Vitality: A Health Sciences Journal

Examining the Relationship Between Social Media Use and Body Image Dissatisfaction in Adolescents By Danielle Zimny '24

Introduction

The phrase 'body image' is often defined as the degree to which an individual feels and perceives their physical self (Salomon & Brown, 2019). Body image dissatisfaction (BID), or the negative self-evaluation of one's appearance, can be experienced across the lifespan, but is perhaps most common during the vulnerable period of adolescence (ages 10-19) when developmental changes occur (Vuong et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2024). A study by Brumberg (1997), for instance, found that, at the age of 13, approximately 53% of females in the United States are "unhappy" with their bodies, increasing to 78% by the age of 17. More recently, data from the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS) revealed that in a nationwide sample of ninth through twelfth-grade students, 37.5% of females and 25.3% of males were dissatisfied with their bodies (Kann et al., 2018). As social media's highly visual, appearance-based platforms promote social comparison through the widespread viewing of highly curated "ideal body types" (e.g., thinness in females and muscularity in males), this issue is only projected to worsen, also impacting mental health (Vuong et al., 2021).

Upward Social Comparison

Upward social comparison occurs when a person evaluates themself against someone they perceive as superior; while often motivated by self-improvement, this commonly results in feelings of envy and frustration (Collins, 1996; McComb et al., 2023). On social media, where users are active receivers of content, individuals can decide who they want to follow and include in their network – even their favorite celebrities (Frederick et al., 2012). When celebrities post snapshots of their daily lives, they create a sense of "intimacy" with their followers, especially adolescents, who may fail to question their authenticity (Ho et al., 2016). The consequences of this engagement, with obliquely unrealistic targets, can be observed in a study by Charmaraman et al. (2021), where over 54% of adolescents (between 11 and 14 years) attributed social media-related body image dissatisfaction to celebrity photos.

Alongside visual, appearance-based content, social media users also experience feedback about others' reactions to posts through "likes" or "follows," as well as opinions through comments (Fatt & Fardouly, 2023). For many adolescents, the number of likes plays a critical role in comparisons, with higher numbers indicating higher levels of attractiveness (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). As likes have come to be assigned immense value, reinforcing hardly reachable body ideals, many adolescents strive to achieve this illusive attention, going to extremes, such as dieting, to change their appearance (Kvardova et al., 2023).

A Look at Content

Social media allows users to portray highly curated, public personas of their ideal ("hoped for") selves, not known to others offline (Mann & Blumberg, 2022). With many platforms now offering built-in filters and editing tools, this practice is becoming more common and harder to identify (Chen et al., 2019). In a Dutch study investigating the effect of manipulated Instagram selfies on body image in adolescent females, participants not only reported the pictures to be just as realistic as the originals (failing to notice the reshaping), but also rated them more positively, resulting in lower self-esteem (Kleemans et al., 2018).

Attempts to increase the normalization of otherwise underrepresented body types on social media with body-positive content have had mixed success (Cohen et al., 2019). After 14 consecutive days of viewing body-positive posts, for example, one study observed up to a four-week decrease in body image dissatisfaction in the 18 to 25-year-old age bracket (overlapping with adolescence) (Fardouly et al., 2023). Conversely, a study exploring adolescents' (ages 15-16) processing of social media content found that 79% of participants (predominantly female) felt limited in their ability to engage with positive body-related images. Despite lauding increased efforts to change unrealistic beauty ideals, they noted that it is easier for individuals who have perfect bodies to promote body acceptance. Many also reported that emphasis on extreme body types (i.e., petite or plus size) takes away from "normal" bodies like their own (Mahon & Hevey, 2021).

Mental Health

Left unchecked, pressures to conform to socially prescribed body ideals can lead to decreased mental health and emotional well-being, increasing the risk for eating disorders, depression, and potentially even suicide in the adolescent population (Voelker et al., 2015). Eating disorders are a group of heterogeneous, disabling, and deadly psychiatric illnesses characterized by extreme preoccupations with appearance. Both the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) currently recognize six principal clinical eating disorders: anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, pica, and rumination disorder (Dane & Bhatia, 2023). In a study by Wilksch et al. (2020) on the relationship between social media use and disordered eating in young adolescents, over half of girls (51.7%) reported at least one disordered eating behavior compared to 45% of boys, with skipping meals, eating very little food, and binge eating being the most common. Long-term consequences of such behaviors can include cardiovascular disease, reduced bone density, reduced fertility, and, among females, adverse pregnancy and neonatal outcomes (van Hoeken & Hoek, 2020).

Further deleterious mental health consequences are found with body image dissatisfaction and depression. In a study of 13 to 17-year-olds in Lima, Peru, Flores-Cornejo et al. (2017) noted that those who had body image dissatisfaction were 3.7 times more likely to report depressive symptoms than those who did not. Other researchers have suggested a potential bidirectional association, noting that body image dissatisfaction (BID) can favor depression, just as depression can worsen BID (Paans et al., 2018; Soares Filho et al., 2021). Perhaps the most staggering bit of information thus far, however, is that along with an increase in social media use, the age-adjusted suicide rate in the United States has also increased (by 24%) from 1999 to 2014 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). While this increase cannot be attributed exclusively to social media use, the correlation cannot be ignored; without any action, this preventable public health problem will continue to rise (Memon et al., 2018).

Potential Solutions

To alleviate the impacts of social media on adolescent body image dissatisfaction, the American Academy of Pediatrics has developed a Family Media Use plan to help parents set reasonable rules tailored to specific developmental phases (Riehm et al., 2019). Abstinence in the form of short, three-day social media fasts has demonstrated benefits such as reduced self-objectification behaviors, increased self-care, better mental states, and heightened connectedness (Roberts et al., 2022). On a much larger scale, school-based media literacy programs could help adolescents learn to identify and critique idealized images, and disclosures upon opening social media accounts could remind users of their potential exposure to image manipulation (Kleemans et al., 2018). When used mindfully, social media has the potential to be an effective tool to engage and connect with others.

Social Media and Social Isolation
By Alina Tejeda '24

Introduction

The CDC (2023) defines social isolation as the lack of relationships with others and the existence of little to no social support or contact. During adolescence young individuals experience marked changes physiologically, psychologically, and biologically which can render them especially vulnerable as they continue to develop (OSG.2023; Jaworska & MacQueen.2015). In one study, 10.14% of adolescents reported experiencing social isolation; (Alsadoun et al., 2023) this decrease in social interaction may negatively impact decision-making abilities (Hinton. 2019). It is critically important to cultivate healthy relationships during adolescence, without which young people may feel isolated, lonely, or lack the social skills that are learned through social interactions (Pfeil et al. 2009; Poulin & Chan. 2010).

Social media in moderation can be used among adolescents as a way to maintain communication and intimate relationships with family and friends (Courtois et al., 2012). Unfortunately, this remote communication style can also contribute to changes in social habits and communication style with others which can lead to decreased interpersonal skills and social alienation (Elcil, 2019). When adolescents engage in excessive social media use, negative outcomes—such as decreased relationships between family and friends, connectedness, and loneliness—are more likely to occur (Gwenn & Clarke-Pearson 2011).

Relationships

Researchers have determined that social media has an impact on the identity of its users, their relationships, and their life experience (Buckingham, 2007). In adolescence, interpersonal relationships and social context play a big role in identity formation and the ability to develop friendships (Adams G.R & Marshall S.K. 1996; Biolcati & Cani. 2015). Using social platforms, which also include interacting in online games and live streaming, can lead to a decrease in family interactions and a lack of real-life, interpersonal connections (Li C. et al., 2022). Additionally, researchers find that overuse of social media can decrease time spent in face-to-face communication, increasing the risk of loneliness, and reducing social contacts (Nie. 2001). Socially isolated and lonely adolescents may need support and guidance towards the development of appropriate social media usage to support their continued mentally and emotionally healthy development (Aktepe et al., 2013).

Connectedness

Adolescence is a time in which psychological vulnerability and the desire for independence coexist, increasing the risk of social isolation and disengagement (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Connections that include face-to-face interactions, can provide a sense of belonging or bond with family members, schoolmates, and others in a young person's community (Diendorfer. 2021). Healthy relationships enhance adolescents' well-being (CDC. 2013), conversely, there may be lasting negative consequences to health in the absence of emotionally intimate bonds (Hawkley & Cacioppo. 2010). Social media use may contribute to an increase in emotional detachment (Winstone et al., 2021) as it provides a less rewarding and less genuine person-to-person interaction. Additionally, evidence suggests that healthy connections during adolescence may reduce depression and anxiety, as well as contribute to a greater sense of belonging (Eugene. 2021).

Threats to Well-being

A new advisory panel assembled by the U.S Surgeon General (2023) emphasized social media's health hazards and called for immediate action from policymakers and technology companies. The panel reported that unmeasured risks indoctrinated into social media's usage can compromise the integrity of person-to-person stability, causing lasting effects on sleep and mental health (Office of the Surgeon General. 2023; Harris. 2023). These unknown risks have the potential to impact the majority of young people as approximately 90% of adolescents between 12 and 17 years old are reportedly using social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat (Anderson, 2018). "At this time, we do not yet have enough evidence to determine if social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents," said Surgeon General Vivek Murthy.

Adolescents may sacrifice their opportunities for face-to-face interactions with their peers outside of the school environment, in favor of technology-based communications (Orben et al., 2020). In addition, social gatherings are now rife with staged photo taking rather than people remaining present and experiencing current happenings without recording (perhaps altering) and sharing the footage through technology. This increase in social media usage has been described as a 'double-edged sword' and causes worry regarding the well-being of adolescents (Guo & Cheung. 2023). Social isolation, one pronounced outcome, can have adverse health effects resulting in psychological, physiological, and behavioral changes in adolescence, increasing the risk of morbidity and mortality (Lay-Yee et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Social isolation has been identified by prominent health leaders as a serious threat to public health and specifically concerning, the well-being of young adults; interventions to address these issues are mandatory (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). More research is necessary to investigate the cause-and-effect relationships between social media use, isolation, and well-being (Ruben et.al., 2020) in order to better anticipate and act to prevent the resulting harm in young people.

Studying these effects will create knowledge and awareness that can be dispensed through healthcare leaders, educators, parents, lawmakers, and anyone responsible for the well-being of minors (Bozzola et al., 2022). Physicians should be tasked with distributing the latest information from the Surgeon General on the risks of social media at routine visits with youth and their parents. Equally as important, schools must develop programs to inform parents and students of the risks associated with social media use and adolescent development. Awareness and actions are imperative as we strive to keep in step with the mammoth lifestyle and health-related changes brought about by the epidemic use of social media among youth (Beyari 2023).

Children Under the Influence of Social Media

Xiomara Nunez '24

Introduction

In the U.S, almost 40% of children ages 8-12 are using social media; however, current federal law indicates that young people have to be 13 years of age to have their own social media account (Office of the Surgeon General, (2023). Research suggests that social media use among the young may be associated with mental health challenges, (Nagata et al., 2023), poor academic performance (Cardoso, 2021), and difficulties managing health behaviors (Smit et al,2020). Social media plays a prominent role in the way society functions; according to Common Sense Media Research, 51% of adolescents check social media websites more than once and 22% of them check social media more than 10 times a day (Hadijpanayis,2019). One of the main sources of social interaction, therefore, comes through the exchange of ideas, photos, videos, or audio messages on apps such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, and Twitter (Hadjipanayis, 2019). To prepare for and be well integrated into current culture, it is critical for parents and caregivers to supervise the online activities of children, while maintaining a sense of respect for their privacy, and acknowledging their need for some semblance of autonomy (Hadjipanayis, 2019).

Mental Health

The data suggest that an inverse relationship exists between time spent on digital media and the health and wellbeing of children (Deepa and Priya, 2020). There is an increased incidence of psychological challenges such as depression, anxiety disorders, and sleep disturbance in children with higher levels of social media use (Deepa and Priya,2020). The Italian Pediatric Society Scientific Communication Group studied the effects of social media use in minors under the age of 18 (Bozzola et al, 2022). Their findings demonstrate that 27.9% of the children showed signs of depression, 19.1 % had sleep pattern disturbance, and 14.7% were experiencing anxiety- related issues (Bozzola et al, 2022). Children who are more fragile are at an even higher risk of developing anxiety-related issues, including poor body image and a decreased sense of self-worth (Bozzola et al, 2022). The constant availability of technological devices contributes to an ever-increasing engagement with social media. Reportedly, many children are leaving their phones at arm's length during their sleeping hours, which may lead to technology engagement throughout the night (Al-Samarraie et al, 2022). This sleep disturbance may result in daytime fatigue and ultimately lead to deficits in academic performance (Cardoso 2021).

Academic Performance

Dr. Richardson Davidson and colleagues found that 47% of the time an American adult's mind is wandering rather than paying attention to the current moment. (*"Training" your mind to improve wellbeing*. News, 2019). A distracted mindset is evident in children and adolescents also—research found that during study sessions student participants were distracted by their phones and social media after only six minutes of schoolwork (Al-Menayes, 2015). Children who are spending more time on social media apps are performing poorly on exams and assignments; this may also be associated with high levels of distractibility (Al-Menayes, 2015). Researchers looked at the amount of time spent on social media and the level of multitasking in children and discovered an association between high levels of social media use, multitasking, and the incidence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Cardoso,2021). Children diagnosed with ADHD may have increased difficulties with standardized exams, technology-associated learning systems, and moderating impulse control—all of which can hinder academic performance (Cardoso, 2021).

Dietary Behavior

Social media use among minors can also have a deleterious effect on other areas of health and human functioning such as nutritional practices. Apparently, 80% of parents who have children younger than 12 allow them to view YouTube videos, 35% of which do so regularly (Amaal et al, 2020). When investigating the number and type of food items shown among the top viewed kid influencers' videos on YouTube, researchers found that 90% of the branded food items fell under the unhealthy category (Amaal et al, 2020). The researchers concluded that "Kid influencers generate millions of impressions for unhealthy food and drink brands through product placement." (Amaal et al, p.1). Studies have shown that food marketing is done through vlogging, giving social media influencers an opportunity to advertise specific topics to their young viewers (Smit et al,2020). A vlog is essentially a video information session through which the influencer has an opportunity to present a theme or a talking point of their choosing, from their perspective (Digital Marketing Blog,2018). Self-generated videos touting obscure, unsubstantiated dietary practices with possibly dangerous material are a serious threat for the more vulnerable viewers.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear that an abundance of social media use is associated with an increased incidence of mental health issues, poor academic performance, and unhealthy nutritional practices. As technology is ever-changing, parents need to stay abreast of the newest social media challenges and influences impacting their children. Researchers, educational and health services providers, and law makers must be charged with providing the up to date, valid and reliable information and guidance to parents and all leaders of children, as we strain to stay ahead of the negative outcomes that may be associated with social media use in the younger population.

Positive Impact of Social Media in Adults
By Elizabeth Prasad '24

Introduction

Current estimates suggest that there are nearly 4.95 billion people worldwide using social media, with an average usage of three hours per day (Goodyear et al., 2021). Research suggests that social media can positively impact health-related behaviors (Schomberg et al., 2016) , the ability to manage stress (Song et al, 2022), and the opportunity to access infinite knowledge effortlessly (Rost et al., 2016). Workplace research investigated employees' perceptions regarding the value of social media in their life. Out of the total participants, 58% of adults reported that social media helped them feel more accepted and 42% found support through social media during tough times. Additionally, the employees were encouraged to have access to social media platforms through which they can portray their creativity and innovation (Vaingakar et al., 2022).

Good Health Behaviors

Approximately 89% of the population in the United States have access to a smartphone, while an estimated 70% of people have access to a stable internet connection and are active users of social media (Vaigankar et al., 2022).

The inherent low to no cost design of social media platforms, allows for the broadest possible access to health-related information. The accessibility promotes health equity by providing an opportunity to have access to fitness material, nutritional guidance, weight loss programming, and all manner of health promotion content (Masur et al., 2021) . There are an abundance of health resources available, and social media allows for ease of delivery. The leading health agencies of the land, masterfully direct campaigns using social media to motivate health behavior management and change. Additionally, campaigns and programming can be interactive allowing the users to share their progress, upload pictures, report their weekly progress, and most importantly to encourage one another (Chen & Wang, 2021).

mHealth apps are platforms through which people receive fitness and health information and can interact with one another including planning group workouts. Researchers investigated the efficacy of two apps–Yuka and Apple health. These apps provide customized meal plans based on caloric needs, while attending to personal preferences and lifestyle behaviors. A longitudinal study found that users reported positive feedback after using the Yuka and Apple health apps; participants found success utilizing the meal plans and other nutritional recommendations. Findings suggest that 84% of the app users cited improvements in their health and wellbeing and would recommend the app to others (Feldman et al., 2019). Health apps continue to play a pivotal role in influencing users to adopt new lifestyle behavior; for example, through the promotion of mind body practices like Yoga and Tai Chi (Goodyear et al., 2021).

Stress management, motivation and new knowledge.

Currently the World Health Organization reports that 50 million American Adults experience mental health issues (Speiker et al., 2021) Accessing mental health support through social media platforms allows for each user to seek understanding, comfort, and support from like-minded individuals with comparable challenges (Zsila et al., 2023). Workers were surveyed on their preference for seeking emotional support using technology versus in a face-to-face format. The researchers found that 74% of participants disclosed they felt more comfortable communicating through social media and talking about their feelings rather than talking in person (Ostic, et al., 2021). Moreover, health professionals and researchers also use social media for professional development which includes learning, collaboration, and career advancement. Many scientists and researchers use social media to collaborate on research projects by sharing information, research findings, and medical knowledge. (Korda & Bautista, 2021). A study queried 587 scientists regarding their social media use during their work hours (Collins et al., 2016). The results indicated that 80% of the scientists used social media as a form of stress management by sharing their work experience and 20% suggested that social media is useful in attaining information. Finally, 20% of the scientists also claim that they networked through accessing science-based social media pages (Collins et al., 2016).

Education

Interactive educational sites like Reddit allow users to pose health and fitness-oriented questions to the community and receive answers to questions about a variety of topics. When the user has a question about a particular topic, he/she can post it to the public, and any user who has an account in the specific platform could answer the question depending on their availability; many users have reported this feature as integral to their health journey (Miottto, et al., 2021). A survey questioned the benefits of using social media, with one main response being that social media is an efficient way to attain answers to many health-related questions (Vaingakar et al., 2016). Suffice it to say that the educational material provided through social media apps may or may not be peer reviewed or validated material and should be perceived with caution.

Conclusion

Social media interactions may contribute to people feeling accepted, generating a sense of community and connection. There are also opportunities for free access to health information and knowledge that are not restricted to any socio-economic, race, or ethnic group; thus, social media is a platform that supports health equity and can be an aid to the underserved in our society. Our technological age allows for people to gain access to emotional and psychological support, of which much is available through social media platforms. "Ubuntu" is an ancient African word that essentially means humanity to others, and highlights the interdependence of humans one to another –on its best day, social media can provide an opportunity for expressions of love, support, and kindness underscoring the best of us through "Ubuntu."

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Social Media Use and Body Image

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Student Reflection on Service Project

Service is a value to be treasured and one I hope to incorporate into my daily life. Apart from the Campus Kitchen, I would like to become more involved in my parish community, whether as an altar server or catechist. Being present is more than just showing up; I want to show my commitment and care. Another simple way to add service is by checking in with people and choosing to spend time with them, even if spontaneous or unplanned. With all that is going on in the world, it is especially important that people feel like they are not alone; they need to know there is someone out there who cares about them. D.Z.

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Social Media use Body Image (cont.)

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Student Reflection on Service Project

I came in contact with a large number of nonnative speakers, and it is not a new experience for me because I myself am a nonnative speaker. I learned about how many people were living a well settled life in different countries and how they immigrated to the United States even without knowing the language or culture to provide a better life for their children.
This was an emotional awakening for me because my parents went through the same situation for my family. I learned more about the struggles which the nonnative speakers faced—although I know about it, I did not anticipate it to be that serious. I think volunteering is very important and it helps us to understand the struggles faced by many people and helps us to understand reality better.
E. P.

Giving back to the community always makes me feel proud because you're helping those in need. Volunteering can help those who are really in need and do not have anyone from whom to seek support. I really enjoy volunteering in a
healthcare setting the most because I'm able to help the elderly and those patients who aren't able to take care of themselves. There are different types of volunteering groups for all ages; no matter your age you can still help an organization that needs the help.
X.N.

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Social Media use Body Image (cont.)

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Student Reflection on Service Project

I have volunteered multiple times prior to this assignment, and the experience always makes me feel grateful for what I have. It is important to value the opportunities that you are given and be thankful for those around you. Additionally, I will teach my kids that although not everyone has the same opportunities, everyone should be treated equally. I will encourage them to participate in volunteering events for them to get a sense of the reality that surrounds us, and to be part of change. This is something I always keep in mind and apply to my personal and professional life daily.
A. T

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Social Media and Social Isolation

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