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INSTAGRAM VS REALITY: PERFECTIONISTIC INSTAGRAM USE AND BODY DISSATISFACTION IN YOUNG MEN

Rhea Milson



ABSTRACT

Presenting perfection on Instagram is negatively associated with body dissatisfaction in young women. However, it is unclear whether this is the case for young men. I conducted a cross-sectional, survey-based study, recruiting a non-clinical sample of men ($N = 262$), to examine relationships between perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram and body dissatisfaction. Findings revealed that perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram was positively associated with body dissatisfaction (drive for muscularity and height). Overall, these findings offer initial support for examining perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram and its utility in understanding male body dissatisfaction.

Keywords: male body image, male body dissatisfaction, body image, perfectionistic self-presentation, Instagram



INTRODUCTION

Young men are increasingly exposed to mesomorphic body ideals via Instagram (Curran et al., 2019; Dixon, 2025). Thus, young men are experiencing greater pressure to appear perfect (perfectionistic self-presentation) online, as well as offline, leading to increased body image concerns (Grugan & Wright, 2023; Patarinski et al., 2023). In the present study, I examine perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram and its association with body dissatisfaction in young men.

Body Dissatisfaction

Traditionally, research has examined women's body image and associated risks for disordered eating (Hyam et al., 2023; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2020; Trafford et al., 2023). More recently, research considers how men and women's body ideals differ. The "mesomorphic ideal" (i.e., tall, muscular, lean; Tylka, 2021), contrasts women's body ideals, via a drive for muscularity, rather than a drive for thinness (Fatt et al., 2019; Fischetti et al., 2020; Tylka, 2021). Therefore, men's body satisfaction warrants investigation of its own.

Research suggests that men score higher than women on muscularity-oriented body dissatisfaction, drive for muscularity is maintained over time (unlike drive for thinness) and male fat dissatisfaction is positively correlated with disordered eating (Karazsia et al., 2017; Mayo et al., 2014). More recently, Murnen et al. (2023) reported that drive for muscularity may represent drive for masculinity, aligning with the theory of precarious manhood (Mills et al., 2023; Vandello & Bosson, 2013), in which masculinity is difficult to gain but easy to lose. This notion also supports the threatened masculinity theory of male body dissatisfaction, in which men who endorse traditional gender norms experience an identity threat following increasing gender equality in society. Thus, men who endorse masculine norms are more likely to experience muscularity-oriented dissatisfaction (Cunningham et al., 2020; Frederick et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2013), disordered eating (i.e., engaging with a bulking/cutting cycle; Murray et al., 2012), and muscle dysmorphia (extreme preoccupation with, and drive for, muscularity; Grugan et al., 2023; Grunewald et al., 2022). Alongside a drive for muscularity and leanness, research suggests a third component of male body image – height (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005), as men who experience greater height dissatisfaction are more likely to conform to masculine norms (Winegard et al., 2014), taller men are more satisfied with their height (O'Gorman et al., 2019) and height dissatisfaction is positively associated with disordered eating in young men (Talbot & Mahlberg, 2023).

Overall, men's body satisfaction can be characterised by a drive for muscularity, low body fat and height, particularly for men who endorse masculine norms, and dissatisfaction can lead to increased disordered eating (Grogan, 2021; Kearney-Cooke & Steichen-Asch, 2014). To further understand the development/maintenance of eating disorders in young men, it is important to investigate factors that contribute to body dissatisfaction in non-clinical samples.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality trait, depicted by striving for flawlessness (Stoeber, 2017). Hewitt and Flett (1990) differentiated three dimensions; self-



oriented (important for one to be perfect), other-oriented (important for others to be perfect) and socially prescribed (other people believe it is important for one to be perfect). Self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionistic men are likely to experience increased drive for muscularity, low body fat and height (Davis et al., 2005; Grammas & Schwartz, 2009), increasing the risk of muscle dysmorphia and disordered eating (Patarinski et al., 2023). It appears that men who believe it is important to be perfect or believe that others think it is important for them to be perfect (i.e., embody the mesomorphic ideal) are likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies and be at an increased risk of disordered eating.

Perfectionistic Self-Presentation

Hewitt and colleagues (2003) suggest perfectionism goes beyond internally focused traits (the desire to be perfect) and propose an externally focused component, referred to as perfectionistic self-presentation (the desire to *appear* perfect). Perfectionistic self-presentation consists of three dimensions: perfectionistic self-promotion (explicitly presenting perfection), non-display of imperfection (concealing imperfect behaviours) and non-disclosure of imperfection (concealing imperfect disclosures; Hewitt et al., 2017). Thus, the focus of perfectionistic self-presentation is to understand the observable behaviours/strategies used to promote perfection and conceal imperfection, advancing the trait perfectionism literature.

Hashmi et al. (2022) found that perfectionistic self-presentation was associated with body dissatisfaction in men, with non-display of imperfection and perfectionistic self-promotion exhibiting the largest correlations. Grugan et al. (2023) further found that perfectionistic self-presentation predicted muscle dysmorphia, beyond trait perfectionism, highlighting the unique contribution of perfectionistic self-presentation. Lundqvist et al. (2024) further reported that perfectionistic self-promotion and non-display of imperfection significantly predicted body satisfaction in men, but non-disclosure of imperfection did not, concluding that gender significantly moderated the effect, as non-disclosure of imperfection did predict body satisfaction in women. It appears non-display of imperfection and perfectionistic self-promotion may be most important when examining men's body satisfaction. However, today, young men are not only presenting perfection offline (as in previous research), but also online, via social media.

Perfectionistic Self-Presentation on Instagram

The transactional model of social media and body concerns (Perloff, 2014) suggests that perfectionism, when combined with social media use, can increase body image concerns. This model posits that perfectionistic individuals increasingly use highly visual platforms, such as Instagram (as this platform promotes the notion of *appearing* perfect, aligning with perfectionistic self-presentation; Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023), and evaluate their appearance as inferior (in accordance with social comparison theory; Festinger, 1954). This perfectionistic Instagram use results in greater body dissatisfaction (Downey & Chang, 2007; McComb & Mills., 2022). Although this model was developed to explain the effects of social media use on women's body image, this model may also conceptualise men's body dissatisfaction. Like women, men are continually exposed to unachievable body standards on Instagram. Via content analysis, Gültzow et al. (2020) found that most sampled Instagram posts depicted muscularity and leanness, and mesomorphic-oriented content received greater engagement (i.e., likes/comments). Further research suggests that young men exposed to mesomorphic-ideal content and fitspiration content (an amalgamation of "fitness" and "inspiration", designed



to promote exercise/healthy lifestyle), report feeling less satisfied with their muscularity/height (Baron et al., 2021; Konings, 2020; Paulson, 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). This suggests that endorsement of masculine norms online, as well as offline, contribute to men's body dissatisfaction. Moreover, despite gender differences in body ideals, Instagram use promotes body dissatisfaction in both men and women.

Perfectionistic self-presentation and Instagram use individually contribute to body dissatisfaction in young men. However, further research is needed to specifically examine perfectionistic Instagram use and body dissatisfaction. Bolt (2019) reported that self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionistic men, who regularly use Instagram, report greater drive for muscularity. However, this study examined trait perfectionism; therefore, the role of perfectionistic self-presentation remains unclear. Milson and Madigan (2024) found that perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram predicted body satisfaction in women. However, it is unclear whether this is also the case for men.

The Present Study

This cross-sectional study aimed to examine relationships between perfectionistic self-presentation (perfectionistic self-promotion/non-display of imperfection) in the context of Instagram use, and body dissatisfaction (drive for muscularity, low body fat and height) in young men. I hypothesised that perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram would be positively associated with body dissatisfaction.

METHODS

Participants

262 male Instagram users, aged 18-34 years ($M = 23.03$, $SD = 4.68$), were recruited from the United Kingdom via opportunity sampling using Instagram/Facebook. Participants with an eating/body image disorder diagnosis were excluded, as I was interested in recruiting non-clinical samples to examine preventative factors. Regarding ethnicity, 71.3% identified as white, 8.4% identified as black, 9.2% identified as Asian, 3.1% identified as mixed two or more ethnic groups, 4.6% identified as other and 1.5% preferred not to say. Regarding sexual orientation, 73.3% identified as straight, 9.5% identified as gay, 12.6% identified as bisexual, 2.3% identified as pansexual, 1.9% identified as asexual and .4% identified as other. A priori power analysis, via GPower, using an alpha of .05 (Miller & Ulrich, 2019), a power of .80 (Abraham & Russell, 2008; Bakker et al., 2016), and a previous meta correlation of .24 (Limburg et al., 2017), estimate a required sample size of 131 participants.

Measures

Perfectionistic Self-Presentation. I contextualized the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (Hewitt et al., 2003) to measure perfectionistic self-promotion and non-display of imperfection on Instagram. The perfectionistic self-promotion subscale measured presentation of perfection on Instagram (e.g., "I must always appear to be perfect on Instagram.") The non-display of imperfection subscale measured concealment of imperfect behaviours on Instagram (e.g., "I will do almost anything to cover up a mistake on Instagram.") This measure consisted of 20 items, using a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). This adapted measure has shown to be reliable, with high internal consistency across subscales ($\alpha = .90-.93$) and valid, via confirmatory factor analysis (Milson et al., 2024).



Body Dissatisfaction. I used the Male Body Attitudes Scale (Tylka et al., 2005) to measure body dissatisfaction. assessing drive for muscularity (e.g., “I think I have too little muscle on my body.”), low body fat (e.g., “I think I have too much fat on my body.”) and height (e.g., “I wish I were taller.”). This measure consisted of 24 items, using a 6-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from never (1) to always (6), with high internal consistency across subscales ($\alpha = .82-.94$; Tylka et al., 2005).

Procedure

Ethical clearance for all procedures was approved by the relevant ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained for all participants and questionnaires were distributed on Qualtrics, via Instagram/Facebook.

Analytic Strategy

I screened for outliers and assessed scale internal consistency. I conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) for the contextualized Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale. To evaluate model fit, I examined a range of incremental and absolute fit indices, including the χ^2 statistic, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI), (Hu et al., 1999; MacCallum & Austin, 2000). The following criteria were indicative of acceptable model fit: RMSEA < .10, SRMR < .10, CFI > .90 (Marsh et al., 2004). To examine relationships between perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram and body dissatisfaction, I used correlation and multiple regression.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

IMB SPSS Statistics 29 was used to analyse the data. 291 participants responded to the survey. 29 participants were excluded from further analyses, due to missing/incomplete data. Multivariate and univariate outliers (i.e., standardised scores that were greater than $z = 3.29$) were screened; no outliers were detected. All scales showed acceptable Cronbach’s alphas (see Table 1). CFA for the contextualized Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale deemed the two-factor model to provide an adequate fit to the data, based on most fit indices ($\chi^2 = 443.43$, $df = 169$, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .06, CFI = .88). Additionally, all factor loadings were significant and an adequate size ($> .30$; Comrey & Lee, 2013).

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1. I found small-medium positive correlations between both dimensions of perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram and drive for muscularity ($p < .001$) and height ($p < .001$). I also found a small positive correlation between perfectionistic self-promotion on Instagram and low body fat ($p < .05$). I did not find a significant correlation between non-display of imperfection on Instagram and low body fat ($p = .110$). In line with Cohen (1992), I regarded correlations with absolute values of .10, .30, and .50 as small, medium, and large.

**Table 1***Bivariate Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alphas.*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perfectionistic Self-Promotion					
2. Non-Display of Imperfection	.83***				
3. Drive for Muscularity	.23***	.31***			
4. Low Body Fat	.14*	.10	.41***		
5. Height	.32***	.32***	.32***	.28***	
M	40.34	40.22	3.40	3.36	3.03
SD	13.54	12.53	1.07	1.20	1.46
Cronbach's Alpha	.90	.87	.88	.93	.71

Note. $N = 262$. *** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$.

Multiple Regression

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine how perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram predicts drive for muscularity (Model 1), low body fat (Model 2) and height (Model 3).

Multicollinearity was assessed via tolerance scores, which were greater than .1 (Nakarami, 2024). Normality was assessed via the Shapiro-Wilk Test, showing normal distribution for standardised and unstandardised residuals ($p > .05$; Yang & Berdine, 2021). Linearity was assessed via scatterplots, with no indication of u-shaped/curved patterns.

Model 1 accounted for 9.6% of the variance in drive for muscularity ($R^2 = .096$, $f(2,259) = 13.76$, $p < .001$). Non-display of imperfection significantly contributed to the model. Perfectionistic self-promotion did not significantly contribute to the model (see Table 2).

Model 2 accounted for 2.0% of the variance in low body fat ($R^2 = .020$, $f(2,259) = 2.64$, $p = .073$). Non-display of imperfection and perfectionistic self-promotion did not significantly contribute to the model (see Table 2).

Model 3 accounted for 11.0% of the variance in height ($R^2 = .110$, $f(2,259) = 16.08$, $p < .001$). Non-display of imperfection and perfectionistic self-promotion did not significantly contribute to the model (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Summary of Multiple Regression Predicting Body Dissatisfaction.*

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Model 1 (Drive for Muscularity)				
Perfectionistic Self-Promotion	-.006	.008	-.074	.490
Non-Display of Imperfection	.031	.009	.368	< .001
Model 2 (Low Body Fat)				
Perfectionistic Self-Promotion	.016	.010	.182	.102
Non-Display of Imperfection	-.005	.011	-.052	.638
Model 3 (Height)				
Perfectionistic Self-Promotion	.021	.011	.191	.072
Non-Display of Imperfection	.018	.012	.156	.140

Note. $N = 262$. b = Unstandardised Coefficient. SE = Standard Error. β = Standardised Coefficient. P = Significance Value.

DISCUSSION

I examined the relationship between perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram and body dissatisfaction in young men. I found that perfectionistic self-presentation was significantly associated with body dissatisfaction, and non-display of imperfection was the most important unique predictor for drive for muscularity.

I expected that men who present themselves as perfect on Instagram would be less satisfied with their bodies, via a greater drive for muscularity. I found support for this positive association, aligning with previous work examining trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation offline (Hicks et al., 2022; Grugan et al., 2023; Patarinski et al., 2023). I furthered these previous findings, suggesting that perfectionistic self-presentation predicts drive for muscularity online, as well as offline. Moreover, I found that non-display of imperfection on Instagram was the most important dimension, in line with previous findings examining women's body satisfaction (Milson et al., 2024).

I also expected that men who present themselves as perfect on Instagram will report greater desire for taller stature. I found support for this positive association, supporting previous research examining trait perfectionism (Grammas et al., 2009). However, I expanded on previous work, suggesting that the contribution of perfectionism goes beyond traits and offline contexts.

Finally, I expected that men who present themselves as perfect on Instagram will report greater desire for low body fat. I found that perfectionistic self-promotion was positively associated with desire for low body fat, aligning with previous research (Grammas et al., 2009; Grugan et al., 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2020). At odds with expectations, perfectionistic self-presentation overall did not predict desire for low body fat. One explanation may be that these



effects could flow in the reverse direction, as Milson et al. (2024) suggest that women who are less satisfied with their bodies may be more likely to promote perfection on Instagram. This may also be the case for young men, i.e., men who are dissatisfied with their bodies may promote their perfection on Instagram, in pursuit of validation (via likes/comments), in line with the transactional model of social media and body concerns (Perloff, 2014). Therefore, longer-term follow-ups are needed to confirm temporal precedence. The limited sociocultural diversity in the present sample may provide another explanation. Research suggests that gay men are more likely to restrict their eating to promote leanness, whereas straight men tend to restrict to promote muscularity (Knight et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2011). As nearly three-quarters of the present sample identified as straight, this may explain why perfectionistic self-presentation was positively associated with drive for muscularity but not drive for low body fat. Future research should increase sociocultural diversity to examine this further.

IMPLICATIONS

My findings highlight that young man who present perfection on Instagram are more dissatisfied with their bodies. Perfectionistic self-presentation may be a useful target for intervention for clinicians working with young men experiencing body image/eating issues, as addressing underlying perfectionistic self-presentation can lead to greater treatment outcomes (Dalle Grave et al., 2021; Fairburn, 2008; Shafran et al., 2018). Moreover, Instagram use could be used to assess underlying perfectionistic self-presentation in body dissatisfaction, and treat these behaviours via psychoeducation, social media literacy and short-term cognitive behavioural interventions (Curran et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although my findings provide initial support for the importance of examining perfectionistic self-presentation on Instagram, these findings are tentative, due to the cross-sectional design. Longitudinal data is required to understand temporal precedence and examine these relationships over time (Caruana et al., 2015).

Perfectionistic men wish to present themselves as flawless (Hewitt et al., 2017), which may limit the use of self-report measures due to social desirability bias. Future research should use observations and controlled experiments.

I recruited men aged 18-34 years, as men within this age range use Instagram most frequently (Dixon, 2025). However, there may be variance in relation to body image (e.g., older men may experience greater body satisfaction than younger men; McGuinness & Taylor, 2016) and social media use (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). I found a small negative correlation between age and Height, and no correlation between age and the other body dissatisfaction and perfectionistic self-presentation dimensions. Thus, the diversity of ages in the present sample did not appear to affect findings; however, future research should examine narrower age ranges and control for age effects (Henrich et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

In the present study, I examined perfectionistic Instagram use and found that young men who present themselves as perfect on Instagram (particularly concealing the display of imperfection) are more dissatisfied with their bodies. I, thus, find initial evidence that this may



be a useful way of conceptualising perfectionistic self-presentation to further understand male body dissatisfaction, particularly regarding drive for muscularity and height.

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