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Abstract

Young adults are in a critical phase of life finding their identity and their place in society. An estimated 72% of young adults ages 18 to 30 use social media (Nesi, 2020). Social media has been proven to affect young adults both physically and mentally (Nesi, 2020). Since social media has been created, mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety have steadily increased among active users (Mojtabai et al., 2016). Body dysmorphia and anorexia nervosa affect both males' and females' perceptions of their bodies, leading to feelings of inadequacy (Hong et al., 2020). This often leaves individuals vulnerable to these mental illnesses, causing feelings of insecurity and depression (Mojtabai et al., 2016). Young adults tend to rely on digital filters and succumb to false ideals of beauty (Hong et al., 2020). Having constant access to social media means that these short-term outcomes will become more severe over time.

Keywords: Instagram, mental health, eating disorder, young adults, influencers

Instagram's Influence on Young Adults: The Negative Impact on Mental Health

Social media's presence has exploded since its conception in the early 2000s. Instagram and its sister company Tik Tok have gained nearly 800 million users since 2020 (Logrieco et al., 2021). More than 72% of young adults in the US have Instagram accounts (Nesi, 2020). With social media playing an extensive role in young adults' lives, the impact it has on mental health is a major concern. Instagram's reach is perpetuated by influencers who promote product marketing and create falsehoods through curated images and videos. Studies have shown that individuals that spend significant time on Instagram have a higher likelihood of mental health disorders (Alsaidan et al., 2020).

Social Expectations & Pressures

Young adults' social media relationships vary from people they are close with, to people they have never met before. These profound relationships can lead to social comparisons among people (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). Social comparison theory focuses on the idea that individuals gain accurate self-evaluations by comparing themselves to others (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). The way people portray themselves on social media is only part of a person's story. It is not the full picture of a person's life or their reality. Social media users generally decide how they want to be perceived and post images or videos that establish their false identity (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). Editing images can skew comparison by using filters to enhance the positive attributes of a person's life or self. In essence, social expectations promote social comparison theory and are responsible for the rise in mental health disorders (Nesi, 2020; Stein et al., 2021). Specifically, mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety have steadily risen (Mojtabai et al., 2016). It has been reported that, in ages 18-30, 93% of respondents said they were harmed emotionally on a social media site, and 51% reported suicidal thoughts after a

social media interaction (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Along with this, suicide rates in ages 10-24 increased 56% from 2007 to 2017 (Nesi, 2020). Research has hypothesized that the increase in suicide rates is caused by social media usage. That there is a correlation between time spent on social media and mental health disorders (Nesi, 2020).

Social media can strengthen mental problems due to its wide range of use and easy accessibility. Social cultivation theory hypothesizes that frequent exposure to social media can distort a person's perception of the world (Stein et al., 2021). In 2018, 45% of adolescents reported spending a majority of their time online, while 72% of adolescents used at least one Instagram account (Nesi, 2020). Many people can feel social pressure to create a social media account simply because peers have one (Stein et al., 2021). Always being bombarded with new social media content can lead to higher exposure to negative content. This is problematic and impacts mental health poorly because the material is not consciously registered (Stein et al., 2021). In other words, users can not differentiate what is real and not real. Instagram influencers can unknowingly promote this unconscious thought and can change users' behavior by the content they post.

Influencers

One of Instagram's primary sources of marketing is its use of influencers. An influencer is a word-of-mouth paid advocate that uses product placement marketing in their videos for monetary gain (De Veirman et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2020). To be an Instagram influencer, one must have a network of followers that trust their brand (De Veirman et al., 2017). An influencer creates brand trust by who they are following and their follower count (De Veirman et al., 2017). For example, if an influencer follows a few accounts they are deemed untrustworthy. The

account could be a possible scam, or the influencer is not returning the favor of following fans and marketing accounts (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Research primarily focuses on how influencers negatively impact social media users, particularly adolescents engaging with Instagram and Tik Tok video advertisements (Logrieco et al., 2021). Social media platform Tik Tok was created in 2016 and has over 800 million users. Twenty percent of these users are minors (Logrieco et al., 2021). Tik Tok video advertisements have promoted anorexia otherwise noted as “pro-ana” by either advocating supplements or unprofessional advice to lose weight (Logrieco et al., 2021). In one investigation, a 14-year-old teenage girl was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. She denied suicidal idealization but subsequently confessed that Tik Tok advertisements inspired her to lose an unhealthy amount of weight. It was not by supplements but through increasing physical exercise and reducing caloric intake (Logrieco et al., 2021). Her weight loss journey created negative self-perception and thereafter resulted in self-harm. These results open the door to advertisement disclosures and why it is vital to incorporate them into an influencer’s ad. Otherwise, adolescents are left to presume that their peers are partaking in the same risky challenges, as the case study illustrates (Logrieco et al., 2021). Many Instagram influencers are guilty of using filters to enhance their body image to increase follower count. False advertisements lead to false beauty ideals and therefore can directly impact one’s mental health.

Selfies, Filters, and Unrealistic Beauty Ideals

A selfie is a picture that social media users take of themselves and post to their desired platforms. This is usually done with a mobile phone or a webcam. Selfies are a visual representation of oneself that can reflect their feelings and emotions, which is very popular

among users (Hong et al., 2020). The mere reason for posting a selfie is to invite attention, be accepted by others, and obtain self-worth from others' reactions (Hong et al., 2020).

Filters are tools that allow users to add to or alter their photos for the most favorable outcome without professional software (Hong et al., 2020). Moreover, Instagram makes it easy to change and edit selfies that are posted with added filters or stickers (Hong et al., 2020). Instagram influences people's views on "ideal" body image by embellishing the vision of physical beauty, regarding fitness, makeup, fashion, and dietary content (Stein et al., 2021).

Extreme self-presentations such as filtered photos may result in an inadequate representation of oneself (Stein et al., 2021). Individuals that rely heavily on filters to enhance their self-presentation only receive increased attention and praise from their peers if the altered image is believable and not an extreme misrepresentation of themselves (Hong et al., 2020). Regardless of how much effort a user strives to glamorize themselves; efforts are only worthy if they are acknowledged by others.

Mental Health Disorders

Excessive social media use coincides with symptoms of depression, lack of confidence, escalated anxiety, extreme body dissatisfaction, and low perception of physical attractiveness (Stein et al., 2021). Depression is defined as a mood disorder associated with sadness, lack of activity, trouble with cognitive ability, changes in appetite and sleep habits, feelings of hopelessness, despondency, and occasional thoughts of suicide (APA, n.d.-b). Anxiety is defined as anxiousness or nervousness over impending or anticipated troubles, leading to avoidance of people and places (APA, n.d.-a).

Frequent Instagram use was directly connected with depressive symptoms and negatively connected with social comparison, highlighting the findings of Instagram use being connected to

poor psychological wellness due to social comparison (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). Instagram motivates people to partake in social comparison due to their focus on visual (photo/video) content in lieu of written content, resulting in negative outcomes (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019). Recent analysis shows that Instagram exploits fitspiration and thinspiration, glamorizing a toned and wholesome appearance (Stein et al., 2021). Moreover, fit and thinspiration posts have unfavorable effects on adolescents causing unrealistic beauty goals and eating disorders.

Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD) is a mental disorder that causes the patient to believe there is something severely flawed with either a specific body part or general appearance and causes a significant amount of torment (Himanshu et al., 2020). Other factors include repetitive behaviors (e.g., skin picking, mirror-gazing, excessive grooming) or mental acts such as constant comparison along with preoccupation causing significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The symptoms of BDD differ between sexes. In females, there is more discontent about body fat, facial hair, height, and complexion. While body image, height, and hair loss are the highest concerns for men (Himanshu et al., 2020). Although there is a significant difference between BDD and anorexia, research classifies the two under body image disorders (Phillipou et al., 2019).

A study conducted in 2015 confirmed that adolescents who use Instagram more often have a higher chance of developing not only depressive feelings, but also body image disorders 6 months later (Lup et al., 2015). Understanding BDD makes it easier to see the correlation that it has with social media. The problem lies when young adults compare themselves to models and influencers that have gotten to where they are today based solely on their filtered looks. Constantly being exposed to content of idealistic beauty and fitness standards over a long period

of time could be harmful to young adults as comparing themselves to these ideals is unrealistic (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019).

Anorexia nervosa (i.e., anorexia), is an eating disorder that is defined by abnormally low body weight that is fueled by an immense fear of gaining weight (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Anorexia affects millions of young adults all over the world. A recent study found that searches for pro-eating disorder content are performed millions of times a year by using specific keywords (e.g., pro-ana, pro-anorexia, pro-ED, pro thinspo, thin, and pro-acceptance; Levine, 2012). Symptoms of anorexia range from appearance-related (e.g., extreme weight loss, thin appearance, thinning hair, and yellowish skin) to severe health risks (e.g., abnormal blood count, irregular heart rhythms, and swelling of arms and legs; Mayo Clinic, 2021). What normally starts as a trend or temporary solution to body dissatisfaction can lead to dangerous health risks as symptoms increase in severity over time.

A study conducted in 2016 found that social media use was associated with an increased risk of anorexia by promoting thin ideals and facilitating access to communities of people involved in anorexic behaviors (Sidani et al., 2016). Social media sites are aware of the issue and have since been taking steps towards combating the increase in body image disorders, such as anorexia, associated with their sites. Major social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, have attempted to limit the exposure of the recent uprising in pro-anorexia-related content, such as the recent banning of hashtags “thinspiration” and “thinspo” (Sidani et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Studies have shown that individuals that spend significant time on Instagram have a higher likelihood of mental health disorders (Alsaidan et al., 2020). Social media has been proven to affect young adults both physically, and mentally (Nesi, 2020). A significant number of young adult social media users rely on filters and unrealistic beauty standards that lead to extreme body dissatisfaction which is affecting mental health (Stein et al., 2021). This aligns with social comparison theory as people use social media to make self-evaluations by comparing themselves to others. We have concluded through our research that increased social media activity does in fact have a negative impact on young adults' mental and physical health.

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