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Social Media & Negative Effects on Body Image

By

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Keywords

Body Dissatisfaction, Mental Health, Body Image, Social Media, Social Comparison, Upward Comparison

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 2010's, social media has grown to affect every aspect of our daily lives. With children using it earlier in their lives, they are getting mass exposure to societal ideals about what body type should be. This has negatively impacted adolescents' view of body image, which has led to dissatisfaction with their own bodies. This leads to depressive symptoms and even in some cases suicide, which has gone up among adolescents in the past decade. The article that follows details how and why these issues occur, as well as solutions to fix them. These solutions discussed include education on body type, parental intervention before the age of adolescence, and the spread of body positive messaging.

Social networks, which rose to popularity with early examples such as Facebook and Myspace, have become a massive part of our daily lives. The amount of time spent on social media during formative years has negatively impacted a whole generation's perception of body image. When Alyssa Siaphoo & Zahra Vahedi (2019) studied the issue, they found that there are 3.5 billion active users on social media sites all over the world. This number is only increasing by the year, as is the number of hours per day spent using social media (259). As of 2015, Jean Twenge (2017) found that more than 92% of teens and young adults owned a smartphone in the USA (14), with that figure increasing since then. Children are increasingly using smartphones and social media at a young age, according to a team of researchers led by Jasmine Fardouly (2018). Adolescents, children from ages 13-17, are the most likely age-group to make appearance-based comparisons, which is comparing your own appearance to that of others. This leads to negative view of body image, depression, and even to a lesser satisfaction with life (1457). Through the perpetuation of unrealistic body ideals, social media has led to negative perception of our own bodies, as well as our views about what our body should be. Social media is a relatively new, but very real wicked problem that our world faces.

Wicked problems, according to Horst Rittel & Melvin Webber (1973) are ill-defined and unique problems that have no clear-cut solutions or measures of success or failure. Solutions to these issues cannot be measured by a completely true or completely false scale, they can only be measured by people's opinion of good or bad. They cannot be solved like a math equation that results in only one answer. Additionally, even when asked what the solution should be, every single person's answer will be different. Furthermore, solutions to these problems will create more repercussions for however long the problem is present. These wicked problems are a result of another problem, while also creating problems themselves (160-166). The current problem,

social media use, is probably one of the more “wicked” issues in our lives. Social media is not going anywhere anytime soon. It’s influence is affecting almost every part of our lives, especially due to the lockdowns that occurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers are attempting to find the root cause of social media’s effect on mental health and body image perception. Like many other wicked problems, it is hard to pinpoint these causes. There may be many other factors that can cause these negative results, including too much use, using solely photo-based applications, comparison to others, or possibly all three (Twenge & Martin, 2020, Holland & Tiggemann, 2016, Fardouly et al., 2018). The answers are not black and white, but researchers are taking steps to study what causes these complex issues.

While there may be multiple causes for a skewed view of body image and negative mental health effects, most researchers agree on social comparison. The theory of social comparison, developed by Leon Festinger (1954), states that people have a natural drive to assess their own opinions and abilities. It also states that without any objective criteria, people are most likely to compare their opinions and looks to other people. Lastly, these comparisons are more likely to be made with others who are similar to the individual (117-121). This shows that it is almost in our nature to compare ourselves to others. According to a team of researchers led by Rachel Rodgers (2020), upward comparison is when a person compares their appearance with others who they see as being more attractive than themselves (400). This is what either motivates an individual or leads to negative views of oneself. Unfortunately, a team of researchers led by Todd Morrison (2004) asserted that individuals are more likely to engage in upward comparison than downward comparison (575). Valentina Boursier and a team of researchers (2020) attribute this to adolescents beginning to form their own identity. They look for confirmation from others similar to them and tend to compare to these they view as better looking (3-6). Morrison and his

team (2004) show that this phenomenon is not new, before the social media boom of the 2010s, adolescents would compare themselves to celebrities with who they viewed as having an “ideal body type.” This is problematic, as of 2004 the average American woman under 30 has grown progressively heavier and media images have grown thinner. The research group led by Morrison found a positive correlation that basing one’s appearance on celebrities in traditional media (movies, TV, fashion magazines) led to a negative view of body image (572-585). Alyssa Saiphoo & Zahra Vahedi (2019) have found that a skewed perception of body image is an outcome among adolescents when it comes to social media as well (259). The problem has been traditional media in the past, but social media has brought on different aspects on comparison that were not present before.

Upward social comparison, which happens virtually every day, for an increasing number of hours a day (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019), is detrimental to view of body image, and mental health as a whole. Jiyoung Chae (2017) points out that one major cause of this comparison is taking selfies on photo-based social media. People who take more selfies more often are creating greater opportunity to critique their own looks. People tend to turn to social media to compare and improve their selfies based on what they see in others’ pictures. Chae also found that those who engage in taking selfies may think they look good, but they want to look better on the online format to receive positive reactions from an audience of peers. While people wanting to look better only for online formats may seem like a positive aspect, it is actually dangerous. Chae asserts that social media users may lose connection between their edited, idealized online pictures and reality. This can result in either more dissatisfaction, or even measures to change ones appearance such as plastic surgery (374-376). While plastic surgery is an extreme case, losing sight of reality in pictures from social media can result in anxiety about appearance.

Social comparison will happen, everyone does it in some form. The negative effects have been more pronounced in females than males, but they still both groups are affected, as reported by a research group led by Valentina Boursier (2020). Female use of social media is higher than that of men. They spend more time on social media as well as engaging more in posting and sharing pictures (4). Jean Twenge & Gabrielle Martin (2020) agree with this point, adding that social relationships are more central to girls' well-being than to boys' well-being. This leads to females having higher social expectancies for themselves as well as more anxiety about their online appearance (100). Boursier (2020) asserts that males also have appearance anxiety when sharing online, though they engage in social media less than females. Male appearance anxiety, just like females, increases the more that they engage in media (5). According to Peerayuth Charoensukmongkol (2018), teenagers tend to engage in a sort of social competition with others in their social group. The more time spent on social media only increases this competition as well as envy among the group. This leads to more social comparison among the friend group, which can lead to negative outcomes, such as anxiety about their appearance, amongst the individuals (76-77). This shows that from a young age, we begin comparing ourselves to others like us. Social media use is not only occurring earlier in the lives of children who use social media, but it is happening more frequently. This is only inflating the issue of body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety at a young age, which can lead to serious negative outcomes later on in life.

A group of researchers led by Jean Twenge (2017) state that social media use can eventually lead to depression and unfortunately in extreme cases suicide. The group reported that suicide rates had been going down amongst adolescents prior to 2010. From 2010 to 2015 however, this number began to rise, especially among females (13). Twenge and Gabrielle

Martin (2020) noted that since 2011 rates of self-harm had also risen dramatically (100). Twenge and her associates (2017) discuss further that during the same period, social media came to prominence with adolescents increasingly using it. This doesn't seem to be a coincidence, when studied, participants in Gen Z were experiencing more mental health issues than the previous generations, millennials and Gen X, did at their age, with more adolescents in Gen Z committing suicide (13). Researchers led by Rachel Rodgers (2020) assert that overexposure to thin body ideals that are perpetuated on social media correlated with self-esteem issues and depressive symptoms. This leads to upward comparison as well as higher body dissatisfaction (400). Not only can social media use affect how we see the world, but this issue can also lead to the unfortunate to someone's life. It is time for some real and immediate change to be enacted to stamp out these negative outcomes. The more social media weaves its way into our daily lives, the worse off we, as well as future generations, will be.

While this future may sound bleak, there are things that we can do to help educate people, especially preadolescents, on this issue. A team of researchers led by Jasmine Fardouly (2018) reported that parental management of preadolescents' (ages 10-12) time spent on social media was associated with better mental health (1458). Marika Tiggeman and Grace Holland (2016) suggest that such change would be impossible to implement (108). Despite this, Fardouly and her team (2018) state that its implementation resulted in preadolescents comparing themselves less than those who had not had the parental intervention when using social media. The researchers did admit however, that this would have to be used before children reach adolescence, which is age 13. This is when children start to establish a sense of independence as a person, and as a result will be less responsive to parental oversight (1458-1464). This would have to be implemented in a nonconfrontational and educational way. Even before the age of adolescence,

too much oversight would not get a positive reaction from the child. This adjustment could help improve mental health from a young age. Education on body image, paired with parental management would have extremely positive results into adulthood.

The body positivity movement has also yielded positive effect in combating body dissatisfaction. A team of researchers led by Kate Mulgrew (2019) noted that the body positivity movement focuses on body appreciation, acceptance, love of oneself, and respect to their own body. The group stated that the movement has led to a better understanding of how women can positively view themselves. The researchers also found realistic workout ads that show women in a natural state (no makeup, flushed face, sweaty, body fat jigging) led to women thinking more positively about their own workout experiences (102-103). That example clearly shows the theory of social comparison; these women are viewing people who are similar to them, and as a result feel more comfortable with that image. The study by Mulgrew and her team demonstrates that women out of adolescence can still have their perceptions changed and begin to feel more comfortable with themselves. This movement has led to positive benefits regarding body image, and I believe the further spread of this messaging would help change perceptions of what ideal body types are, especially for women, and lead to more widespread body satisfaction.

After studying the issue, it is clear that the issue of social media use is multifaceted and extremely wicked. Through upward social comparison, social media has led to negative perception of our own bodies, as well as our views about what our body should be. Social media use is only increasing, as is the number of younger children using it. Without restriction or education on body image and the differences between real and fake, it can lead to negative consequences. The issue has led to depressive symptoms in adolescents as well as suicide in extreme cases. Social comparison is something that everyone does, and the answer is not to stop

this comparison, which would be near impossible. The solutions laid out focus on educating and managing preadolescents time on social media. It is through this, as well as the spread of body positivity messaging, that will help change perception of body image in media. If this change starts from an early age, we can help an entire generation navigate through these idealized images we see on social media. Just a small change can have immense results for the future. These solutions will result in higher body satisfaction and better mental health for generations to come.

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