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# The Influence of Highly Visual Social Media Engagement on the Body Image of Cisgender Heterosexual Emerging Adult Men. A Grounded Theory Approach

Isaac Cheng

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THE INFLUENCE OF HIGHLY VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON THE  
BODY IMAGE OF CISGENDER HETEROSEXUAL EMERGING ADULT MEN. A  
GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University Seattle

In partial fulfillment for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

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August 2024

THE INFLUENCE OF HIGHLY VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON THE  
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GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

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Antioch University Seattle  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

### THE INFLUENCE OF HIGHLY VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON THE BODY IMAGE OF CISGENDER HETEROSEXUAL EMERGING ADULT MEN. A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

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The effects of highly visual social media (HVSM) on the body image of users is a widespread concern amongst consumers and popular topic of research. While numerous studies have explored the effects of HVSM on women's body image, the literature on men's body image, particularly among cisgender heterosexual men, is comparatively sparse. The present study utilized constructivist grounded theory methodology to develop an explanatory model illustrating how HVSM engagement by cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men influences their body image. Data analysis revealed how specific HVSM platform attributes, a user's behavior on an HVSM platform, a user's perception of an ideal male physique, and the appearance-related content they viewed on HVSM platforms contributed to deleterious effects on their body image. The findings of the study offers insight to an understudied demographic group comprising a large share of social media users and suggest areas of future inquiry to better delineate HVSM effects on men. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* men, social media, body image, constructivist grounded theory

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Social media is a fixture in the lives of Americans, with over 70% reporting daily usage in 2021 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Eighty-four percent of 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States report using social media, a percentage larger than any other age group (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The social media platforms 18- to 29-year-olds use the most are YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, respectively. These platforms are all highly visual in that the content users interact with are primarily based on images and videos. Highly visual platforms are in contrast with social media platforms that are primarily text-based, such as Twitter and Reddit.

The effects of social media on individuals have become a topic of immense interest in research and popular culture. In 2021, the popular social media company Meta (formerly Facebook) came under sharp criticism when a whistleblower revealed that the company was aware of detrimental effects its social media platforms were having on young women. An investigation by the Wall Street Journal found that Meta was aware that its social media platform Instagram was exacerbating body image issues in teen girls, and that younger users were blaming the platform for increased anxiety and depression (Wells et al., 2021).

While other studies have corroborated similar findings in social media users, some studies report contrary findings such as increased confidence and self-esteem (McCrorry et al., 2020). One explanation for the mixed findings of social media research is that there is little consensus on *how* social media should be researched. Addressing gaps in current social media research methodologies can lead to findings with increased validity and generalizability regarding the impact of social media on its users. This can lead to higher quality social media research in underexplored areas, such as the various forms of engagement accessible to users of

highly visual social media (HVSM) platforms or the effects on body image they have on heterosexual cisgender emerging adult men.

This dissertation is an exploration into the effects of highly visual social media on body image, with a specific focus on cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. The subsequent chapters begin with a comprehensive literature review, providing insights into existing research on social media's influence on measures of well-being, like body image, both in the general population and among men. A chapter on methodology will detail the design and implementation of a study investigating the effects of HVSM platforms on body image among cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men, accompanied by a rationale for the selection of constructivist grounded theory as the appropriate methodology. The results of the study will be presented and the ensuing discussion will provide an interpretation of the findings along with an exploration of their implications for future research on HVSM, body image, and men.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study explored the effects of HVSM on the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. The following chapter begins by discussing the developmental stage of emerging adulthood and the characteristics that distinguish it from other stages, like adulthood or adolescence. Next is a detailed review of existing literature on HVSM impacts on body image. This review specifically focuses on findings related to male-identifying users of HVSM and what has been established in the literature so far about how their engagement on HVSM platforms influences their body image.

### Emerging Adulthood

Eighty-four percent of 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States report using social media, a percentage larger than any other age group (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). This age bracket encapsulates a developmental period referred to as emerging adulthood. Initially posited by Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is characterized by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations. It is a flexible period in which individuals are able to explore a variety of possible life opportunities at a scope greater than in any other age group. This time period, for many, is a time of frequent change in areas such as love, career, and worldview.

Emerging adulthood is often compared to adolescence. Identity development and exploration occur at both these stages. However, identity exploration in emerging adulthood is uniquely different as the questions pondered by individuals comprise a much more long-term context than those by adolescents. For example, employment by emerging adults is often for occupational preparation for adult work roles that may comprise their careers for the rest of their adult life. Employment by adolescents, on the other hand, is more often than not a means to an end to sustain an active leisure life. Emerging adults are afforded the unique opportunity to

obtain a broad range of life experiences before taking on more enduring—and limiting—adult responsibilities that appear in the thirties and beyond.

Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood is consistent among diverse levels of socioeconomic status in the United States (Arnett, 2016). Individuals in this age bracket report many commonalities in their experiences of emerging adulthood regardless of social class, strengthening its theoretical basis as a unique developmental life stage. Given that the majority of HVSM users are emerging adults, the bulk of HVSM research has naturally focused on individuals within this demographic.

### **Brief History of Social Media Research**

Early research from the 2000's to the early 2010's explored the emotional and psychological impact of social media on young people. These studies mainly focused on text-based platforms such as discussion forums, blogs, and platforms like Facebook or ASKfm (Best et al., 2014). Findings from these studies often reported either mixed or no effects on well-being (Best et al., 2014). Beneficial outcomes included increased self-esteem, perceived social support, increased social capital, safe identity experimentation, and increased opportunities for self-disclosure. Harmful outcomes included increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depression, and cyber bullying. Best and colleagues (2014), in their systematic review of social media literature from this time period, recommended that future research should focus on the specific type of social media platforms used. Additionally, they suggested placing less emphasis on variables such as "time spent on social media" or "number of online friends" and instead focusing on the types of online activities users are engaging in (p. 34). Lastly, they suggested that social media's ability to foster self-disclosure could help healthcare professionals access "traditionally hard-to-reach populations such as young males" (p. 34).

While the social media platforms researched before 2010 occasionally contained videos, images, and other visual stimuli, the content on these platforms was predominantly text-based. Visual-based platforms were not as prevalent until at least 2010 when Instagram was created. An increased number of HVSM platforms hit app stores and rapidly gained in popularity through the 2010s. HVSM platforms are now among the most popular social media platforms for American young adults aged 18–to–29, with 71% reporting Instagram usage, 65% reporting Snapchat usage, and 48% reporting TikTok usage in 2021 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). HVSM is defined as social media platforms that mainly focus on sharing user-generated visual content, such as images and short videos, and allow the use of filters to modify and improve the content before it is uploaded (Marengo et al., 2018).

HVSM platforms granted users the ability to create and engage with types of content that were unavailable before. Selfies—a self-portrait photograph of oneself or of oneself with others, usually held at arm’s length—and stories—visuals capturing moments of daily life that disappear after a 24-hour time frame—are examples of content types that were unavailable in text-based platforms (McCrory et al., 2020). These new tools afforded novel ways of engaging with social media, and with them, new calls for research on how they affected aspects of their users’ well-being, including body image.

### **Current Literature on the Effects of Social Media on Body Image**

Meta-analysis of studies examining the association between social media usage and body image disturbance indicate a small, positive relationship between these constructs (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). In addition, moderator analyses of the data suggest that factors such as types of social media usage, dimensions of body image, age, and country grouping can all serve as moderators of the relationship between social media usage and body image disturbance (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). For example, larger effect sizes were obtained for studies investigating body



image and *appearance-focused* social media use compared to those investigating *general* social media usage (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). This suggests that the manner in which a user engages with their social media may influence the degree of body image disturbance they may experience. Limitations noted in these analyses include homogeneity of social media platform studied (mostly Facebook), lack of differentiating between active versus passive social media usage, and underrepresentation of male participants (McCrory et al., 2020; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

### **Gaps in the Research**

The current body of literature on the relationship between social media usage and body image disturbance has overall found statistically significant, albeit small, positive relationships. Mixed findings and weak effect sizes continue to be prevalent in social media research, making it difficult for researchers to draw meaningful conclusions in understanding *how* social media affects body image. A common thread underlying recommendations for future research is to distinguish types of social media studied, specify the activities and forms of engagement by users on social media platforms, and broaden the scope of research to include newer social media platforms and participants from underrepresented groups.

### **HVSM vs. Text-Based**

Social media research has historically lumped together HVSM and text-based social media under a single umbrella of *social media* in their studies. The issue is that users can access such widely different forms of content depending on the type of social media platform used. Fardouly & Vartanian's (2016) findings that *appearance-focused* social media usage resulted in a larger effect size of body image disturbance than *general* social media usage is illustrative of the unique impact an HVSM platform can have over one that is text-based. Thus, attempting to obtain valid and generalizable findings under the broad category of social media without

distinguishing the types of social media platforms used by participants is a futile effort. Comparing research on HVSM versus text-based platforms, McCrory and colleagues (2020) found that research into the former has lagged behind analysis of the latter. Given that the top five most used platforms by the age group using social media the most are all HVSM platforms, this is problematic (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

### **Specific vs. General Platforms**

Research focusing solely on HVSM platforms still runs into problems of heterogeneity. McCrory and colleagues (2020) pointed out that much of HVSM literature focused on HVSM platforms *in general* and that little is known as to individual relationships of particular HVSM platforms. While HVSM platforms consists of similar types of content, the ways in which users interface and engage with this content are drastically different. Facebook, for example, is considered by researchers as a *crossover* platform because users engage with large amounts of both text-based and visual-based content (McCrory et al., 2020). By contrast, Instagram is predominantly visual based to a far greater degree than Facebook. While other popular HVSM platforms like Snapchat and TikTok share similarities to Instagram, they offer ways of engagement unique to their specific platform. Given the differences between these HVSM platforms, trying to interpret findings from studies that lump them together can be difficult.

### **Types of Engagement**

The diverse ways that users can engage in content on a specific platform has not been explored sufficiently in social media research for valid and reliable conclusions to be drawn. Ziv and Kiasi (2016), for example, conducted a study about the “depth of Facebook engagement” as a statistically significant predictor of the relationship between Facebook use and psychological well-being. Engagement was comprised by the actions of *sharing* content created by others and

*commenting* on others' content. However, there are more ways of engaging with content on Facebook, such as creating content and posting images for others to see. Beyond Facebook, other HVSM platforms offer additional ways of content engagement in the form of stories, and image editing.

Problematic media use and time spent on social media platforms are common measures of social media usage in extant research (Prinstein et al., 2020; Saiphoo et al., 2020; Valkenburg, 2022). There is a lack of homogeneity in how problematic social media usage has been operationalized in the research. Studies attempting to capture this construct have utilized scales that measure Facebook dependency, Facebook addiction, and general social media addiction (Saiphoo et al., 2020). Given the platform-specific nature of those scales, and the lack of evidence that time spent on social media is a useful predictor of social media outcomes, the validity of these methods to measure problematic social media usage is questionable (Prinstein et al., 2020; Saiphoo et al., 2020; Valkenburg, 2022). These research methods do not distinguish distinct types of engagement on a specific platform or how much time is spent on any type.

Future exploration into the similarities and differences in how different forms of engagement on a platform may influence a user's experience can shed light on the mechanisms by which HVSM platforms affect individuals. This is salient to researchers due to the enduring popularity of HVSM platforms. The rise of TikTok, an HVSM platform created as recently as 2018, illustrates the dynamic nature of the HVSM landscape. By 2021, it was reportedly used by almost half of all 18–to–29 year-olds in the US (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Research that focuses on types of HVSM engagement may be generalizable to future HVSM platforms.

## **Additional Issues**

Most social media research has historically focused solely on Facebook and predominantly studied female participants (McCrorry et al., 2020). While Facebook remains an extremely popular social media platform, newer platforms have emerged, such as Snapchat and Instagram. These platforms have become just as popular, or in the case of the latter, surpassed it (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Additionally, a scoping review of HVSM literature found that 32% of studies focused exclusively on female participants while the rest included both male and female participants (McCrorry et al., 2020). No HVSM studies exclusively focusing on males were identified. While a greater percentage of women report using HVSM platforms than men in the United States, the percentage of men who use HVSM platforms is notable (e.g., 61% use Facebook, 36% use Instagram, 22% use Snapchat) (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Any effort to research the effects of social media must focus on the platforms that users are most likely to be interacting with and include a representative demographic in their research samples.

The same scoping review of HVSM literature found that quantitative methods predominate research (McCrorry et al., 2020). While quantitative methods such as surveys and scales give breadth to findings, depth and context are lacking without a stronger qualitative base. Qualitative methodologies can shed insight into the lived experiences and emotional impacts of HVSM, distinguishing between specific platforms and differing forms of engagement. They can offer theoretical insight into how and why HVSM, and forms of engagement on HVSM, lead to specific emotional outcomes.

### **HVSM and the Body Image of Emerging Adult Men**

Although the study of HVSM's effects on the body image of emerging adult men is under-studied compared to emerging adult women (Hobza et al., 2007; Lonergan et al., 2021; Pagano et al., 2021), there are findings unique to the experiences of emerging adult men within

the current body of HVSM research. Regarding general trends in social media usage, emerging adult men are more likely to use the platforms YouTube, Twitch, and Reddit compared to emerging adult women (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In fact, men ages 18–to–24 comprise the demographic that uses YouTube the most (Vingilis et al., 2017). Thirty-one percent of teenage males in the United States report that they spend too much time on social media and 49% report that it would be difficult to give up using social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

Understanding the different ways emerging adult men use social media than emerging adult women can help guide future research focusing on this specific demographic. The following is a summary of the current research findings of HVSM on the body image of emerging adult men. It is important to note that none of the studies cited in the rest of this chapter exclusively researched heterosexual, cisgender men.

### **Objectification Theory**

The majority of social media research focused on emerging adult men's well-being examines body image. In general, research examining the association between social media usage and body image disturbance indicates a small, positive relationship for both men and women (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Some of these effects can be explained by objectification theory, developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) initially to help understand the psychological and physical consequences faced by women in a culture where they are seen as objects for the viewing pleasure of others. This influences women to engage in the act of self-objectification: the degree to which a person internalizes a third-person perspective of themselves and becomes preoccupied with how they appear to peers (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Rounsefell et al., 2020).

Researchers have applied objectification theory to the study of how social media influences male body image. Similar to the cultural system promoting women as viewing objects, men are increasingly subjected to one that promotes a mesomorphic body type: a well-developed chest and shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist and hips (Morrison et al., 2003; Seekis et al., 2021). The mesomorphic body type represents characteristics synonymous with hegemonic notions of masculinity, such as power, dominance, strength, competitiveness, and success (Morrison et al., 2003). A study of undergraduate men found that self-objectification was positively correlated with the desire for a significantly more muscular body shape (Wagner Oehlhof et al., 2009). This illustrates the application of objectification theory to men, that they are influenced to engage in self-objectification and internalize a third-person perspective of themselves in relation to the mesomorphic body type (Rounsefell et al., 2020; Seekis et al., 2021).

Social media provides an opportunity for individuals to engage in self-objectification: the internalization of a third-person perspective of self and preoccupation with how their appearance is perceived by peers. An example of a self-objectifying activity on HVSM is uploading photos of oneself and inviting comments and reactions from others. Research on social media engagement and self-objectification in emerging adult men has provided evidence for this relationship. For example, one study found that investment in, and passive usage of Facebook by undergraduate men were positively associated with objectified body consciousness (Manago et al., 2015). Additional studies have found that men aged 15–25 show concern about how their sexually alluring self-photographs will be evaluated by others (Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010).

Long-term self-objectification is a mediator in the development of body dissatisfaction and can lead to body shame, body surveillance, appearance anxiety, internalization of appearance

ideals, and increased risk of disordered eating (Rounsefell et al., 2020). For college-aged men, reassurance seeking behaviors on Facebook were associated with higher body dissatisfaction and disordered food choices, including eating restraint (Rounsefell et al., 2020). Higher levels of photo investment with selfies and photo manipulation, both forms of self-objectification, were positively associated with body dissatisfaction in young men (Lonergan et al., 2019). Evidently, HVSM platforms can potentially harm young men's body image and overall well-being through the risks of engaging in self-objectifying behavior.

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is another lens that may explain associations between social media usage and body image disturbance. This theory posits that humans have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by discerning similarities and differences between one another. Men may experience negative affect when perceiving the physical qualities of others as superior (i.e., upward comparisons) (Pila et al., 2014). Alternatively, a boost in self-esteem may occur when attributes of others are seen as inferior (i.e., downward comparisons) (Pagano et al., 2021).

Existing research has found harmful effects on men's body image evaluations for upward comparisons of physical appearance (Schaefer & Thompson, 2018). Men tend to engage in upward social comparison with appearance-related content seen on digital media (i.e., television, social media, etc.) that is associated with increased pressure to engage in excessive weightlifting routines or use performance enhancing drugs (Pagano et al., 2021). Notably, men engaging in upward comparison with media influences reported worse impacts on body image compared to the influence of peers or friends they shared physical presence with (Pagano et al., 2021).

Social comparison is one psychological process that interacts with another, the internalization of body ideals, to influence men's body image. Multiple studies have demonstrated the positive association between social comparison and internalization processes in men and their correlation with body dissatisfaction, higher drive for muscularity, and disordered eating practices (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). Researchers theorize information obtained through social comparison may influence the degree to which men internalize body ideals (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009).

### ***Fitspiration***

The prevalence of appearance ideals on HVSM, such as *Fitspiration*, promote the mesomorphic body type and leads to body image disturbance for emerging adult men (Easton et al., 2018; Rounsefell et al., 2020). *Fitspiration* refers to HVSM content consisting of inspirational fitness images (Easton et al., 2018; Rounsefell et al., 2020). *Fitspiration* content targeted at emerging adult men specifically focuses on images of muscularity and education on how to increase muscle mass (Easton et al., 2018). A third of *Fitspiration* images on Instagram depict mesomorphic male bodies sometimes in a sexualized manner (Gültzow et al., 2020). Studies have shown that emerging adult men experience negative emotions associated with failing to fulfill appearance-based expectations generated by *Fitspiration* content (Easton et al., 2018). These effects, and those of self-objectification and social comparison described above, show how different forms of engagement by young men on HVSM can cause body image disturbances. Lastly, researchers suggest that due to gender norms about masculinity, men may be reluctant to express their feelings about how HVSM engagement affects their body image (Easton et al., 2018). Thus, experiences of body image disturbance in emerging adult men caused by HVSM engagement may be under-reported.



## **Gay, Bisexual, and other Men who have Sex with Men**

There are unique considerations for gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) regarding experiences of body image and social media usage. In general, GBMSM report higher body dissatisfaction and are more likely to report dissatisfaction with muscle tone and body size in comparison to heterosexual men (Frederick & Essayli, 2016; Marino Carper et al., 2010). One possible explanation for this effect is that the importance of being attractive to men is equally important to GBMSM as heterosexual women. Thus, GBMSM may internalize the male gaze in a similar manner to heterosexual women which is known to trigger body image concerns (Basabas et al., 2019). Additionally, men identifying as homosexual report higher social comparison frequency, a greater fixation with leanness, and a desire for lower body mass index (BMI) compared to heterosexual men (Tylka & Andorka, 2012).

GBMSM display unique patterns and motivations for HVSM use that differ from heterosexual men and stem from their collective history of cultural marginalization and systemic persecution (Filice et al., 2020). GBMSM utilize specific HVSM platforms designed to connect users for chat, dating, or sex while minimizing the risk of experiencing homophobic harassment or violence (Filice et al., 2020). Some of these platforms target specific communities, identities, and sexual interests among GBMSM (e.g., Grindr, Jack'd, Scruff, GROWLr, and Recon).

Research regarding how HVSM platforms influence GBMSM's body image reflects these unique considerations compared to heterosexual men. Examples of this are research findings that objectification experiences on dating apps were negatively related to gay men's self-esteem, that usage of HVSM was related to muscularity dissatisfaction and higher levels of eating disorder symptoms for GBMSM, and the identification of internalized homophobia by GBMSM as a risk factor for developing body image concerns and susceptibility factor to

negative effects of HVSM (Breslow et al., 2020; Filice et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018). While cisgender heterosexual men are a hegemonically dominant group compared to GBMSM, they are understudied regarding the examination of their unique experiences of body image as it relates to HVSM usage.

### **The Proposed Study**

Researchers have studied social media for the last twenty years to understand its effects on individuals and measures of well-being, such as body image. However, findings have been inconclusive due to issues related to methodology amidst a rapidly changing social media landscape as described previously. Greater than half of all Americans are using social media daily and its popularity is rising with each successive generation (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Existing research, such as the findings about Instagram on teenage girls, clearly demonstrate a serious effect of social media on its users. The mechanisms by which social media affects its users may be better understood by addressing methodology issues such as not differentiating between text-based and highly visual social media or utilizing qualitative research methods. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men, an understudied demographic in the domain of social media and body image research, adds breadth to understanding any unique considerations experienced by this large population of social media users. The grand question of how exactly social media affects body image cannot be understood until these mechanisms are elucidated, and its users and platforms properly represented in the literature.

The present study examined how different forms of engagement on HVSM platforms influence the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. The present study addresses current gaps in HVSM research methodology by adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach, focusing exclusively on the experiences of cisgender heterosexual emerging

adult men, distinguishing between specific HVSM platforms, and distinguishing between specific types of engagement on these HVSM platforms. The aim of these methodological considerations was to elucidate the mechanisms by which social media influences users' body image to better understand the *how* and *why* behind the historically mixed findings found in social media research. The findings of the present study addresses the gap in social media and body image research by providing insight into a population comprising a large share of HVSM users who remain understudied: cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. Additionally, information gleaned about forms of engagement on HVSM and their effects on body image can be generalizable towards research on HVSM platforms yet to be developed.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the present study aimed to address the research question of how HVSM affects the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. Additionally, considerations accounting for methodological gaps identified in previous HVSM studies are detailed, such as utilization of a qualitative research methodology and inquiry into types of engagement on HVSM platforms. The following chapter describes the rationale for constructivist grounded theory methodology and outlines the procedure and methods for how the study was executed.

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a popular qualitative research methodology aiming to construct an explanatory theory for phenomena that is not well understood (Chun Tie et al., 2019). As its name suggests, the theory produced is grounded in the data and thus relies on an inductive approach. Whereas quantitative research is deductive and aims to test pre-existing theories, grounded theory is inductive and focuses on generating theoretical ideas from the data (Gibbs, 2012). Gurd (2008) suggests that grounded theory is best suited for “questions of process,” in other words, suitable for questions of *how* rather than *why*. Given that the present study aims to explain how the mechanisms behind HVSM engagement influence young men’s well-being, this methodology is appropriate.

### History

Since its development by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, grounded theory has branched into different genres based on various philosophical positions researchers have assumed. The three main genres of grounded theory are traditional, evolved, and constructivist (Mills et al., 2014). Each genre is an extension of variations from the original grounded theory methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss. These genres differ in the philosophical position of the

researcher in the study, data generation and collection, and data analysis. The following discussion is a brief history of grounded theory and explanation for why constructivist grounded theory is an appropriate qualitative research methodology for the present study.

Glaser and Strauss were credited as the founders of grounded theory when they published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967). This seminal work explained an inductive process of data generation, challenging the traditional method of examining theory through deductive testing (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This methodology was a departure from the predominant view that quantitative methodology was the only valid way to conduct research (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Grounded theory, as initially developed by Glaser and Strauss, is referred to as *traditional* grounded theory, where the researcher conducts the study without any preconceived notions or data and insists on a fundamental set of procedures for data analysis and coding (Mills et al., 2014).

Glaser and Strauss' viewpoints diverged when Strauss published *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990). In this text, Strauss and Juliet Corbin incorporated symbolic interactionism in their research philosophy behind the usage of grounded theory techniques. *Symbolic interactionism* is a perspective from the philosophy of pragmatism, where meaning is constructed by the symbolic meaning people ascribe to practical applications and interactions (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Thus, objective reality can have multiple natures and is open to different interpretations (Mills et al., 2014). Strauss and Corbin's ideas are referred to as *evolved* grounded theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2014). This differed from Glaser's original ideas in that he believed in the existence of an objective reality that, given time and the correct application of grounded theory techniques, would emerge from the data (Mills et al., 2014). An evolved grounded theorist recognizes the need to account for themselves

as influencing the use of grounded theory methods whereas a traditional grounded theorist sees themselves as separate from the usage of grounded theory techniques (Mills et al., 2014).

Charmaz, a student of Strauss and Glaser, is credited with the development of the next stage of grounded theory known as *constructivist* grounded theory (Mills et al., 2014). The methodological underpinnings of constructivist grounded theory focuses on how individual participants construct meaning in relation to the area of inquiry (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2014). Constructivist grounded theory accepts the notion of multiple realities, emphasizes reflexivity, and allows researchers to incorporate prior knowledge in the development of new theories (Mills et al., 2014). Charmaz (2006) conceptualized the researcher as implicit in the research process, co-constructing experience and meaning with research participants. Rather than assuming that the theory solely emerges from the data, constructivist grounded theorists believe researchers construct the analysis of the data and the categories that eventually make up the grounded theory (Mills et al., 2014). Thus, researcher reflexivity is of utmost importance while also considering the individual viewpoints of participants.

The present study utilized the constructivist position of grounded theory. Data interpretation and analysis, as well as theory development, incorporated the findings of previous literature of HVSM's effect on body image. Furthermore, the researcher's philosophical position rejects the notion of a single objective reality and embraces a relative interpretation of reality shaped by contextual factors that can vary across individuals. Thus, it is deemed impossible for the researcher to disregard his own experiences with HVSM in engaging with participants and in data interpretation. In line with the assumptions of constructivist grounded theory, the researcher is seen as implicit in the research process and therefore reflexivity is necessary to account for it in all stages of the research.

## **Constructivist Grounded Theory Techniques**

The various genres of grounded theory utilize techniques that may appear similar but differ in utility based on the researcher's philosophical position. The following is a brief explanation on the constructivist grounded theory techniques that were utilized in this study (Charmaz, 2006; Chun Tie et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2014).

### ***Generating and Collecting Data***

Sources of data in grounded theory include “focus groups, questionnaires, surveys, transcripts, letters, government reports, documents, grey literature, music, artefacts, videos, blogs, and memos” (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 4). In this study, the researcher derived data from conducting individual interviews and generating transcripts of them to analyze.

### ***Purposive Sampling***

Purposive sampling provides the initial data analyzed by the researcher. This data is collected, coded, and analyzed before further data collection and generation is undertaken. In the present study, purposive sampling began with the seven recruited participants and their individual interviews. The researcher coded and started the categorization process of the transcripts generated from these interviews.

### ***Theoretical Sampling***

Theoretical sampling commences from the codes and categories developed from the initial data set obtained from purposive sampling. Theoretical sampling is used to follow clues from the analysis, fill gaps in knowledge, clarify uncertainties, examine hunches, and test interpretations over the progression of the study.

## ***Coding***

Coding is an analytic process used to identify concepts, similarities, and conceptual reoccurrences in data. It is the link between data and developing a theory that explains the data. Constructivist grounded theory describes coding in a progressive series of stages: initial, focused, and theoretical.

Initial coding begins with the first data generated or collected and involves the fracturing of this data into smaller segments for the purpose of comparison with other data segments from the same or different data sources. Coding progresses from initial to focused as categories start to take shape.

Focused coding furthers theory generation through the development of categories and the identification of relationships between categories as analysis progresses. This stage progresses as the researcher looks to obtain saturation: the point at which theoretical sampling no longer adds material to existing theoretical categories, and the categories are sufficiently explained.

Final theoretical integration occurs in the theoretical coding stage. Categories are presented as a set of interrelated concepts and explanatory statements are used to detail the relationship between them and a central core category. It is the final, culminating stage towards achieving a grounded theory.

## ***Constant Comparative Analysis***

Constant comparative analysis is an analytical process used for coding and category development. It refers to the comparison of codes and eventual naming of categories derived from the codes. New data is compared to data obtained earlier in an iterative, inductive process. Chun Tie and colleagues (2019) describe constant comparative analysis as helping to find



consistencies and differences, with the aim of “continually refining concepts and theoretically relevant categories.”

### ***Memoing***

Memo writing is an analytic process consisting of reflective, interpretive pieces that build a historic audit trail to document events, ideas, and the thought processes of the researcher throughout the research process. They detail why and how decisions were made related to sampling, coding, and categorizing. Memos are informal analytic notes about the data and the theoretical connections between the categories. This is a crucial, reflexive component of constructivist grounded theory to account for the role of the researcher throughout the research process.

### ***Theoretical Sensitivity***

Theoretical sensitivity is the ability of the researcher to know when they have identified a data segment important to the developing theory. It is shaped by the researcher’s methodological philosophy and founded in the researcher’s experience. Theoretical sensitivity informs what the researcher sees in the data, how it is analyzed, and the subsequent direction that is followed in response to the analysis. This encompasses the entire research process.

## **Procedure**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of cisgender heterosexual men ages 18–25 residing in the United States who were fluent in English. Residents outside of the United States and participants who were not fluent in English were excluded because English is the primary language of the researcher and the HVSM platforms being studied were chosen based on usage statistics by American emerging adults.

Prospective participants completed a survey (see Appendix B) providing them with the informed consent (see Appendix A) for the present study and a demographic questionnaire asking for gender, sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, residency in the United States, and English fluency. Additionally, they were asked to choose which HVSM platforms they use among the five most popular HVSM platforms used by young adults in the United States: YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok, respectively (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). This survey was on *Google Forms*, an online survey platform. All data derived from *Google Forms* was stored on a secure, HIPAA compliant version of *Google Drive*, an online storage platform, and accessible only to the principal researcher.

Participants selected a time interval (15, 30, 45, and 60+ minutes) best describing the amount of time spent on each HVSM platform they endorsed. The average time spent on the above HVSM platforms by American adults in 2022 are as follows: YouTube: 45 minutes, Instagram: 30 minutes, Facebook: 30 minutes, Snapchat: 30 minutes, and TikTok: 45 minutes (Lebow, 2022). Participants were included in the study only if they spent minimally the average amount of time on one or more HVSM platforms. Participants meeting the inclusion criteria were asked to provide their contact information for the primary investigator to schedule an interview.

These were the inclusion and exclusion criteria for purposive (initial) sampling. As themes emerged through data analysis, researchers added criteria for inclusion to explore these themes further until saturation. This theoretical sampling process helped follow clues from data analysis, fill gaps in knowledge, clarify any uncertainties, examine hunches by the researcher, and test interpretations. In the present study, data from the initial sample of participants was sufficient for saturation and thus, additional theoretical sampling was not necessary.

## Recruitment

Participants were recruited through an electronic flyer (see Appendix C) distributed via email to listservs and posted to social media pages. Potential participants were informed of the inclusion criteria in the flyer. The flyer also informed participants that they will be entered into a raffle for a \$100 Amazon gift card for their participation in the proposed study.

Recruitment occurred from April 2023 to October 2023. Of the 56 total respondents to the eligibility survey, 21 respondents did not meet inclusion criteria. Of the remaining respondents, 28 of them did not proceed with the study due to ceasing communication with the researcher. Seven participants proceeded with returning a signed informed consent form, participating in a virtual interview, and subsequently entered into the online raffle. Table 3.1 shows the demographic data collected from the participants.

**Table 3.1**

*Participant Demographic and HVSM Data*

ID	Race & Ethnicity	Education	Annual Income	Employment	HVSM Platforms Endorsed	State of Residence
1	Black	Grade 12/GED	\$100,000 - \$150,000	Student	YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Tiktok	Georgia
2	Chinese	College 4+ years	\$50,000 - \$60,000	Employed for wages	YouTube	Washington
3	White	College 4+ years	\$100,000 - \$150,000	Employed for wages	TikTok, Snapchat	Washington
4	Black	College 1-3 years	\$30,000 - \$40,000	Self-Employed	Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat	New Jersey
5	White	College 4+ years	\$150,000 - \$200,000	Employed for wages	YouTube, Instagram	California
6	White	Grade 12 or GED	\$20,000 - \$30,000	Employed for wages	YouTube, Instagram	Texas

7	South Asian	College 4+ years	\$150,000 - \$200,000	Employed for wages	YouTube, Instagram, Facebook	New York
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### Semi-Structured Interviews

Seven participants met with the researcher for a 45-minute virtual semi-structured interview taking place over a HIPAA compliant version of *Google Meet*, an online video-conferencing platform. Participants were informed that the audio of the interviews would be recorded in the informed consent section of the survey and also reminded at the start of the interview. Interview audio recordings were stored in a HIPAA compliant version of *Google Drive*. Participant data was viewed only on the principal researcher's personal computer, which was password protected with two-factor authentication. Files with identifying information were stored in a password protected folder on the personal computer's hard drive.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of cordial, open conversations about how participants' HVSM usage influences their body image. Researchers asked prompting questions related to body image and engagement on specific HVSM platforms (e.g., "What aspect of TikTok do you find the most impacting on your feelings about the way you look?"), as well as follow-up questions (e.g., "what did you mean by that?", "can you say more about that?") when deemed appropriate. While questions focused on specific platforms endorsed by participants, the researcher noted when participants spontaneously brought up experiences or anecdotes about using other HVSM platforms. After the interview, the researcher thanked the participants and informed them of their entry into a raffle for a \$100 Amazon gift card. All interviews were conducted by Isaac Cheng. See Appendix D for a list of questions and prompts.

## Initial Coding

Transcripts of the interview recordings were generated using *Temi* (<https://www.temi.com>), an audio-to-text speech recognition software. Files uploaded to *Temi* are securely stored and transmitted using TLS 1.2 encryption. Names of participants and any other identifying information were manually edited out of the transcripts and replaced with non-identifying labels (e.g., “Person A”). Researchers used *NVivo*, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to assist with coding and data analysis. *NVivo* allowed for the storage and organization of transcripts and provided tools for creating and managing codes and categories.

Initial coding involved the researcher parsing through interview transcripts to fracture the data into smaller segments by identifying data points and concepts deemed relevant based on theoretical sensitivity. After multiple interviews were transcribed and parsed through for initial coding, data points were compared across the different transcripts and the researcher began to sort categories.

## Data Analysis: Focused Coding → Theoretical Coding → Grounded Theory

The grounded theory techniques of theoretical sensitivity, constant comparison, and memoing occurred throughout the processes of data collection, coding, and data analysis. The researcher’s theoretical sensitivity dictated which data points were relevant to the developing theory. Under the constructivist genre of grounded theory methodology, the researcher incorporated his own experiences with HVSM and prior knowledge from the literature on HVSM and body image into his theoretical sensitivity. The researcher employed constant comparison by repeatedly going through previous transcripts and codes to revise, edit, and re-analyze as new insights emerged from the data over the course of data analysis. The

researcher engaged in memoing throughout the entire research process to organize ideas, track the development of insights, keep a record of developments and changes, and engage in reflexive examination of his own influence on the research. Close attention to proper utilization of these grounded theory techniques enhances fidelity to the constructivist grounded theory methodology.

Data analysis in constructivist grounded theory is an iterative process with a cyclical nature that unfolds over the stages of coding. As transcripts were coded in initial coding, categories emerged from constant comparison across different transcripts. Each time a new interview occurred and was transcribed, codes and categories identified from previous transcripts were compared to those previously identified to refine, challenge, or demonstrate consistency in them. Saturation was reached when new categories showed consistency and no longer challenged or refined the developing theory. The grounded theory was constructed by establishing the relationships between the categories that emerged from the data analysis.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The present study utilized constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) to explore the research question of how different forms of engagement on HVSM platforms influence the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews were transcribed and coded using constructivist grounded theory methodology to develop a grounded theory illustrating a mechanism by which engagement with HVSM by cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men influences their body image. The methodology for reporting findings was based upon the researcher's theoretical sensitivity for material related to HVSM influences on body image and themes reported by at least two participants. This chapter discusses the findings from data analysis of the transcripts. Namely, the identified categories and subcategories, the relationship between these categories, and the emergent grounded theory of how HVSM engagement by heterosexual, emerging adult men influences their body image.

### Endorsed Platforms

Overall, the most popular platforms endorsed by participants on their demographic questionnaire were YouTube and Instagram (n = 5). The least popular was Tiktok (n = 2). Notably, every participant commented, in an unsolicited manner, on at least one platform among those examined in the present study that they did not initially endorse in their demographic survey. The researcher included this data in his analysis and formation of categories and subcategories related to these HVSM platforms.

The intensity of the impact that each HVSM platform had on their body image varied among participants. Every platform was described as having a high impact by at least one participant and low impact by at least one participant. Notably, Instagram was the platform endorsed as having a high impact by the greatest number of participants (n = 4) and Facebook

was the platform endorsed as having no impact by the greatest number of participants ( $n = 2$ ).

Participant 7's comments about Instagram reflected the general sentiment from other participants

about its high impact on body image:

Instagram, you can explore people's pages and look at their images and take time on each image to look at people and all of their intricacies of their body they're showing or their face, and the way it recommends people's profiles and influencers, I think is just different than watching videos. But the fact that there's still images on it, it adds a new element to that insecurity and stuff that I think puts it as number one for sure.



## The Model

**Figure 4.1**

*Model of How HVSM Engagement Influences the Body Image of Cisgender Heterosexual Emerging Adult Men*

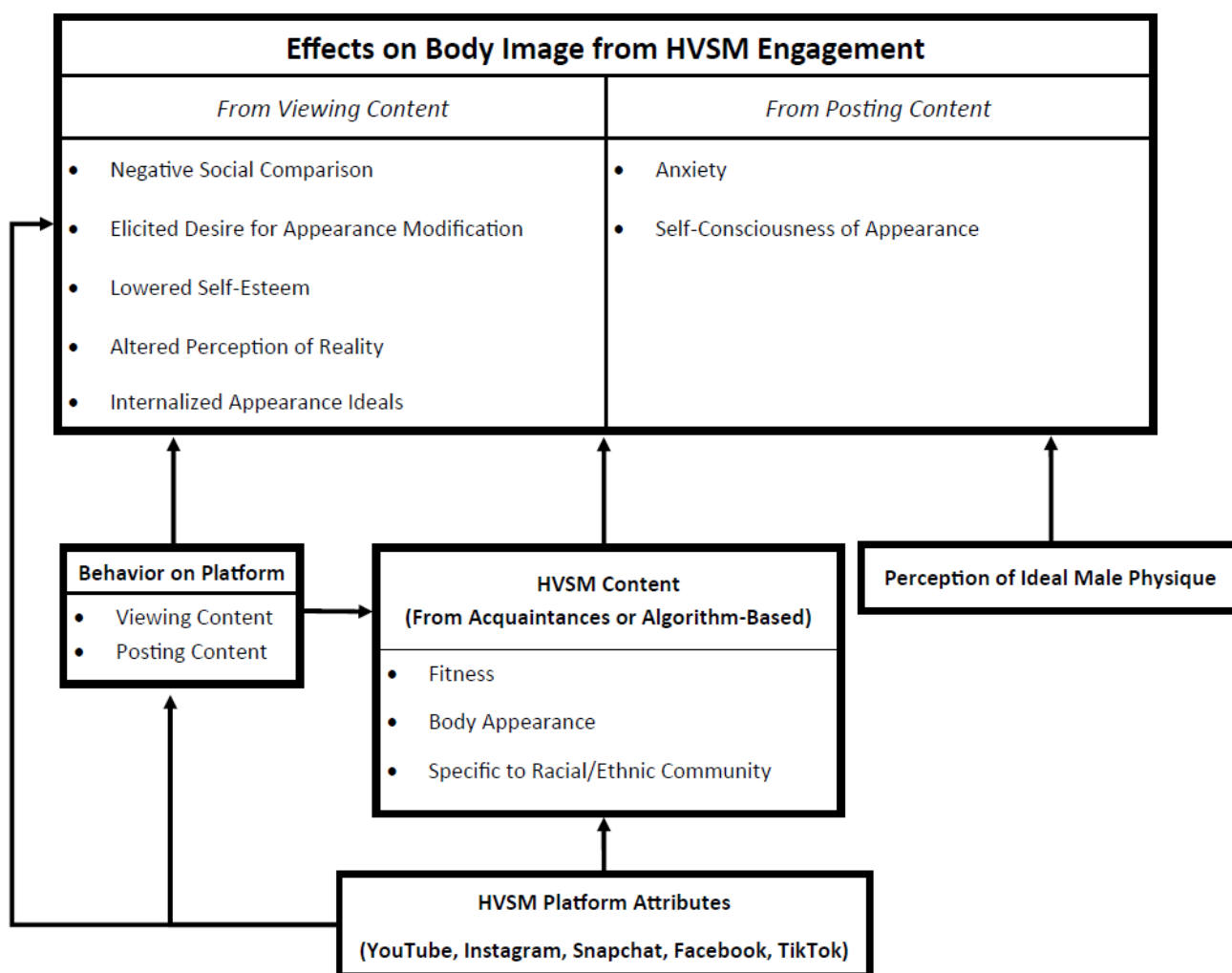


Figure 4.1 represents the Model of How HVSM Engagement Influences the Body Image of Cisgender Heterosexual Emerging Adult Men (hereby referred to as, “The Model”). The Model represents a theory on how four different categories (*HVSM Platform Attributes*, *HVSM Content*, *Behavior on Platform*, and *Perception of Ideal Male Physique*) influence the core category of *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement* for the studied demographic of men.

Participants noted differing effects on body image from two different forms of engagement on HVSM platforms: *viewing content* and *posting content*. The various effects on body image attributed to each form of engagement are shown in The Model. Lastly, The Model was theorized with a inductive approach in mind. *HVSM Platform Attributes* was a category that not only had a direct influence on *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*, but it shaped other categories that also had a direct influence (*Behavior on Platform* and *HVSM Content*). The following is a discussion on each category, their respective subcategories, and the relationship between them.

### **HVSM Platform Attributes**

*HVSM Platform Attributes* refers to the various qualities attributed by participants to each of the HVSM platforms examined in the present study (i.e., YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok). A user's behavior, and the content they engage with, may differ based on which HVSM platform they use. This is represented on The Model by the two arrows connecting the category of *HVSM Platform Attributes* to the categories of *HVSM Content (From Acquaintances or Algorithm-Based)* and *Behavior on Platform*. These categories directly influenced the core category *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*. Table 5.1 illustrates examples of participant statements attributing various qualities to the studied HVSM platforms.

**Table 5.1***Examples of HVSM Platform Attributes*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	<p>“[I’m] influenced by YouTube a lot in terms of trying to get fit”</p> <p>“Snapchat has had a huge impact on my body”</p> <p>“People are intimidated by Instagram. I'm not going to lie. People are intimidated by Instagram”</p> <p>“I think basically my Snapchat gets to see a more personal side of me that most platforms don't get to see.”</p>
Participant 2	<p>“I think with YouTube, I definitely do see a trend where I feel like people that supposedly fit the beauty standards or fit what an ideal body image looks like. I feel like people like that are definitely more comfortable with what they put out there, and I think they would definitely be more prone to showing their face or showing their body or whatnot, whether part of it is, if it's part of their content that's their brand.”</p>
Participant 3	<p>“Instagram is a little bit like LinkedIn or Facebook where they're a little bit classy where you might want to kind of watch what you post”</p> <p>“Instagram a little bit more so too, just because a little bit more public looking I feel like than Snapchat because a lot of those pages and things are public versus Snapchat”</p> <p>“I think most of my friends and other things I'd see on Snapchat, it was kind of just for fun and anything goes and kind of low stakes.”</p> <p>“I think part of it too is just the aspect of Snapchat where everything's temporary. If you post a story, it goes away in a day, or if you send someone a message, it disappears. So maybe more of just that aspect is the, oh, if I feel bad about posting this, at least it goes away in a day and nobody could find it again versus other things we have to manually get rid of it if you wanted to,”</p>
Participant 5	<p>“Facebook has quite an influence on my perception and my body”</p> <p>“TikTok is very addictive”</p>
Participant 6	<p>“I think it's pretty unique to Snapchat, but I think it's got a culture of being much more like you can be more of a degenerate now because most of it gets erased”</p>

Participant	Examples
Participant 7	“Instagram, you can explore people's pages and look at their images and take time on each image to look at people and all of their intricacies of their body they're showing or their face, and the way it recommends people's profiles and influencers, I think is just different than watching videos. But the fact that there's still images on it, it adds a new element”

Participants described how attributes of the various HVSM platforms influence their behavior on them. For example, Snapchat was described as a platform that feels easier to post videos and photos on because of the temporary nature of content (e.g., typically can only be viewed once before it disappears or expires after a day) and less pressure compared to Instagram, which was described by participants as “intimidating” to post on. Participant 3 described this effect:

I think part of it too is just the aspect of Snapchat where everything's temporary. If you post a story, it goes away in a day, or if you send someone a message, it disappears. So maybe more of just that aspect is the, oh, if I feel bad about posting this, at least it goes away in a day, and nobody could find it again versus other things we have to manually get rid of it if you wanted to.

The terms “low stakes” and “low pressure” were used by other participants when describing how the temporary nature of content shared on Snapchat makes it easier to post. Another example of HVSM attributes influencing behavior is how participants identified TikTok as “addictive,” suggesting that increased time spent viewing content might be more likely on this HVSM platform relative to others.

Participants described how attributes of the various HVSM platforms influence the type of HVSM content they see. For example, YouTube was described as a platform where content creators whose appearance fit modern beauty standards would be more likely to gain popularity and to appear, via YouTube’s recommendation algorithm, to other users. Regarding a YouTube content creator’s beauty standard congruent appearance, Participant 4 mused, “that's probably

one of the reasons why they have a platform, and people like looking at good looking people, so they get boosted a little bit.”

Furthermore, data analysis found that *HVSM Platform Attributes* exert their own direct effect on the core category. This is represented on The Model by the arrow connecting the category of *HVSM Platform Attributes* to the core category of *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*. Content similar in substance may have differing effects depending on which HVSM platform it is viewed on. For example, participants described a difference in how content is perceived based on whether it was viewed on Snapchat or Instagram. Snapchat was described as capturing a comparatively authentic glimpse of “day-to-day” life for a *personal* audience, whereas Instagram was described as “highly curated” and to portray a type of “lifestyle” to a *public* audience. Perspectives by Participant 3 and Participant 1 describe this dynamic. Participant 3 stated, “Snapchat was like everybody was partying and going to bars and things like that ... no one's going to judge you for going to the bar or things” and Participant 1 stated, “there is this feeling that the things that are on Instagram are viewed by a higher caliber of people.” These ideas extend to participants’ experiences of effects on body image and this contrast is explored further in the discussion of the sub-category *Altered Perception of Reality* within the core category of *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*.

### **HVSM Content (From Acquaintances or Algorithm-Based)**

*HVSM Content (From Acquaintances or Algorithm-Based)* refers to participant descriptions of content seen on HVSM platforms that influenced their body image. The name of this category recognizes the fact that content seen on users’ HVSM platform feeds is derived from the social media posts of acquaintances *and* curated by content recommendation algorithms (Narayanan, 2023). Through analysis of responses to interview prompts explicitly asking for this

information (see Appendix D), and spontaneous reporting of experiences with certain types of HVSM content, three sub-categories of HVSM content that influenced multiple participants' body image were identified: *Fitness*, *Body Image*, and content *Specific to Racial/Ethnic Community*. The following is a discussion of which specific aspects of these sub-categories were frequently mentioned by participants as affecting their body image. The actual effects on body image will be detailed in the discussion of the core category: *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*. Table 5.2 illustrates examples of participant references to HVSM content that influenced their body image.

**Table 5.2***Examples of HVSM Content (From Acquaintances or Algorithm-Based)*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	<p data-bbox="423 390 1403 457">“It's how their body looks, how their body looks. Sometimes it's about how much they can do with their body”</p> <p data-bbox="423 474 1403 758">“My Gym Bros, my close friends, they all posting on Snapchat, and I'm like, sometimes I kind see this guy and I'm like, yo, I want to be like that guy. I want to be like that guy. Have you seen what he does ever? You seen his routine? Have you seen his routine and stuff like that? Have seen what he eats? Have you seen where he is going to and stuff like that? I, yeah, I get influenced by that a little bit. So yeah, on my body it does had, I would say, a strong impact on my body, on my perception of my body, of course.”</p>
Participant 3	<p data-bbox="423 825 1403 926">“Just the persona of influencers where all they do is work out or go to the gym or be like, you could be like me if you sign up for this gym or this class, or things like that”</p>
Participant 4	<p data-bbox="423 993 1403 1060">“You see some really good-looking people and you're like, damn, wish that were me.”</p> <p data-bbox="423 1077 1403 1146">“Every dude you see on there is just really looking really buff and stuff, and it's like, I don't look like that at all, so it makes me feel kind of inferior.”</p>
Participant 7	<p data-bbox="423 1203 1403 1486">“But I think there's that movement, and my social media has easily caught into that where it's South Asian masculinity and being proud of being an Indian man, don't be bullied by white people, whatever. But it gets into the border of pretty inflammatory, and I think it's literally just like, oh, you need to look at me. I'm a brown dude who got real. It was really skinny. I've seen so many of those. I'm really skinny. And then I was super jacked six years later videos, so I don't think it affected me that much. I was literally like, this is ridiculous.”</p> <p data-bbox="423 1539 1403 1682">“I think it was literally just like, oh, they have such nice skin, or, oh, they have no unibrow. Well-groomed and all these very small things of people I'd never met before. I'm like, oh, they're so well clean shaven and all this stuff. Why don't I look like that?”</p>

Fitness-related content was identified by six out of seven participants as having an effect on their body image. Specific elements of fitness included workouts, gym-related content, diet, physical abilities, and progress related to weight loss or muscle mass goals. Participants shared that content related to bodybuilding and workout routines at the gym affected their body image. Participant 6 described his view on progress videos for gaining muscle mass, “I’ve seen so many of those ... I’m really skinny and then I was super jacked six years later videos ... I was literally like, this is ridiculous.”

Content focused on an individual’s body appearance was identified by six out of seven participants as having an effect on their body image. Specific elements of body appearance included muscularity and specific references to the influence of performance-enhancing drugs on it. Participants reported that images of muscular men affected their body image, utilizing terms like “jacked,” “ripped,” “huge,” “yoked,” and “shredded” to describe muscularity. These terms were often accompanied with descriptions of “the perfect body.” Mentions of whether the men featured in HVSM content used performance enhancing drugs to achieve their appearance was also prevalent. Participant 6, when recalling an image of an acquaintance that affected his body image, stated the following about men posting on HVSM and performance enhancing drugs:

All of the guys that start getting on [testosterone] cycles early and start getting bigger early ... they all get fitness accounts and they've all got their fitness Instagram accounts where they're flexing and they're showing everyone, oh look how big. And so a lot of my mates are all falling into that rabbit hole ... I met up with a few of my mates a while ago and three of them admitted to having gotten onto testosterone cycles despite being perfectly fine, normal looking people, they're not like crazy physiques, but they're doing absolutely anything they can to look better.

Content specific to a racial or ethnic community was identified by two out of seven participants as having an effect on their body image. Participant 7, a South Asian identifying



male, described that there are online discussion boards on the topic of South Asian masculinity.

He stated the following:

Indian and East Asian men have historically been in the US and in general, stereotyped as weaker, feeble, whatever ... But I think there's that movement, and my social media has easily caught into that where it's South Asian masculinity and being proud of being an Indian man, don't be bullied by white people, whatever. But it gets into the border of pretty inflammatory, and I think it's literally just like, oh, you need to look at me. I'm a brown dude who got real jacked.

Similarly, Participant 1, a Black identifying male, discussed his perception of a “masculinity crisis” in the “Black and African American community” stating, “a lot of us don’t really know what it means to be masculine.” In a discussion about the types of content that influence his body image, he made numerous references to content created by other Black individuals discussing muscularity and fashion specific to the masculine presentation of Black men.

### **Behavior on Platform**

*Behavior on Platform* refers to the behaviors that participants engaged in when using the HVSM platforms examined in the present study. These behaviors, across every HVSM platform, can largely be organized in two sub-categories: *Viewing Content* and *Posting Content*. Different effects on body image were identified from these sub-categories, as illustrated on The Model by the arrow connecting this category to the core category and will be detailed in the discussion of the core category: *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*. Furthermore, the behavior of users (e.g., posting certain types of content, engaging with specific types of content on other profiles) influences the content they see on HVSM platforms via recommendation algorithms (Narayanan, 2023). This effect is illustrated on The Model by the arrow connecting this category to the category: *HVSM Content (From Acquaintances or Algorithm-Based)*. The following is a discussion of specific elements of *Behavior on Platform* generalizable to each HVSM platform

that were endorsed by multiple participants. Table 5.3 illustrates examples of participant reports about their behaviors on HVSM platforms.

**Table 5.3**

*Examples of Behavior on Platform*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	“My routine on Facebook is more of interacting with my community and my community in terms of my academic community, my immediate community, my local community, and interacting with my family, also, interacting with the news I follow a lot”
Participant 2	“[I] mindlessly scroll a little bit”
Participant 4	“I’ll pop it open to see if anything, if my friends have posted stuff”
Participant 6	“I’ll check messages on Snapchat just in case people are messaging me”
Participant 7	<p>“I was just sending memes to my friends, and I used it as a form of, this is hilarious. Let’s just talk about it. Let me send memes to people. Let me check people’s story. Check in. Very standard.”</p> <p>“It was literally just posting and then being like, I’m going to make a funny caption and get as many likes as possible. And obviously you get the rush and the dopamine of like, oh, I got this many likes in this minutes, very standard experience.”</p> <p>“I definitely have caught myself in times where I’m just sitting and watching compilations of Succession and random stuff”</p>

Regarding the sub-category of *Viewing Content*, participants reported viewing content posted by friends, family members, acquaintances, content creators and other public figures (e.g., celebrities, athletes, etc.), and organizations (e.g., news media, fashion brands, etc.). All participants reported that they engaged in both purposeful viewing of content (e.g., intentionally searching for a specific query and then viewing related content) and unconscious viewing (e.g., scrolling through posts on a feed of content curated by the HVSM platform’s recommendation

algorithm). Four out of the seven participants described their unconscious viewing as related to “addictive” or “mindless” qualities of social media.

Regarding the sub-category of *Posting Content*, only four out of the seven participants reported posting content on at least one HVSM platform. The types of content most frequently posted were updates to their *stories*: images or shortform videos disappearing after a specific timeframe (McCrory et al., 2020). The most commonly reported subject matter posted onto stories was content related to day-to-day life or attendance at a social event. Notably, shortform videos were the most reported type of visual content that participants engaged with, both in terms of viewing and posting, and widely prevalent across each of the examined HVSM platforms (e.g., YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, Snapchat Stories, TikTok videos, Facebook Stories).

### **Perception of Ideal Male Physique**

*Perception of Ideal Male Physique* refers to discussion of various qualities by participants congruent with their subjective perception of an ideal male physique. Participants’ views on an ideal male physique influenced the core category *Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement*. This effect is represented on The Model by the arrow connecting this category to the core category. Physical traits congruent with an ideal male physique were derived from spontaneous comments and direct responses to an interview question asking how users would change their appearance on HVSM platforms (Appendix D). Four out of the seven participants reported ways they would modify their physical appearance on HVSM platforms, and three of them stated they would not change their appearance. Table 5.4 illustrates examples of participant reports on their beliefs of what an ideal male physique consists of.

**Table 5.4***Examples of Perception of Ideal Male Physique*

Participant	Examples
Participant 2	<p>“Slim fit is what people really want to be”</p> <p>“Maybe I would make my arms a little bit bigger, maybe look a little more shredded, a little bit, maybe look mildly to kind of shredded, that type of thing. Put a little bit more definition in my arm.”</p>
Participant 4	<p>“Seeing how pervasive certain body types are, which is just super lean or chiseled or big body building kind of guys and seeing that”</p>
Participant 6	<p>“Literally just like, damn, I wish I was a bit bigger would be my only thing.”</p> <p>“Everyone seems to want to look like that now, everyone wants to be crazy massive, put on a lot of weight, have really big bulging muscles”</p> <p>“I don't know Chris Hemsworth is primary idea of male attraction. He's gotten crazily big on roids. All top actors are bigger and bigger and bigger it seems. Yeah, that's sort where it comes from.”</p>
Participant 7	<p>“Probably just seeing people who are your male physique of standard male physique of abs and big muscles”</p>

Muscularity, tall height, and specific facial features were reported by multiple participants as congruent with an ideal male physique. Regarding muscularity, two types were identified: high muscularity and lean muscularity. The former refers to muscularity that resembles a bodybuilder. Participant 6 stated, “now everyone wants to be crazy massive, put on a lot of weight, have really big bulging muscles.” Lean muscularity refers to an appearance that is “chiseled” and “ripped,” but unlike the bodybuilder-type physique, “skinnier and more athletic.” Regarding height, participants listed “tall,” among other attributes (e.g., muscular), when

describing their ideal male physique. Participant 3 stated, “If I could take a picture and be like, look, I’m six foot, it’d be pretty cool.”

Regarding specific facial features, participants did not describe a general view of what the ideal male facial structure might resemble. Rather, they identified specific changes they would make to their faces to fit their idealized image of a male face. Participant 6 described various aspects of his facial structure he would change:

I'm pretty happy with my jaw on, but I think it's a bit uneven, so I think maybe if I could just get it symmetrical, that would be lovely... I've been told the gap between my nose and my mouth might be a bit small, maybe that. But yeah, mostly I just like my cheekbones. I think cheekbones look good. The bigger cheekbones and maybe less of a forehead. I don't know.

Participant 2 also commented on his cheeks, stating a desire to “maybe shrink that down a little bit.”

### **Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement**

*Effects on Body Image from HVSM Engagement* is the core category of data analysis and refers to the resulting psychological effects pertaining to body image reported by participants as a result of HVSM engagement. The core category addresses the research question of how different forms of engagement on HVSM platforms influences the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men by identifying specific effects on body image caused by HVSM engagement. Information regarding these specific effects was derived from data analysis of participant responses to specific queries about HVSM engagement and body image (see Appendix D) and spontaneous reporting of these effects during conversations with the researcher.

Overall, The Model demonstrates how contributing factors (i.e., *HVSM Platform Attributes, HVSM Content, Behavior on Platform, and Perception of Ideal Male Physique*) influence these effects by connecting the respective categories and subcategories to the core

category. Discrete effects on body image were reported based on whether the participants were viewing or posting content. This distinction is represented by the two columns within the core category illustrating sub-categories of influence based on *viewing* or *posting* content. The following is a discussion of the various reported effects on body image by participants when viewing content or posting content on HVSM platforms. For discussion about the categories *contributing* to the effects on body image rather than the effects themselves, please view the appropriate sections above.

### **From Viewing Content**

#### ***Negative Social Comparison***

*Negative Social Comparison* refers to participants' reports of experiences due to negative comparison with individuals seen on HVSM platforms. These effects differ from the sub-category *Lowered Self-Esteem* in that they are reported explicitly in the context of a negative social comparison of an individual they are viewing on an HVSM platform, whereas data from the aforementioned sub-category are derived from reports by participants in contexts that do not involve a direct social comparison with an individual viewed on an HVSM platform.

All participants reported some degree of negative social comparison when viewing HVSM content for traits related to body image. Six out of seven participants specified fitness as an area of negative social comparison. Fitness encompasses muscularity and physical abilities. Participants described how viewing elements of fitness by other men on HVSM platforms led to negative social comparison that in turn, made them feel they were lacking in some aspect. Table 5.5 illustrates examples of participant statements regarding negative social comparison of fitness.

**Table 5.5***Examples of Negative Social Comparison Regarding Fitness*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	<p data-bbox="423 386 1398 457">“I felt self-conscious a bit because I wasn't as in shape as they were. I wasn't as ripped.”</p> <p data-bbox="423 520 1406 625">“To be honest, there is a quiet competition at the moment from all of my past high school friends. There is quiet underlying competition where if we get together, we expect to see some progress.”</p>
Participant 2	<p data-bbox="423 684 1386 974">“Are you considered, I don't know, overweight compared to what you're seeing on a screen with your friends or people around you? So a lot of negative comparison, and I know that sometimes for me, yeah, I can fall into that and it's not necessarily the healthiest thing to do, and I think I do know that, but it's just something that can naturally happen, especially when you maybe continue to see people that at a point where maybe I would want to be in terms of body image or just from a physical health standpoint.”</p> <p data-bbox="423 1037 1406 1180">“So when people are on their weight journey, and sometimes in the beginning they'll show where they were at in the beginning of the journey in terms of what their body, they'll just take a half-naked picture of themselves. So sometimes when I look at that, I'm like, oh, am I like that?”</p> <p data-bbox="423 1243 1414 1453">“I'll say when I see other people that I perceive that I'm like, when I perceive someone that maybe is unhappy with themselves at the point at some point, and I see some sort of resemblance to that, so it's almost like I can relate to them, but it's also kind of in a negative way of like, oh, you're at the bottom of the barrel instead of somewhere in the middle or something like that.”</p>
Participant 4	<p data-bbox="423 1503 1393 1575">“Every dude you see on there is just really looking really buff and stuff, and it's like, I don't look like that at all, so it makes me feel kind of inferior.”</p> <p data-bbox="423 1638 1393 1709">You can logically know something, but it's really hard to pull yourself away from that initial reaction of comparison.”</p>
Participant 6	<p data-bbox="423 1776 1370 1873">“So it sort of makes me imply to believe that he's natural and then it's something like, well I should be working much harder so that I can look like him.”</p>

Participant	Examples
Participant 7	<p>“But I think with the body stuff, it's literally like, oh, sometimes it'll come into like, oh, my chest is not big. Why am I not that big?”</p> <p>“I'm just looking at influencers who are making pasta, but they're yoked. And I'm like, why am I not yoked like that?”</p>

In addition to fitness, participants mentioned other elements of appearance that elicited negative social comparison. This included aspects such as facial features, hairstyle, and perceived handsomeness. Table 5.6 illustrates examples of participant statements regarding negative social comparison of these elements of appearance.

**Table 5.6**

*Examples of Negative Social Comparison Regarding Other Aspects of Appearance*

Participant	Examples
Participant 4	<p>“You see some really good-looking people and you're like, damn, wish that were me.”</p>
Participant 7	<p>“That’s why I have a problem ... I have a unibrow, and people on YouTube don’t have unibrows.”</p> <p>“They didn’t have very thick hair like mine. So the hairstyles they were doing or I was looking at, I was like, I can’t do this with my hair. And so then I would be like, oh, I don’t have the right hair for this. I won’t look good”.</p> <p>“I think it was literally just like, oh, they have such nice skin, or, oh, they have no unibrow. Well-groomed and all these very small things of people I'd never met before. I'm like, oh, they're so well clean shaven and all this stuff. Why don't I look like that?”</p>



### *Elicited Desire for Appearance Modification*

*Elicited Desire for Appearance Modification* refers to participants' reports of desires for appearance modification related to body image and elicited by content they saw on HVSM platforms. Data for this sub-category was derived from participant mentions of explicitly desiring some aspect of appearance-based change or reports of modifying their behavior to match an appearance ideal based on content from their HVSM feeds. Participants largely reported the desire to work out more and modify their appearance on both HVSM platforms and offline to increase masculinity and attractiveness. Table 5.7 illustrates examples of participant reports of desiring some aspect of appearance modification as a result of content seen on HVSM platforms.

**Table 5.7**

#### *Examples of Elicited Desire for Appearance Modification*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	<p>“Started working out more fervently about six to seven months ago because of that”</p> <p>“[I’m] trying to be masculine”</p>
Participant 7	<p>“You need to hit the gym five times a week. You need to look as jacked as possible”</p> <p>“I want to look better, or I want to talk to women better.”</p> <p>“I try to make my hair more of what a lot of the people on YouTube at the time”</p>

Three out of the seven participants described how viewing HVSM content made them want to work out more. Participant 1 reported that he “started working out more fervently” due to exposure to HVSM content and Participant 7 stated, “there’s a push to counter that with

hypermasculine type tendencies ... you need to hit the gym five times a week. You need to look as jacked as possible.”

Regarding the desire to increase masculinity and attractiveness, two participants extensively discussed how their experience viewing HVSM content drove these desires.

Participant 7 shared the following:

It’s so easy to fall in that pipeline on YouTube as someone who may be insecure, like, oh I want to look better, or I want to talk to women better. And then it’ll easily recommend you shit on Instagram or whatever.

Participant 1 discussed his experience of trying to “dress a certain way to be taken seriously or to be deemed attractive” in his efforts to convey a “masculine looking appearance” based on what he saw on HVSM platforms.

### ***Lowered Self-Esteem***

*Lowered Self-Esteem* refers to participants’ reports of lowered self-esteem from viewing content seen on HVSM platforms. Such reports include experiences of increased self-consciousness of their physical appearance and self-criticism. While an inverse relationship between self-consciousness and self-esteem is not necessarily inherent, participant descriptions of self-consciousness were often paired with negative attributions to their body image. These effects differ from the sub-category *Negative Social Comparison* in that they are not explicitly tied to a direct social comparison with an individual viewed on an HVSM platform. Table 5.8 illustrates examples of participant statements regarding lowered self-esteem from viewing content seen on HVSM platforms.

**Table 5.8***Examples of Lowered Self Esteem*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	<p>“[Content on Instagram has a] strong impact on my perception of my physical body.”</p> <p>“I think that [content on Instagram] is one of the things that influenced my consciousness of self.”</p>
Participant 2	<p>“and then either getting in this criticism out of like, oh, you shouldn't have eaten that last week, or you should have worked out more.”</p>
Participant 4	<p>“Sometimes you think maybe I do need to go and exercise a little bit more ... do I need to be a super buff guy?”</p> <p>“I mean, when I go to the beach sometimes it's like, do I want to take off my shirt?”</p> <p>“It usually just makes me feel bad about myself.”</p> <p>“It just makes me feel like the way that I look is not good enough, it's not attractive enough, and it would make it harder to find a partner or anything like that, just be attractive to the opposite sex or my, yeah, it's not a great feeling or feeling not good enough.”</p>
Participant 6	<p>“I don't have these clothes. That's why I'm not doing X, Y, Z, or I don't have this beard. I can't grow a beard. That's why I have a problem.”</p> <p>“I think it was literally just like, oh, you're never good enough.”</p>

*Altered Perception of Reality*

*Altered Perception of Reality* refers to participants' reports of how HVSM has influenced their perception of what realistic or normative experiences of men might be like. Table 5.9 illustrates examples of participant statements describing an altered perception of reality due to HVSM engagement.

**Table 5.9***Examples of Altered Perception of Reality*

Participant	Examples
Participant 2	<p>“I guess people being more fit or whatever that looks like is the norm versus maybe what reality really shows”</p> <p>“It gives me that false perception that this should be something that should be a straight line to the finish line. But in reality, it's never like that”</p> <p>“I will say there's a very big reason why I don't really consume those other apps anymore, like Instagram, Snapchat, those very image focused apps is because I do feel like it does create a facade of what is normal in a person's life, what's normal and how a person presents themselves.”</p>
Participant 6	<p>“Just the ability to go and view people. I think that are just so beyond the mean, so beyond the norm in terms of their physi because those people are propped up right to the top. So I imagine the top point, 0.1% of genetics in bodybuilders it probably seen so much more than anyone else by all of my mates looking at social media.”</p>

Three out of seven participants reported altered perceptions of reality with experiences including fitness, appearances, and physical abilities. The term “false perception” was used by multiple participants to describe the effect that HVSM content had on their body image and sense of what was “normal.” Participant 2 stated the following:

I will say there's a very big reason why I don't really consume those other apps anymore, like Instagram, Snapchat, those very image focused apps is because I do feel like it does create a facade of what is normal in a person's life, what's normal and how a person presents themselves.

He further described this effect when illustrating how highly edited “progress” videos on YouTube depicting weight loss influenced his thoughts about how easy or difficult it might be to bring about change:

I feel like going into that detail really helps because it really helps an audience member sense that, okay, it wasn't just all uphill, it wasn't just a positive journey all the way around. There was a bunch of other obstacles within this big obstacle that they had to face ... And when they don't show things like that, it does create the impression in my

head that maybe, it is easier than I think, and I don't mean it as a way to diminish your accomplishment, but it's almost like, oh, this is easy. If you don't do it, you're kind of failing. You're not able to do something that could be easy to do. And I think when you don't highlight those problems within problems, it gives me that false perception that this should be something that should be a straight line to the finish line. But in reality, it's never like that. It's ups and downs and all the time, emotional and mental things you have to accomplish and fight through ... it's the false perception it can create for me when the editing's really tight like that.

Participant 6 described his views on how HVSM alters perception of reality in terms of muscular bodies on HVSM:

The ability to go and view people, I think that are just so beyond the mean, so beyond the norm in terms of their physi, because those people are propped up right to the top. So I imagine the top 0.1% of genetics in bodybuilders are probably seen so much more than anyone else by all of my mates looking at social media. Even if they do start using steroids, even if they do start working out and dieting from that age, they're never going to be able to achieve that look because it's not even genetically feasible for most of 'em. Right. And that's something really damaging, I think.

Both of these participants discussed examples of how HVSM content influenced their perception on what might be considered normative or realistically achievable. Beyond naming their altered perception of reality, both of the above excerpts convey a sense of concern of how these false perceptions can have a negative influence, with Participant 2 naming the feeling of “failure” and Participant 6 stating his belief that this is “damaging.”

### ***Internalized Appearance Ideals***

*Internalized Appearance Ideals* refers to participants' suggestions of an idealized male appearance as a result of viewing HVSM content. Data for this sub-category was derived from participant descriptions of how their ideas of an idealized male appearance were shaped by engagement with HVSM content. The distinction between this sub-category and the category *Perception of Ideal Male Physique* is that data from the former was derived specifically from statements referencing HVSM content, and data from the latter was derived from statements referencing generalized ideas of an ideal male physique, with no specific association with HVSM

content. Table 5.10 illustrates examples of participant statements describing internalized appearance ideals stemming from viewing HVSM content.

**Table 5.10**

*Examples of Internalized Appearance Ideals*

Participant	Examples
Participant 1	<p>“[I get a] certain mentality about how I'm supposed to look”</p> <p>“[It tells me] how Black man is supposed to present”</p>
Participant 7	<p>“I don't have these clothes. That's why I'm not doing X, Y, Z, or I don't have this beard. I can't grow a beard. That's why I have a problem. Or I have a unibrow, and people on YouTube don't have unibrows, like these beauty things or hair.”</p> <p>“I try to make my hair more of what a lot of the people on YouTube at the time that I also didn't really think about this, but they didn't have thick hair. They didn't have very thick hair like mine. So the hairstyles they were doing or I was looking at, I was like, I can't do this with my hair. And so then I would be like, oh, I don't have the right hair for this. I won't look good.”</p>

Participant 1 described this effect by discussing how HVSM content influences a “certain mentality of how I’m supposed to look” and “how a Black man is supposed to present ... it has had a certain way that I view myself, of course, as a Black person”. Participant 7 shared about how HVSM content influenced specific aspects of male appearance he was striving for, or using as a basis for comparison to gauge his proximity to his internalized ideal:

I don't have these clothes. That's why I'm not doing X, Y, Z, or I don't have this beard. I can't grow a beard. That's why I have a problem. Or I have a unibrow, and people on YouTube don't have unibrows, like these beauty things or hair. I try to make my hair more of what a lot of the people on YouTube at the time that I also didn't really think about this, but they didn't have thick hair. They didn't have very thick hair like mine. So the hairstyles they were doing or I was looking at, I was like, I can't do this with my hair. And so then I would be like, oh, I don't have the right hair for this. I won't look good.

Both statements from Participants 1 and 7 show how their experiences on HVSM shaped their internalized perception of a male appearance ideal they subsequently compare their own appearance to.

### **From Posting Content**

#### *Anxiety*

The sub-category *Anxiety* refers to participants' reports of experiencing generalized anxiety from posting HVSM content. It differs from the following sub-category, *Self-Conscious of Appearance*, in that data for the latter is more specific to increased self-consciousness, with or without accompanying experiences of anxiety, around appearances when posting content on HVSM platforms. Table 5.11 illustrates examples of participant statements describing anxiety resulting from posting HVSM content.

**Table 5.11**

#### *Examples of Anxiety*

Participant	Examples
Participant 2	<p>“I would say it’s a mixture of excitement and anxiety a little bit”</p> <p>“The anxiety part is not really because of what people think of me, but it's just more so the video itself, how people kind of view that. I think mean generally comments don't really get to me, but it's more just like, oh, did people, what I put out? Things like that. Was I engaging enough? Things like that.”</p>
Participant 5	<p>“There are many reasons why I don't like posting on the social media, because sometimes you post a picture, then the first comment that appears is much hateful to you”</p>

Two participants shared their experiences regarding anxiety when posting HVSM content. Participant 2 described “a mixture of excitement and anxiety” and explained, “I mean generally comments don't really get to me, but it's more just like, oh, did people like what I put

out? Things like that. Was I engaging enough? Things like that.” Participant 5 stated, “there are many reasons why I don't like posting on the social media, because sometimes you post a picture, then the first comment that appears is much hateful to you.”

### *Self-Conscious of Appearance*

The sub-category *Self-Conscious of Appearance* refers to participants’ reports of experiencing self-consciousness related to their physical appearance when posting content to HVSM platforms. It differs from the previous sub-category, *Anxiety*, in that the data for the latter focuses on a generalized emotional experience of anxiety experienced by participants when posting content to HVSM, rather than specific mentions of increased self-consciousness related to physical appearance. Table 5.12 illustrates examples of participant statements describing appearance-based self-consciousness resulting from posting HVSM content.

**Table 5.12**

#### *Examples of Self-Conscious of Appearance*

Participant	Examples
Participant 3	“Snapchat always has to have a picture of you or a picture of something. So I mean maybe that aspect of if I'm taking pictures like, oh, I got to make sure I look presentable or I look a little bit nicer in this photo versus just this aspect of if you want to say something on Twitter, you don't have to put any pictures or anything behind it.”
Participant 6	“I definitely like to show myself in a better light on my posts. I don't want to post myself on a bad day or looking bad. I want to look good.”  “I try and get a good angle on my face”

Two participants shared their experiences regarding self-consciousness related to their physical appearance when posting HVSM content. Participant 6 shared several examples, such as, “I try and get a good angle on my face” and “I definitely like to show myself in a better light



on my posts. I don't want to post myself on a bad day or looking bad. I want to look good.”

Participant 1 shared an example of self-consciousness when posting content to Snapchat, stating, “Snapchat always has to have a picture of you or a picture of something. So I mean maybe that aspect of if I'm taking pictures like, oh, I got to make sure I look presentable or I look a little bit nicer in this photo versus just this aspect of if you want to say something on Twitter, you don't have to put any pictures or anything behind it.”

### **Summary**

This constructivist grounded theory study explored how different forms of engagement on HVSM platforms influence the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. Using constructivist grounded theory methodology, data analysis of seven semi-structured interviews developed a grounded theoretical model illustrating the mechanism by which HVSM engagement influences the body image of this population. HVSM platform attributes, a user's behavior on an HVSM platform, the content they see on the HVSM platform, and the user's perception of the ideal male physique all contributed to the effects on their body image as a result of HVSM engagement, whether they were viewing or posting content. Such effects included negative social comparison, elicited desire for appearance modification, lowered self-esteem, altered perception of reality, internalized appearance ideals, anxiety, and self-consciousness of appearance.

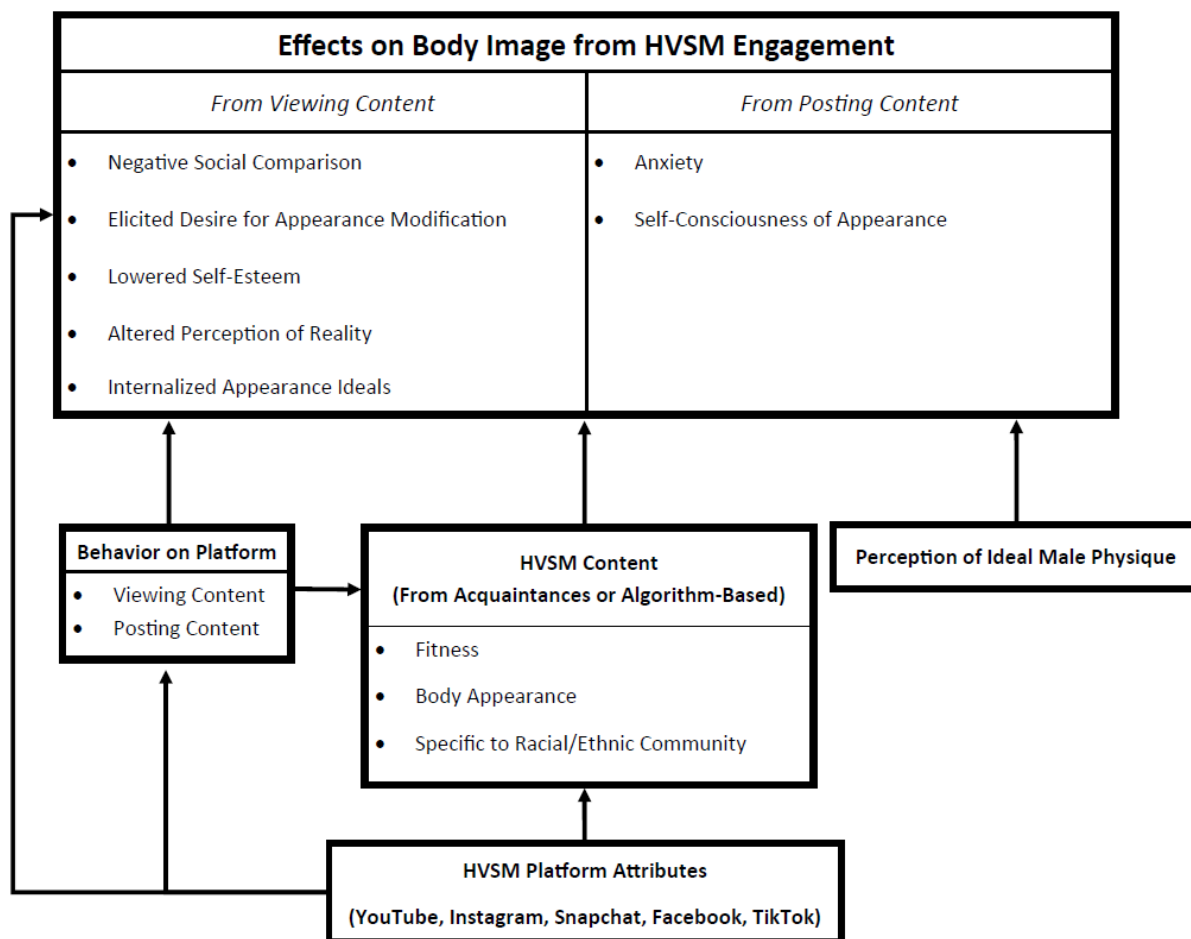
## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Highly Visual Social Media (HVSM) is prevalent among emerging adult Americans, with 84% of them utilizing platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok (Anderson & Smith, 2018). Social media research has yielded mixed findings regarding the impact of HVSM on well-being, with some studies reporting positive outcomes (e.g., increased confidence and self-esteem) while others indicate potential drawbacks (e.g., increased anxiety and depression) (McCrory et al., 2020). Body image, a facet of well-being, is often investigated in conjunction with HVSM usage. Existing research on the effects of social media usage and body image disturbance has indicated a small, positive relationship between these constructs (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019); however, there is a dearth of literature focusing on cisgender heterosexual men, including multiple HVSM platforms, distinguishing between types of engagement by users, and utilizing qualitative research methodologies (McCrory et al., 2020; Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019).

The present study addressed these gaps by utilizing constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) to explore how different forms of engagement on HVSM platforms influence the body image of cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men. The researcher conducted seven semi-structured interviews and coded them using constructivist grounded theory methodology to develop a grounded theory illustrating a mechanism by which HVSM engagement by cisgender heterosexual emerging adult men influences their body image. The Model (Figure 4.1), introduced in Chapter IV and reproduced below, represents the emergent grounded theory of how HVSM engagement affects body image by showing the relationships between identified categories and subcategories from the data analysis.

**Figure 4.1**

*Model of How HVSM Engagement Influences the Body Image of Cisgender Heterosexual Emerging Adult Men*



It is important to note that qualitative research methodology not only examines the lived experience of participants, but also explicitly considers the differences in positionality between the researcher and researched as core aspects of inquiry (Reich, 2021). The reflexivity of the researcher necessary throughout each step of this constructivist grounded theory was situated in a dynamic of power, privilege, and social location between participant and researcher. It is imperative that qualitative researchers consider how this dynamic is exerted onto participants and influences data collection and analysis.

While the seven participants of the present study were a homogenous sample in terms of age, gender, and sexuality, there was diversity in the social domains of race and socioeconomic status. Under the same demographic categories disclosed by participants, the researcher's social location comprised of the following identities: adult (28-years-old), cisgender male, heterosexual, Taiwanese American, college for 4+ years, annual income of \$80,000-\$100,000, and employed for wages. Similarities and differences in power and privilege within each participant-researcher dyad can be identified when comparing these social domains. As this chapter discusses the researcher's inquiry of participants' lived experiences, the inherent role of social structures and inequalities in these experiences must also be considered.

The following is a discussion of the researcher's interpretation of the findings, implications of the present study for HVSM users in the studied population, limitations of the present study, and suggestions on future research on HVSM and body image or other domains of well-being.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The HVSM platforms examined in the present study were YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok. These have been the most used HVSM platforms by emerging adults in the United States since 2020 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Gottfried, 2024). The seven participants in the present study identified attributes both unique to each of the studied HVSM platforms (i.e., YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok) and generalized across them, that impacted their behavior on these platforms, the content they saw on these platforms, and the resulting effects on their body image.

#### **Specific HVSM Platforms**

YouTube and Instagram emerged as the most frequently endorsed social media platforms by participants ( $n = 5$ ). The popularity of these two platforms is consistent with recent statistics

on the most used HVSM platforms for adults aged 18 – 29 in the United States (Gottfried, 2024). Conversely, TikTok, a platform that 62% of adults in this age demographic report using (Gottfried, 2024), was the endorsed the least among participants in the present study ( $n = 2$ ). Regardless of the platforms they endorsed, every participant commented, in an unsolicited manner, on at least one platform among those examined in the present study they did not endorse in the demographic survey. Thus, there is a possibility that additional participants utilized TikTok without endorsing it, potentially due to reasons such as failing to meet the 45-minute usage exclusion criterion aligning with the average time spent on this platform by emerging adult HVSM users in the United States. This may also be true for participants' engagement with the other HVSM platforms examined in the present study.

Participants did not identify engagement on any one particular HVSM platform as having exclusively high or low impact on their body image. Every platform was reported by at least one participant as having high or low impact. Instagram was endorsed as having a high impact by the greatest number of participants ( $n = 4$ ) and Facebook was the platform endorsed as having no impact by the greatest number of participants ( $n = 2$ ).

Instagram engagement by both heterosexual and non-heterosexual male identifying individuals are associated with small, statistically significant effects on measures of body image, such as body dissatisfaction (Modica, 2020; Sumter et al., 2022). Although stronger effect sizes have been associated with non-heterosexual men, findings remain statistically significant regarding the correlation between Instagram engagement and body dissatisfaction with heterosexual male samples (Modica, 2020; Sumter et al., 2022). These effects were exemplified by participant reports of how the ability to browse through an Instagram user's profile, as well as

the content curated by Instagram’s recommendation algorithm contributed to detrimental effects on their body image.

In contrast with the “high pressure” attributed to Instagram by participants in the present study, Snapchat was comparatively described as “easier” for participants to post content to and had less impact on body image. Participants described how the ephemeral nature of Snapchat—that content disappeared immediately after viewing or after a set amount of time—reduced the sense of “pressure” associated with deleterious effects on body image caused by HVSM platforms, such as Instagram, where content can remain indefinitely viewable. These endorsements are similar to existing research on Snapchat discussing user experiences of both ephemerality and the sense that Snapchat was somehow “more personal” than other HVSM platforms (Burnell et al., 2022; Vaterlaus et al., 2016). While participants identified Snapchat engagement as having deleterious effects on their body image, the differences with platforms like Instagram illustrate how various forms of engagement based on heterogeneous elements of HVSM platforms affect the intensity of impact on body image experienced by users.

### **HVSM Engagement and Body Image**

There is no evidence from the present study that a single platform, without considering the nature of user engagement, has high or low impact on a user’s body image. Rather, participant reports of *how* they engaged on these various platforms and the resulting effects on their body image bolster the argument by previous HVSM researchers that studying forms of engagement on these platforms, rather than metrics such as time spent or number of platforms endorsed, may help explain the mechanisms by which users’ well-being are influenced by HVSM usage (Prinstein et al., 2020; Valkenburg, 2022). The categories outlined in The Model (i.e., *HVSM Platform Attributes*, *HVSM Content*, *Behavior on Platform*, and *Perception of Ideal*

*Male Physique*) represent the various domains that influence a user's engagement on any given HVSM platform and the subsequent effects on their body image.

Appearance-focused HVSM engagement is associated with negative effects on body image (Loneragan et al., 2019, 2021; Markey et al., 2024; Rounsefell et al., 2020). This type of engagement includes activities focused on appearances, such as viewing information about cosmetic enhancement, body modification (i.e., Fitspiration), and photo manipulation. Fitness, body appearance, and elements of fitness and appearance that were specific to a racial or ethnic community were examples of appearance-focused content participants identified as influencing their body image. These appearance-focused activities are compared and contrasted with users' perception of an ideal male physique, which is largely influenced by ideas of a mesomorphic body type (Morrison et al., 2003) and muscular physiques (Wagner Oehlhof et al., 2009). Participants described elements of a mesomorphic body type (e.g., well-developed chest, narrow waist and hips) and high muscularity as extremely desirable appearance traits.

Participants' proximity to these physique ideals influenced the effects on their body image. Effects on body image reported by participants as a result of HVSM engagement were reported based on their experiences of *viewing* and *posting* content. Effects from viewing content included: negative social comparison, elicited desire for appearance modification, lowered self-esteem, altered perception of reality, and internalized appearance ideals. Effects from posting content included anxiety and self-consciousness of appearance. These effects may be understood through theories of self-objectification and social comparison.

Participants reported harmful effects on their body image and lowered self-esteem resulting from upwards social comparison during HVSM engagement, particularly with content involving Fitspiration. While previous studies on men's body image and social media usage were

not conducted exclusively on heterosexual, cisgender males, the findings from the present study are consistent with existing research findings that upwards comparisons of physical appearance with other men especially on digital media platforms have deleterious effects on body image and self-esteem (Pagano et al., 2021; Schaefer & Thompson, 2018). Participants in the present study frequently identified how comparison of their own bodies to the attributes of fitness, such as muscularity, seen on their HVSM feeds made them feel inferior about their body image.

The findings of the present study also show how social comparison by participants influenced their internalization of body ideals, a psychological interaction that has been correlated with body dissatisfaction, higher drive for muscularity, and disordered eating (Karazsia & Crowther, 2009; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). Participants reported how HVSM content shaped their “ideas of how men are supposed to look” and in turn, elicited specific behaviors such as weightlifting or specific grooming practices to modify their appearance in accordance with these ideals.

Men who engage in self-objectifying behavior on social media have been found to experience increased body consciousness, body dissatisfaction, and appearance anxiety (Lonergan et al., 2021; Rounsefell et al., 2020). Self-objectifying effects were most prevalent with participants who posted content, rather than solely viewing. While participants who only viewed content engaged in processes of social comparisons with men they were seeing on their HVSM feeds, users who posted content were cognizant of how they would appear on a platform when viewed by an outside party. They described a process of self-objectification through ruminations of how their bodies and faces would appear to others when they posted images of themselves on an HVSM platform. This was correlated with increases in anxiety and appearance related self-consciousness.



## Implications

The findings of the present study address multiple gaps identified by social media researchers seeking to elucidate the ways in which social media affects measures of well-being, such as body image, of its users. Historically, mixed findings and weak effect sizes of social media research have been attributed to methodological issues such as not distinguishing the types of social media platforms studied (i.e., highly visual, or predominately text-based), not identifying specific platforms to be studied (e.g., Instagram versus Snapchat), and utilizing measures such as screen time rather than various forms of engagement (e.g., posting content and viewing content; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; McCrory et al., 2020; Prinstein et al., 2020; Saiphoo et al., 2020; Valkenburg, 2022). Additionally, most social media research has historically been quantitative in methodology and focused on female participants, with few studies exclusively focusing on men (McCrory et al., 2020). The methodology of this study was designed specifically to address the aforementioned gaps by distinguishing between platform type and specificity, using qualitative methodology, considering multiple forms of social media engagement, and exclusively focusing on cisgender heterosexual men.

Constructivist grounded theory methodology enabled the collection of rich descriptions of lived experiences to generate a theory of *how* and *why* HVSM affects the body image of heterosexual, cisgender men. Where quantitative studies on this topic with this population might reveal correlations between negative emotions and exposure to specific types of appearance-related content on social media (Easton et al., 2018; Lonergan et al., 2019; Rounsefell et al., 2020), the qualitative findings from the present study detail richer descriptions linking specific thoughts and feelings to these psychological outcomes. The depth provided through qualitative research may help individuals better understand the emotional impact on body image that HVSM engagement has on heterosexual, cisgender men.

A common limitation of extant social media research is the generalization of studies towards all social media usage when the methodology focuses on one specific platform—historically Facebook (McCrorry et al., 2020). Recent studies have shifted focus to generalizable elements across popular social media platforms, such as the distinguishing of the category: highly visual social media to separate it from predominately text-based platforms (McCrorry et al., 2020; Modica, 2020). The present study identified common ways of engagement across the most popular HVSM platforms, thereby increasing the likelihood that the findings might be generalizable to current and future HVSM platforms that utilize similar elements. Even if popular platforms like Instagram or TikTok fall out of favor and are replaced by new HVSM platforms in the future, the effects on body image resulting from common HVSM activities—such as negative social comparison with fitness-related content or self-objectification when posting images—may persist and be applicable to the new platforms.

Furthermore, the present study identified specific nuances to HVSM platforms that, on the surface, share many elements in common. For example, Instagram and Snapchat are both popular HVSM platforms that allow users to share visual content in the form of posts or shortform videos and view user-posted or algorithm-recommended content. However, users identified Instagram as having a more intense effect on their body image and associated with a feeling of “high pressure” compared to Snapchat due to the ephemeral nature of content on this platform. Identifying the qualitative experiences of users across these similar platforms helps distinguish the nuances between them and helps shed more light on the unique ways in which a specific HVSM platform influences its users.

The present study helps illustrate various forms of engagement on HVSM platforms that researchers can examine closer to delineate how they influence users. In many quantitative social

media studies, screen-time, “problematic social media usage”, or “appearance-focused social media usage” are measured alongside self-reports related to well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, body image issues) (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020; McCrory et al., 2020). The findings of the present study illustrate how specific behaviors on social media platforms, such as posting content or viewing certain types of content, can lead to different impacts on body image. In line with calls by social media researchers for more nuanced examination rather than overgeneralized labels of helpful or harmful (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2022), increased specificity on behaviors related to HVSM engagement helps shed light on associations between specific user behavior and outcomes on well-being, such as body image.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size ( $n = 7$ ) of the present study limits the generalizability of the findings. Each participant had his own unique life experiences, including mental health history and body image-related experiences, which shaped his reports in the conducted interviews. A larger sample size would improve generalizability by reducing the influence of unique, individual experiences and help identify similarities in HVSM effects on body image across a larger sample of men. Furthermore, a larger sample size might allow for additional generalizations to be made across identity domains beyond cisgender and heterosexual. For example, the two Black participants in the study referenced HVSM engagement specific to the Black community in their interviews. If the research sample included a greater number of Black cisgender heterosexual men, it may have been possible to identify stronger generalizations for how HVSM engagement affects the body image of this population.

There were fewer participants who engaged in HVSM content creation ( $n = 2$ ) than those who solely viewed HVSM content ( $n = 5$ ). Participants in the present study who reported posting HVSM content endorsed feelings of anxiety and self-consciousness that may have stemmed in

part from self-objectification. Existing research shows how the positive relationship between social media usage and self-objectification contributes to body-image concerns in men (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020; Manago, 2013; Manago et al., 2015). A greater number of participants who engaged in content creation or posting on HVSM platforms could lead to better understanding of how their experience of posting content influences their body image and subsequently improve generalization regarding this form of engagement by cisgender heterosexual men.

### **Future Research**

The present study examined various mechanisms by which HVSM engagement influenced the body image of heterosexual, cisgender emerging adult men. While many questions remain regarding how exactly HVSM affects the well-being of its numerous and diverse userbase, the findings from the present study shed light on future avenues of research to explore. For example, the present study specifically examined the emerging adult age cohort. Similar studies on other age cohorts, such as adolescents or older adults, might reveal which aspects of HVSM engagement on body image might be generalizable across populations and which might be age cohort specific.

Further research on the unique experiences of individuals with minoritized racial or ethnic identities is another avenue to explore. Comments by Participant 1, a Black identifying male, and Participant 7, a South Asian identifying male, described engagement specific to their racial and ethnic communities on HVSM platforms and highlighted the existence of certain forums specifically dedicated to members who also identify with these communities. Men of color may be particularly vulnerable to negative psychological effects (e.g., decreased confidence and self-esteem) from comparisons of physical appearance when acculturating to Western appearance ideals and norms (Pagano et al., 2021). Future studies examining the

experiences of men from specific racial and ethnic groups can shed light on the nuances of these effects across various identities.

It is imperative that HVSM researchers acknowledge the rapidly changing social media landscape and dynamic changes in popularity of HVSM platforms. Facebook, the HVSM platform most studied in the previous decade (McCrary et al., 2020), was suggested by multiple participants in the present study to be outdated and belonging to an older generation. TikTok, the HVSM platform currently experiencing the most rapid growth (Gottfried, 2024), is currently facing threat of a national ban in the US due to security concerns about its ties to the Chinese government (Allyn, 2024). For any social media research to be salient to its stakeholders, researchers must maintain awareness of growing trends and the platforms that are being used most by their target populations of study. The dynamic nature of HVSM platform popularity bolsters the argument that forms of engagement generalizable across various HVSM platforms are worthy of rigorous examination, in addition to the specific platforms themselves. Thus, research on common forms of engagement on HVSM platforms can inform users on how to engage in a manner that mitigates maladaptive outcomes, even in anticipation of future popular HVSM platforms yet to emerge.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

This is a research study about how engagement on highly visual social media (HVSM) platforms influences young men's body image. Participation in this study may provide more insight into how your body image is related to your HVSM activity. Prior to the study, you will be asked to fill out a brief survey asking for information about yourself, your HVSM usage, and provide your email address. To participate, you must be an 18-to-25-year-old male fluent in English and resides in the United States. Your responses on the survey will determine your eligibility to take part in the study. Please answer truthfully to the best of your ability and only complete the survey once. If you are eligible for the study, you will be asked to schedule an interview with a researcher to talk about HVSM usage and body image. Interviews will occur on a HIPAA compliant, web-based, teleconferencing platform and is expected to take about 45 minutes to 1 hour. You must have Internet access and a device capable of teleconferencing (i.e., has a camera and microphone). Additionally, you will be required to be visible on camera at all times during the interview. Audio from the interviews will be recorded. These recordings will be stored on a HIPAA compliant online storage platform and viewed only by the researcher. Participating in this study may involve conversations about difficult topics and has the risk to cause feelings of distress. Should you disclose imminent risk of danger to yourself or others, I am required, as a mandated reporter, to violate the confidentiality of the interview and inform local authorities. Upon completion of this survey, you will be provided with a list of national crisis lines, in the event of discomfort with topics discussed in the interview. By completing this study, you will be entered into a raffle for the opportunity to win one \$100 Amazon gift card. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Additionally, once you start the study, you are free to withdraw at any time. The information gathered in this study will be kept

confidential and your responses anonymous. All names identified in the interview transcript will be changed to a non-identifiable label (e.g., “Participant A”). If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact the primary researcher, Isaac Cheng. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair Dr. Melissa Kennedy. The IRB is a group of individuals who review research studies and protect the rights of research participants. Should you choose to continue and consent to being contacted by the primary investigator if you are eligible for the study, please click “I understand.” If you do not consent, please exit by closing this window. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC AND HVSM SURVEY**

## Eligibility Survey

This is a survey to determine whether you are eligible for a study about the effects of highly visual social media usage on young men's body image. Please answer all questions truthfully and to the best of your ability. Thank you!

\* Required

1. This is a research study about how engagement on highly visual social media (HVSM) platforms influences young men's body image. Participation in this study may provide more insight into how your body image is related to your HVSM activity. Prior to the study, you will be asked to fill out a brief survey asking for information about yourself, your HVSM usage, and provide your email address. To participate, you must be an 18-to-25-year-old male fluent in English and resides in the United States. Your responses on the survey will determine your eligibility to take part in the study. Please answer truthfully to the best of your ability and only complete the survey once. If you are eligible for the study, you will be asked to schedule an interview with a researcher to talk about HVSM usage and body image. Interviews will occur on a HIPAA compliant, web-based, teleconferencing platform and is expected to take about 45 minutes to 1 hour. You must have Internet access and a device capable of teleconferencing (i.e., has a camera and microphone). Additionally, you will be required to be visible on camera at all times during the interview. Audio from the interviews will be recorded. These recordings will be stored on a HIPAA compliant online storage platform and viewed only by the researcher. Participating in this study may involve conversations about difficult topics and has the risk to cause feelings of distress. Should you disclose imminent risk of danger to yourself or others, I am required, as a mandated reporter, to violate the confidentiality of the interview and inform local authorities. Upon completion of this survey, you will be provided with a list of national crisis lines, in the event of discomfort with topics discussed in the interview. By completing this study, you will be entered into a raffle for the opportunity to win one \$100 Amazon gift card. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Additionally, once you start the study, you are free to withdraw at any time. The information gathered in this study will be kept confidential and your responses anonymous. All names identified in the interview transcript will be changed to a non-identifiable label (e.g., "Participant A"). If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact the primary researcher, Isaac Cheng, at [icheng@antioch.edu](mailto:icheng@antioch.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair Dr. Melissa Kennedy at [mkennedy1@antioch.edu](mailto:mkennedy1@antioch.edu). The IRB is a group of individuals who review research studies and protect the rights of research participants. Should you choose to continue and participate in the study, please click "I understand". If you do not consent, please exit by closing this window. Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Mark only one oval.*

I understand and consent to participating in this study, if eligible, and having the audio of my interview recorded

I do not consent    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*

### Demographics

2. What is your age? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Under 18    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*

18 to 25

Above 25    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*

3. Are you Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish Origin? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

4. If yes, which ethnicity **best** describes you?

If no, please ignore this question.

*Mark only one oval.*

Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano/a/x

Puerto Rican

Cuban

Other: \_\_\_\_\_



5. Which of the following **best** describes your race? Select all that apply: \*

*Check all that apply.*

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. What sex were you assigned at birth on your *original birth certificate*? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male
- Female *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Decline to answer *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- I do not know

7. Which of the following **best** describes your current gender identity? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male
- Female *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Transgender (MTF) *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Transgender (FTM) *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Nonbinary, genderfluid, or genderqueer *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- I am not sure
- I don't know what this question means
- Decline to answer *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Which of the following **best** represents how you think of your sexual orientation? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Gay or Lesbian    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Straight or heterosexual
- Bisexual, pansexual, or queer    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Asexual    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- I am not sure
- I don't know what this question means
- Decline to answer    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

9. What is the highest grade or year of school you have completed? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Never attended school or only attended kindergarten
- Grades 1 through 8 (Elementary)
- Grades 9 through 11 (Some high school)
- Grade 12 or GED (High school graduate)
- College for 1 to 3 years (Some college or technical school)
- College for 4+ years (College graduate)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Which of the following best describes your annual household income from all sources? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$30,000
- \$30,000 to \$40,000
- \$40,000 to \$50,000
- \$50,000 to \$60,000
- \$60,000 to \$70,000
- \$70,000 to \$80,000
- \$80,000 to \$100,000
- \$100,000 to \$150,000
- \$150,000 to \$200,000
- More than \$200,000

11. Which of the following best describes your employment status? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Employed for wages
- Self-Employed
- Out of work for 1 year or more
- Out of work for less than 1 year
- Homemaker
- Student
- Retired
- Unable to work
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you live in the United States? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes  
 No *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*

13. Are you fluent in English? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes  
 No *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*

Highly Visual Social Media Usage

14. Do you use any of the following highly visual social media platforms? \*

YouTube  
Instagram  
Facebook  
Snapchat  
TikTok

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes  
 No *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*

Highly Visual Social Media Usage (cont.)

15. If you selected YouTube, please give your best estimate of how much time you spend per day using this platform \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 15 minutes or less    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 30 minutes    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 45 minutes
- 60 minutes or more
- I did not select YouTube

16. If you selected Tiktok, please give your best estimate of how much time you spend per day using this platform \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 15 minutes or less    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 30 minutes    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 45 minutes
- 60 minutes or more
- I did not select Tiktok

17. If you selected Instagram, please give your best estimate of how much time you spend per day using this platform \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 15 minutes or less    *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 30 minutes
- 45 minutes
- 60 minutes or more
- I did not select Instagram

18. If you selected Facebook, please give your best estimate of how much time you spend per day using this platform \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 15 minutes or less      *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 30 minutes
- 45 minutes
- 60 minutes or more
- I did not select Facebook

19. If you selected Snapchat, please give your best estimate of how much time you spend per day using this platform \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 15 minutes or less      *Skip to section 6 (Eligibility)*
- 30 minutes
- 45 minutes
- 60 minutes or more
- I did not select Snapchat

Based on your responses, you may be eligible for this study.

Please provide your contact information below. You may be contacted by the researcher to schedule a virtual interview about your HVSM usage and body image. It will be approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. After the interview, you will be entered into a raffle to win one \$100 Amazon gift card.

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Please contact [icheng@antioch.edu](mailto:icheng@antioch.edu) if you have any questions.

#### Eligibility

##### National Crisis Hotlines and Resources

- Call or text 988, or chat [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org) to be connected to the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#).
- Text HOME to 741-741 to reach the [Crisis Text Line](#).
- Call 1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678678 to be connected to [The Trevor Project](#), a national 24-hour, toll free confidential suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth
- Visit [Mental Health America's Resources for Immediate Response](#) for more crisis resources.

20. First and Last Name \*

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21. Which State in the USA do you live in? \*

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22. Email address \*

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## Eligibility

Based on your responses, you are not eligible for this study. Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Feel free to reach out to the principal investigator, Isaac Cheng, at  if you have any questions. Thank you! You may close this window.



## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER



# SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

For a research study exploring how highly visual social media engagement influences young men's body image

## Eligibility:

- Men between ages of 18-25
- Use YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and/or Tiktok for more than 30 minutes a day

IF ELIGIBLE, YOU WILL BE INVITED TO A 45-60 MINUTE CONFIDENTIAL VIDEO INTERVIEW AND ENTERED INTO A RAFFLE TO WIN ONE \$100 AMAZON GIFT CARD

INTERESTED? TAKE THIS SURVEY TO SEE IF YOU ARE ELIGIBLE FOR THE STUDY:



SCAN ME

Principal Investigator:  
Isaac Cheng, MA.  
PsyD Candidate  
Antioch University Seattle

Dissertation Chair:  
Melissa Kennedy, PhD

This study has been approved by the Antioch University Seattle IRB

## **APPENDIX D: LIST OF QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR INTERVIEWER**

### Introduction:

“Hello! Thank you for taking time to participate in this study. In this interview, I’m going to ask you some questions about your social media usage and any resulting impacts it might have on your body image. Please take as much time as you need to think about the questions. If at any point you feel uncomfortable and do not wish to continue, please let me know and we will stop. At the end of the interview, you will be eligible to be entered into a raffle for the chance to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. I would also like to remind you that this conversation is being recorded. Any questions before we begin?”

### Opening Questions/Warm up:

- I would like to learn about your experience with [HVSM platform endorsed in survey].  
Can you tell me about your normal routine on [HVSM platform]?
- Which pages or profiles do you follow most closely? Why?
- If you post content, what kinds of content do you post? How do you feel about posting something?

### Body Image Questions:

- What kind of influence does [HVSM platform] have on your own perception of yourself and your body?
- Can you tell me about a time where you have felt self-conscious about your appearance due to content you saw on [HVSM platform]?
- What aspect of [HVSM platform] do you find the most impacting on your feelings about the way you look?

- If you could alter the way you appear on [HVSM platform], what kind of changes would you make, if any?

#### Concluding Mental Health History Questions

- Have you ever sought mental health services before?
  - If so, were any services provided for depression? Body image concerns? Anxiety?  
An eating disorder?

#### General Prompts:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- Can you expand on that?
- Can you think of an example?
- How did/do you feel about that?
- What's that like for you?