

Social Media and Body Image

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COM 201: Social Media: History, Theory

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Dec. 4, 2020

There are countless ways in which one uses social media, but one of the most common reasons they use it is to engage with other peoples' lives (Kim et al., 2017). Other reasons include but are not limited to: entertainment, being informed, addiction, fear of missing out and self-status seeking (Kim et al., 2017; Dutot, 2020; Reer et al., 2019). By using a social media account, one has control over what content they wish to view and engage with, which makes platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, among others, very popular (Lee et al., 2014). But like every brilliant entity, there are some downfalls one must keep in the back of their mind.

As the world has developed more advanced technologies, many people have been using forms of entertainment to feel good, specifically social media. Throughout the twenty-tens, social media outlets became more popular among young people (Lee et al., 2014) and show no signs of losing traction, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. Many people like social media for the ability to connect with others but others have realized that social media has a negative impact on their psychological well-being (Dutot, 2020). That is why social media has influenced the way young people not only view others, but themselves.

One of the most common habits people have, whether realized or not, is comparing themselves to others, also known as the social comparison theory. This is the idea where individuals evaluate their lives by asking themselves 'how are you doing' and 'what should I do now' (Reer et al., 2019). As it relates to body image, it would be appropriate to conclude that if a person does not feel well, they may change their lifestyle that will help them look and feel better. Recent research from Rodgers et al. (2020) has suggested that as a result of viewing the content of other people, one is influenced to physically change themselves to the point where they emulate their idol. Not only that, but several social media platforms have capabilities where they

can block out content that does not suit a user's views and preferences and then display the pictures that do (Lee et al., 2014). So if a male is consistently looking at bodybuilding content, the app will recognize that pattern and adjust their algorithm so it shows the user pictures of fitness models and muscular celebrities. Therefore, it can be inferred that more exposure to desirable, user-specific content can motivate one to imitate a certain image.

Throughout the years, ideal male and female representations have been established and frequently modified by countless media forums (Kim et al., 2017; Jackson & Lyons, 2012). Today, many believe that basic external characteristics for an ideal female image include being slender and fit while men aspire to be active and strong with less fat (Prnjak et al., 2020; Jackson & Lyons, 2012). When a male or female possesses physical traits that are universally accepted, he/she will use the platforms, such as social media, they have and flex their features to seek status and support from their audiences (Lee et al., 2014). Although looking at someone who may have a more desirable appearance may cause one who isn't as attractive to feel insecure about themselves (Rodgers et al., 2020). For instance, if an overweight female is on Instagram and views a picture of a thin bikini model, it is possible that they may feel disgusted with themselves because exposure to content with ideal body images has harmful effects on people, which may trigger depression, anxiety and psychological distress (Jackson & Lyons, 2012; Reer et al., 2019). The same idea can be applied to males: one who views pictures of male muscular fitness influencers may be inclined to emulate their physiques to develop a more masculine identity not only to please themselves, but to please women (Jackson & Lyons, 2012; Prnjak et al., 2020). However, according to Rodgers et al. (2020) sometimes one will go to dangerous lengths just to look perfect.

In a world where mass media advertises the desire for thin body types for young women, it can be inferred that women will undergo serious habits to obtain that image (Lee et al., 2014; Rodgers et al., 2020). This is particularly a huge issue young women face not just in the United States, but in Asia and Western European nations (Lee et al., 2014; Jackson & Lyons, 2012). Significant research from Jackson and Lyons (2012) and Prnjak et al. (2020) has suggested that viewing pictures of the ‘perfect body’ on social media has led to cosmetic surgery and eating disorders among other practices. The same thing goes for men: seeing someone with a muscular frame that they do not have leads to internalization, which may lead to unhealthy exercise habits (Rodgers et al., 2020). That internalization is caused by the fear of missing out (FoMO). Simply put, FoMO is the desire for one to stay connected with others because he/she feels excluded from the fun (Dutot, 2020; Reer et al., 2019). This fundamental idea can be applied to social media use and body image. In fact, it can be argued that FoMO is a factor that contributes to a dangerous lifestyle. For instance, if an overweight man sees a picture of a ripped bodybuilder, he may want to be like him. Other than a remarkable appearance, he may want to look like that because he may feel that he is “missing out” on potential new friends, attention, likes or comments that his role model is receiving. The potential fame and attention the person may get out of using steroids or eating absurd amounts of food to look bigger is what inspires him to begin changing in the first place, since men believe that larger bodies are more desirable (Prnjak et al., 2020).

Since social media is particularly popular among young and athletic individuals, (Lee et al., 2014; Dutot, 2020), it can be concluded that there is a positive correlation between social media and body image. Studies completed by Kim et al. (2017) indicate that people who are active in college use social media more than those who aren’t. This would make sense, especially

for men, because people who are deemed athletic have attractive-looking physiques and, as mentioned earlier, one who possesses an ideal image may be inclined to flaunt it (Lee et al., 2014). Furthermore, research conducted by Prnjak et al. (2020) concluded that women desire a more slender frame. The reason why that makes sense is because physical appearance trumps everything else; people who look great are more likely to be rich, likable and smarter (Jackson & Lyons, 2012). Finally, Lee et al. (2014) concluded that females who are active on social media are often people who have better bodies. This can be attributed to the fact that they want to seek acceptance from others and once they have obtained it, they will continue to post more.

It has been established that social media use has negatively impacted the lives of countless young people. Popular social media applications have led to hours of scrolling, internalization and the desire to achieve beauty standards that are quite frankly unattainable (Rodgers et al., 2020; Prnjak et al., 2020; Jackson & Lyons, 2012). The fact is there are countless alternatives one can use to feel better about themselves mentally and physically. Exercising is a popular way for people to lose or gain weight, reduce stress and be more productive with their lives, not to mention it has excellent health benefits. Going on a date with someone you really like has served people well as it encourages both individuals to stay off their phones and focus on each other. Even going on a day trip with friends or family is sufficient enough to promote interaction and discourage social media use. All of these strategies can be very fun and only require yourself and others you know. With that said, the key to less social media use is constantly keeping yourself busy, whether it is with sports, friends, or projects around the house. If you can do that, you will live a much healthier and fulfilled life.

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