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How Many Likes Is Your Life Worth? The Relationship between Social Media Use and Self-Esteem Among Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010, my family's Thanksgiving of forty-five people was unusually quiet. I was thirteen years old and the youngest of seven in my generation of cousins. All of our parents had decided that the age of thirteen was the age one was ready for a cell phone. My older cousins had already been granted their own devices at previous Christmases, but I was still anxiously awaiting my turn to enter the cellular world. However, this particular Thanksgiving made me rethink what I was so eagerly awaiting. We all sat on the couch in the living room, but no one talked; everyone stared at their phones, occasionally glimpsing up, usually to look at what someone else had on their screen. I felt lonely and nostalgic. I wasn't ready to cross over to the technological, intangible, cell phone-and media-filled world; I wanted to stay in the concrete, face-to-face world, but I wanted my cousins to be there with me, too. Fortunately, this was a phase brought on by the newness of cell phones and eventually wore off. We now have more of an appreciation for times spent without technology and media, and think fondly of our childhood where we were free of these devices and media. However, we often find ourselves thinking about our younger cousins, wondering how technology and media will affect them and if they will be able to find the same appreciation for a deviceless world they have never known.

The use of technology and media, particularly social media, is extensive in modern society; future generations will not know society without it. A critical aspect of technology and media is social media (e.g Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Social media is

still a new development, therefore there is much to learn about its impacts and how to use it healthily. However, the effects of social media on recent generations, and specifically today's adolescents is becoming increasingly apparent through more research and by observation. It is hypothesized that the use of social media, especially more frequent use of social media, negatively impacts self-esteem in adolescents. Adolescence is a crucial time for personal, physical, and mental development, which makes the impact of social media even more of a concern. The effect of and association between media and mass media with self-esteem, sleep quality, body-image, emotional expression, levels of anxiety and depression, and more is made apparent through reviewing multiple diverse journal articles and research studies. These associations are also focused on through different lenses, such as gender, race, and age. The diversity of these sources helps to depict the complexity of the issue and provide a solid foundation for further understanding and research on social media. These sources act to illustrate the impact of intersectionality in the emerging subject of social media use among adolescents, encompassing the far-reaching and complex effects of social media on different populations of adolescents.

PROMINENT CONSIDERATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND MEDIA ON SELF-ESTEEM AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Although, each source took a unique approach and considered a variety of factors, all studies directed a focus towards the association between media and self-esteem or certain aspects of self-esteem (e.g. levels of depression and/or anxiety; perception of body; frequency of use; etc.), among adolescents. Some studies consider social comparison theory and explore reflected appraisals in their research of the relationship between self-esteem and media or social media use among adolescents (Milkie 1999 and Morrison et al. 2004). Many of these

sources also include a diverse sample of participants and respondents, showing varied levels of religiosity, different genders, races, socio-economic backgrounds and/or ethnic groups. This diversification helps to create a more well-balanced, grounded foundation to further my understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and social media use among adolescents. These diverse approaches of research on this subject also depict the use of social media as a global issue, not one specific to a certain population or area in the world; therefore, this array of studies demonstrates that the numerous impacts of social media are not small, but are vast and occur on a complex scale that includes a world population. There exist three common themes and main arguments evident in my chosen research studies relevant to the relationship between self-esteem and the use of media and social media among adolescents. These common themes include how media and social media use are associated with levels of anxiety and depression, body issues and gender, and the impact of the frequency of exposure to the media and social media.

MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE & LEVELS OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Self-esteem and symptoms of depression and anxiety are closely linked. This connection can be examined while observing the various samples in studies conducted by Banyai et al. (2017), Woods and Scott (2016), Shensa et al. (2017), and Mastronardi (2003). For instance, the article by Banyai et al. (2017) and research conducted by Woods and Scott (2016) both concluded that greater use of social media is strongly associated with lower self-esteem, and in particular, higher levels of depression. Banyai et al. (2017) made notable observations of irritability and withdrawal - symptoms of depression - in participants with lower levels of self-esteem to illustrate the link between depression and social media use. Through the vast distribution of questionnaires, Woods and Scott (2016) found that social

media use is associated with poorer sleep quality, which is a likely indicator of higher levels of depressions and anxiety, especially during adolescence when sleep is critical for proper growth. In addition, the findings of the nationally-representative study by Shensa et al. (2017) also supports that frequent use of social media is associated with higher levels of depression or more depressive symptoms, which they owe largely to the anxiety of and dependence on technology and media multitasking. The study by Mastronardi (2003) also shows an association between self-esteem and social media use in relation to higher levels of depressive symptoms through the lens of body-image. The abundance of oversexualized and stereotypical gendered images in the media and social media sources often lead to higher levels of body-image dissatisfaction, which is evidently linked to higher levels of depression - as well as shame, guilt, insecurity, and more (Mastronardi 2003). All of these factors have a major impact on the self-esteem of adolescents, especially while experiencing the key growth period of adolescence, and depict how self-esteem is related to the use of social media and media.

MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE & BODY ISSUES

Body-image and other body issues are usually most common and of most concern during adolescent years, particularly due to the rapid period of growth and development (e.g. puberty) occurring at this time. The following studies demonstrate how adolescent self-esteem is greatly affected during this time, and is especially impacted by one's perception of self and one's self-esteem. Studies by Milkie (1999), Morrison et al. (2004), Polce-Lynch et al. (2001), and Mastronardi (2003) all carefully examine the relationship between self-esteem, media use, and body-image perceptions among adolescents. In addition, some studies have also focused on the differences in the effects of media and social media use among male and female adolescents. This research includes studies conducted by Banyai et al. (2017), Morrison et al.

(2004), Polce-Lynch et al. (2001), and Mastronardi (2003). One similarity between sources includes research by Milkie (1999) and by Polce-Lynch et al. (2001), which both found that social media may show stronger negative impacts on female, as opposed to male, adolescents. Milkie (1999) suggests this may be due to the pervasive beauty images that young women are bombarded with throughout daily life. Milkie (1999) and Morrison et al. (2004) both gathered data from participants that emphasized the artificiality and impracticality of the bodies and images that were featured in the media, which left many girls feeling body-image dissatisfaction and contributed to lower self-esteem. Polce-Lynch et al. (2001) also described body-image as being an issue for young women brought on by greater use of and exposure to social media. Research by Morrison et al. (2004) thoroughly examines this association between body-image evaluation and investment among young women and men and the use of social media through the lenses of sociocultural theory (theorizes how an individual relates to society) and social comparison theory (theorizes that the way in which an individual determines one's value is by comparing oneself to others) (Morrison et al. 2004). Morrison et al. (2004) found that this association did exist for both young men and women and created negative perceptions of self, increased social comparisons harmful to one's self-esteem, and showed participants partaking in more frequent dieting or steroid use to achieve media ideals. In Mastronardi's (2003) study, media depictions of females, in particular, were found to be oversexualized and emphasize gender stereotypes, as well as provide inaccurate and misleading information about sexual relationships that could lead to unhealthy, harmful practices. These effects of media in association with higher levels of media consumption showed an increased feeling of body dissatisfaction in young women, as well as guilt, shame, insecurity, and a higher likelihood of having an eating disorder. It is apparent that there is a link

between how the media and social media sources impact body-image ideals of adolescents, particularly young women, and as a result, lead to lower levels of self-esteem (Mastronardi 2003). Despite different approaches, variables, and samples, each of these sources found strong associations between (lower) self-esteem and social media use in relation to body-image struggles. This next section will focus on one aspect that the majority of these researchers continually found, which was that the frequency of exposure to social media matters in terms of its impact on the self-esteem of the adolescent user, most often relating to lower levels of self-esteem.

EXPOSURE AND FREQUENCY OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The frequency and amount of exposure to media and social media sources and images was of key importance in many studies, including research by Errasti et al. (2017), Morrison et al. (2004), Ward (2004), Woods and Scott (2016), and Forest and Wood (2012). Errasti et al. (2017) and Morrison et al. (2004) both focused on the impact of the frequency of social media and media use and its effects on self-esteem. Both studies found that higher levels of social media and media use was associated with lower levels of self-esteem. Morrison et al. (2004) found that greater exposure and frequency of exposure brought more social comparison and lower self-esteem. Ward (2004) also found that frequent use of media, as well as higher levels of felt connection to media characters or individuals (e.g. celebrities), was associated with lower self-evaluations and harmed self-esteem. Woods and Scott (2016) focused more on *when* during the day exposure to social media occurred, comparing the effects of overall use and nighttime-only use of social media, and how each affected sleep quality, levels of depression, and self-esteem among adolescents. It was evident that overall social media use and nighttime use were associated with poor sleep, higher levels of depression, and lower self-

esteem, although nighttime-only use was even more significantly associated with poorer sleep quality. Forest and Wood (2012) found that those with already low self-esteem were more likely to spend more time on social media (i.e. Facebook) and were also more likely to suffer negative effects from it, such as anxiety. Overall, these studies highlight the connection between higher levels of frequency and exposure to social media with lower levels of self-esteem among adolescents.

COMMON LIMITATIONS

A self-report bias was a prevalent limitation that was present among several articles of research, including studies by Banyai et al. (2017), Woods and Scott (2016), Polce-Lynch et al.(2001), and Morrison et al.(2004), and Forest and Wood (2012). These sources often encountered or were limited by a major flaw in the self-reporting method, which was the possibility of a social desirability bias by participants during a survey or during an interview. Surveys and interviews were amongst the most common methods of data collection within these studies. These methods may have created inaccurate results due to answers of participants', who may have answered in a way viewed as more socially beneficial, instead of answering honestly, demonstrating a limiting social desirability bias. The presence of other survey participants or interviewees, faculty or staff members, or the researcher could have inhibited respondents from answering honestly, which may have skewed results. Another common limitation among these sources was the uncertainty of the direction of influence between two or more factors or variables of association. Although, this creates an amount of ambiguity in such studies, this also provides a good foundation for further research into the subject. One way in which this limitation could be improved upon in future research would be

conducting a longitudinal study, instead of a cross-sectional study. The use of a longitudinal study would help eliminate some of this ambiguity as it would allow the researcher(s) to follow the changes of one sample over a long period of time, as opposed to multiple different samples at different times. This more focused lens of a longitudinal study would help clarify the relationship between certain variables of self-esteem and social media use over time.

CONCLUSION

Future research on the subject of social media and self-esteem among adolescents is much needed as social media and technology becomes more prevalent and powerful in society. One way that would improve understanding and provide better insight into the impacts of social media on the self-esteem of adolescents is to conduct more studies that focus on smaller specificities of the association, such as certain social media sites, comparing geographical locations, or exploring religiosity in regards to social media use. It would also be beneficial to compare this smaller lens to a broader scope, such as being able to compare a few small locations to the demographics of a larger populations, then being able to generate a greater understanding of the whole. Another way to improve research on this topic may be to compare sample populations of social media users in comparison to nonusers. Do implications exist for those who abstain from the virtual world? And, if so, what are these implications and who suffers more - social media users or nonusers?

General media has been present in society longer than social media has, therefore there is less known about social media. General media, such as television or magazines, can seem distant as the focus may not be geographically close or personally relevant, which may make the impact of the media less impactful than social media, which is more intimate, and thus can

have more personal repercussions. Most social media users utilize the sites to showcase the best versions of themselves and the best aspects of their lives; this may create competition and/or social comparison, and - if similar to the findings from the studies above - be associated with lower levels of self-esteem and yield other negative effects. It may be of interest to conduct further research on social media use and social comparison theory in association with adolescent self-esteem.

All of my sources weave together multiple aspects under one common theme: the association between social media use and self-esteem among adolescents. Throughout all of these thorough examinations, each study came to a conclusion which supported my hypothesis in that greater use of social media among adolescents is associated with negative impacts on self-esteem, which can be especially harmful due to the crucial period in development that is adolescence. The findings of these studies were diverse in selected approaches and lenses, yet still supported my hypothesis and addressed common themes, including: media and social media use in association with levels of depression and anxiety; media and social media use in association with body issues and gender; and the frequency and exposure to media and social media use.

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