of Instagram visitors in the same year were female (Seligson, 2016).

### **The link between social media and body image:**

The research suggests that social media has significantly impacted upon the growing trend of body dissatisfaction (Griffiths, Murray, Krug and McLean, 2018). Men often aspire to be built with well-developed muscles in areas such as the chest and arms, which in turn promotes the use of anabolic steroids and other drugs which aid hormone growth (Grogan, 2006; Grogan, 2017). While females aspire to achieve an unrealistically perfect level of beauty (Wagner, Aguire and Summer, 2016). The male participants regarded Instagram as a social media site that most encourages body image dissatisfaction, which is thought to be ‘making people feel worse’.

The current literature states that youth is the key stage in developing either positive or negative body image (Voelker, Reel and Greenleaf, 2015). Taking the United Nations definition of youth (fifteen to twenty-four) students are continuing to develop their perception of body image up until the age of twenty-four (United Nations, 2013). This, therefore highlights that students transitioning from second level to third level education, are still unsure of their views regarding positive and negative body image

perceptions. It must be noted the difference between positive and negative body image. Positive body image is where the person knows their body and they are satisfied with it (Cash, 2012; cited in Meshioye, 2016). Negative body image on the other hand, is where the person does not like their body and may show hatred and dissatisfaction to the body (Meshioye, 2016).

There are many factors that contribute to positive and negative body image perceptions. The participants revealed that celebrities and influencers on social media have a major impact on the perception of body image. The researcher did not anticipate the influence celebrities have on individuals on social media. However, Gross (2015) says that celebrities on social media produce themselves to have a great body image, which young people aspire to achieve. As a result, self-criticism is common when seeing unrealistic body images online (Gross, 2015). Both male and female participants mentioned online influencers or celebrities. For example females mention bloggers and celebrity figures while males mentioned famous sports stars and athletes. With celebrities and online influencers impacting people's lives, the female participants also highlighted the influence weight-loss accounts have on individual's body image. The researcher therefore looked at the impact weight-loss accounts have on people and found several studies. The researcher also had not considered this element as a factor of the way in which individuals perceive their body image. This may be due to the fact that the researcher was unaware that third level students look at these weight-loss accounts. According to Warner (2015), a study consisting of 130 female participants was conducted by Flinders University in South Australia. Two focus groups were set up. One group looked at travel images, while the other group look at images displaying 'fitspiration'. Once the participants had viewed the images they were asked to complete a survey to assess their mood and perception of their body image. The results concluded that the women who viewed the 'fitspiration' images were less satisfied with their bodies, while also displayed negative mood afterwards. It also must be noted that they compared themselves to the individuals in the photos they were looking at.

It is not just females that witness unrealistic body image expectations on social media, males do too. The media portrays people with an unrealistically perfect level of beauty (Wagner, Aguire and Summer, 2016) As mentioned previously in this discussion section, the literature suggest that men often aspire to be built with well-

developed muscles. The researcher had slightly anticipated this result and briefly mentioned this in the literature review section. The males in this study, felt strongly about social media's influence on individuals body image, particularly Instagram. Joe for example says: "I play a lot of sports and I am always seeing sports stars and athletes on Instagram and other social media sites. Everyone has six-packs and muscular bodies". Both male and female participants state that young people are continuously comparing themselves to others. This links to the literature review which discussed Leo Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. This theory believes that people are continuously evaluating themselves (Carlson-Jones, 2001; Krayer, Ingledew & Iphofen, 2008; Panger, 2014; Seidel, 2009). Therefore, when individuals evaluate themselves, they look at other people and compare themselves with them (Seidel, 2009). The literature and the participants within this study, state that social comparison increases the likelihood of body image dissatisfaction, due to the pressure people feel they "*have to live up to*". Peer and societal pressure is also an influencing factor that the participant's highlighted throughout the research. Peer pressure has been known for its role in the development of body image concerns in young people (Kenny, 2017). Peer pressure may influence a young person of when to have sex for example, drink and smoke, send nude pictures and so on. All of these may also contribute to how a person feels about themselves and their bodies (Kenny, 2017). In recent times, there is an increased pressure to be thin and obtain the 'perfect' body image (especially for females) that is deemed 'acceptable' (Wallis, 2015). The female participants in the focus group talk about social media as being like a competition, in terms of body image and the amount of likes a picture gets. This is due to the fact that people "*are competing to look better than one another*". The male participants also feel pressures from their peers and society to attain a certain body image while on social media. Peer pressure can refer to the feelings of pressure that young people experience when they are encouraged by others to think or behave in a specific way (Kiuru, Burk, Laursen, Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2010; cited in Kenny, 2017). Alsaif (2016) states that a proportion of students use social media because of peer pressure and because their friends are using it. The male participants highlight the pressure to look a certain way in terms of muscular bodies and fashion, in order to "*fit in*".

Social media according to the participants encourages feelings of jealousy, as young people feel the desire to imitate other people's body image, fashion sense or the amount of likes a person is receiving for an image posted online. The literature review mentioned a study carried out with romantic partners. The research was carried out with undergraduate male and female students whom were given various scenarios to read and were asked how they felt about each scenario. One result concluded that participants felt jealous and hurt while thinking that their partner had no photos on Facebook of them as a couple (Muscanell, 2013; cited in Strickland, 2014). This was the only mention of jealousy in the literature review. However, the participants of this study, talked about feelings of jealousy in a different way. Instead of talking about jealousy between romantic partners, the participants highlighted that jealousy was common when viewing someone's images or when comparing how many likes a person gained for a particular photo.

The participants feel that the link between social media and body image is very strong. Social media encourages social and peer comparison, jealousy, weight-loss aspirations and a desire to achieve the "*perfect*" body image.

### **Solutions for promoting positive body image when using social media:**

Due to the extent of the link between social media and body image, it is important to find possible solutions for promoting positive body image. Social media is a major part of individual's lives, particularly young peoples. Due to the definition of youth by the United Nations (2013) the term is extended to anyone up until the age of twenty-four. This therefore has implies that older youths, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, also experience possible negativity regarding body image, while using social media. When searching for literature on promoting positive body image on social media several solutions are recommended. For example; McKeele (2015) speaks about various campaigns that promote this including #Fatkini and 'the Perfect Body'. Some participants also mentioned the idea of campaigns, however with the help of celebrities and online influencers. This is thought to be necessary for "*Disabling the stigma*" says one participant. The students think that media campaign and various talks and poster campaigns would help promote positive body image, however it may be more beneficial with the help of celebrities and influencers who are highly regarded. They however, also stated that this solution would be hard to implement as it would be difficult to gain contact with celebrities.

The participants offered their opinions for promoting positive body image while using social media. One major suggestion that was highlighted was the use and promotion of more “*natural*” photos online. This proposes the removal of any photo edits, photo-shops, airbrush tools, make up and so on. This solution represents the participants own personal views and literature supporting this solution is unavailable.

The participants also feel that society needs to begin to promote people of all “*shapes and sizes*” on social media. The media is constantly prompting the idea of a “*thin*” or “*ideal body image*” and this needs to be reduced and changed. Again, this is the participants own personal views and there is no literature backing up this idea.

One student highlighted the power of social media platforms themselves being an advocate for promoting positive body images. This person also regarded the government as having the power to make some possible changes which may help promote positive body image on social media.

When researching possible solutions for promoting positive body image on social media, many campaigns are visible which are mentioned above. Some of the participants believed that campaigns may be a good idea for promoting positive body image. However, some participants feel that – “*Social media is just going to continue to develop and grow in popularity. Everyone is going to keep using it. So, what do you do?*”. There are mixed opinions on how to promote positive body image while using social media. Further research may be beneficial in creating some new ideas relating to this.

### **Conclusion:**

The research examined student’s perceptions and experiences of many key issues including – types of social media students use and the amount of time they spend on social media. The results also examined the link between social media and body image, while identifying supports that student’s feel could be put into place, to promote positive body image when using social media. The following section will conclude the entire study, while highlighting some recommendations from both the participants and the researcher.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary aim of this research was to examine the extent of third level student's perceptions of the link between social media and body image. It is evident that the students within this study feel strongly about the link between social media and body image. The research highlighted that image-based social media including Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram increases body image dissatisfaction. This is because such social media platforms allow individuals to compare themselves to others, while encouraging feelings of jealousy and the desire to look "*perfect*".

The literature insists that youth are regular social media users. The term youth according to the United Nations (2013) extends to individuals to the age of twenty-four. The students within this study coincide with this age category. Each male and female student stated they used many different social media platforms, while also stating that they are using social media on a daily basis.

The participants highlighted that promoting positive body image while using social media is difficult and complex, however, they suggest some solutions that could help achieve this.

The researcher was satisfied that the studies aims and objectives were achieved.

The students discussed some possible solutions or recommendations which are as follows:

- The promotion of "*natural*" photos that are posted online. This therefore, includes the reduction of photo edits, photo-shops and airbrush tools, with the possibility of wearing less make up for women.
- The encouragement of individuals of all shapes and sizes on social media.
- Various social media campaigns, talks and other campaigns that promote positive body image. The participants feel that if celebrity or online influencers were involved in this campaign, more people would be persuaded to feel positive about themselves and their body image.
- Social media platforms could be advocates for themselves. Social media has the power to help promote positive body image for users viewing their sites.

The researcher also has some recommendations that may be beneficial in the future. As previously pointed out in this study, there is limited Irish research on social media and body image.

This study is a small-scale study. Therefore further research may be considered, including:

- A large-scale study examining student's perceptions of the link between social media and body image.
- A localised study, with a larger number of participants comparing student's perceptions of the link between social media and body image. For example, a study focusing on an entire faculty in Athlone Institute of Technology.
- An international study analysing a gender comparison regarding, student's perceptions of the link between social media and body image.

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## Appendix (A)



### Focus Group Questions

1. Do you use social media?
2. What type of social media do you use?
3. How often do you use social media?
4. Do you think there is a connection between social media and body image?  
Why do you think this?
5. What are the effects of using social media on body image? Why do you think this?
6. What can be done to promote positive body image for students when using social media?

Appendix (B)



**Athlone Institute of Technology**  
**Consent Form for participation in a Focus group**

**Topic: “An exploration of young people’s perception of the link between social media and body image. Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) as a case study site.**

Name: Jasmine Moss

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read the participation information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
4. In signing this consent form I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to volunteer r to participate in this research study being conducted by Jasmine Moss.
5. I understand that I will participate in a recorded focus group with the researcher on the agreed topic.
6. I understand that a written transcription of the focus group is available to me on request.

7. I grant full approval for the use of the above information, including publication and conference presentation on the full understanding that my anonymity and confidentiality are preserved.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher                      Date                      Signature

## Appendix (C) Information Sheet



To participants,

I am required to do a piece of research for my MA in Child and Youth in Athlone Institute of Technology. I would like to ask for your help with this study. The purpose of my study is to find out the perceptions of young people in relation to the link between social media and body image. I am hoping to conduct a focus group for this study.

I would like a group of students to volunteer to participate in a focus group. I will ask you for information on your views on the link between social media and body image. And also possible supports that could be put in place for students to promote positive body image when using social media

This is a voluntary study and you do not have to participate if you do not wish. If you do agree to take part you can withdraw at any time. If you take part in my research study, the information will be treated with a high level of confidentiality. Your name will not be presented in my study. For the focus group process, I aim to use pseudo names, which will protect your real names. I would also ask your permission audio tape the focus group as it will help me remember what has been discussed. I would like to record the focus group for analysis purpose only. I will ask for your permission prior to running the focus group.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on: \_\_\_\_\_ or email me on:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to read the information above.

Kind Regards,

Jasmine Moss.

