

Unrealistic Body Image and Facial Appearance on Social Media

Abstract

This paper is about how social media is promoting unrealistic body image and facial appearance on its platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. A person's identity on social media is radically different from their personal identity outside the virtual network. In this case, unrealistic body and facial appearance are promoted on social media platforms through the virtual identity of the user and not the personal one. Unrealistic body image is projected by famous social media users such as actors, models and influencers, who are people the general public usually look up to and eventually try to imitate. Another factor is the projection of an untrue identity on social media platform to showcase unrealistic body image and facial appearance. Users on social media do not reflect their personal identity on this virtual platform. Instead, they advocate for the unrealistic body image and falsify their identities to conform these ideals. This paper also talks about the use of hashtags to fight against the unrealistic body image projection on social media and to how extent it is efficient.

Keywords: #identity, #socialmedia, #unrealisticbodyimage, #advocacy

Introduction

Identity and social media are two enmeshed factors. Compared to before, where people had to be in the same physical environment and communication was done face to face to be able to get acquainted with or befriend someone, nowadays, just a simple search of any social media platform such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter can give them a lot of information about someone's identity. "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). With User Generated Content, users are slowly forming an identity based on the several pictures they post, the things they share on several platforms, the pages they follow and like, the causes they voice out to on the online platforms and all. It is said that between ages 12 and

15, 99% of people who own smartphones go online for more than twenty hours weekly and 69% have their own social media accounts (Ofcom, 2018, as cited in Goodyear, 2020, p. 48). Today, one's identity is based on their social media profile. Goffman explained how our identity are staged based on the environment we are in (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Buckingham, 2008). People's identities tend to be malleable based on factors such as who they are with and which environment, they are currently in. "Self-presentational motivations are activated by the evaluative presence of other people and by others' (even potential) knowledge of one's behaviour" (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, pp. 71). For instance, people might identify themselves differently in the virtual community compared to a professional community or a cultural community. People's behaviour on social media differs from their behaviour in the physical world. "In the past, technology was seen as undermining community, but today, in the age of soft technologies, community has been given new possibilities for its expression" (Delanty, 2018, pp. 200).

However, expression on social media has not always been positive. There are some forms of expressions which can be seen as unrealistic and unachievable especially when it came to the physicality. Social media is promoting unrealistic body image and facial appearance on its platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. A person's identity on social media is radically different from their personal identity outside the virtual community. In this case, unrealistic body and facial appearance are promoted on social media platforms through the social identity of the user and not the personal one. Unrealistic body image is projected by famous social media users such as actors, models and influencers, who are people the general public usually look up to and eventually try to imitate. Another factor is the projection of an untrue identity on social media platform to showcase unrealistic body image and facial appearance. Users on social media do not reflect their personal identity on this virtual platform. Instead, they advocate for the unrealistic body image and falsify their identities to conform these ideals. This paper also talks about the use of hashtags to fight against the unrealistic body image projection on social media and to how extent it is efficient.

Hashtags – promoting or demoting body positivity?

Nowadays, hashtags are extensively used to fight against the unrealistic body image issues on social media. Hashtags, such as #fatspiration, #nomakeupselfie, #loveyourbody and #enhancement-free, are the ones commonly used to promote body positivity on social media

platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and selfie. Along with common users, celebrities also use these hashtags to campaign for body positivity. It is argued that these types of hashtags are created to make young women, girls and generally everyone feel less dissatisfied with their physical appearance. Users being the general public as well as several celebrities have adopted the #enhancement-free hashtag, promoting a social media without the need to beautify the images in terms of filters and other extravagant tools (Tiggeman & Zinoviev, 2019). There are several celebrities who promote the makeup free selfies. For instance, actress Gal Gadot and model Cindy Crawford posted makeup-free pictures of themselves on Instagram (Fisher, 2017). However, these celebrities did not make use of the hashtags in their captions. This raises a question. Are hashtags really efficient? The celebrities' selfies were campaigning positive body image but with no usage of the actual hashtag method. In the research of Tiggeman and Zinoviev (2019), the "enhancement-free images with hashtags led to greater facial dissatisfaction than those same images without hashtags" (pp. 136). These hashtags, instead of decreasing body dissatisfaction and increasing body image positivity on social media platforms, are increasing appearance comparisons. As explained by Tiggeman and Zinoviev (2019), "enhancement-free images on Instagram potentially present women with more realistic representations, expectations, and comparison targets" (pp. 136). This all explains how these specific hashtags such as #enhancement-free and #nomakeupselfie, though used as a method to fight against unrealistic body image and promote body and appearance satisfaction, have the reverse effect to what it was originally created for. The 'No Makeup Selfie' campaign also face some backlash such as in the article by Krneta (2017), where social media users, including famous celebrities such as Kylie Jenner and Demi Lovato, lie about not using makeup. Along with being inefficient to promote body and appearance satisfaction, hashtags are also misused by the social media users. All this prove the inefficiency of these hashtag campaigns. Though, there are some improvements, it is still not enough to stop the advocacy for unrealistic body image and facial appearance.

Celebrities promoting unrealistic body image and facial appearance

Celebrities such as actors, models and influencers advocate for unrealistic body image and facial appearance on their social media profiles through pictures and sometimes videos. This enhances their images and social identity. This does not only apply to celebrities. The general majority of users on social media platforms, especially the younger generations, take their identities on this virtual platform rather seriously. One's identity on social media has to

be impeccable and without any defect. The general users of social media are easily influenced by celebrities they follow. Several media figures advocates for thin media ideals on social media. As per Maltby et al. (2005), media in general glamorises celebrities and models and promotes “body shapes that are unrealistic and unattainable for many young people” (pp. 18). “Instagram is purely a photo-based platform and is renowned for the ubiquitous ‘selfie’ as well as ‘fitspiration’ imagery” (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2017, pp. 186). This social media platform, being photo-based and famous for its hashtags is often used for body surveillance. There are several profiles on this platform which demonstrate and advocate the journey of getting an ideal body. An ideal body on Instagram is mostly thin and fit, as Cohen, Newton-John and Slater explained (2017). Exposure to such contents is a major promotion to adopt that lifestyle. “Social media offer a constant stream of curated appearance and physical images promoting a typical ideal such as the thin ideal for women and the muscular ideal for men” (Cohen et al., 2019, as cited in Kim, 2020, p. 2). Body image concerns are often raised due to celebrities posting unrealistic photos of themselves, showing an unrealistic body image and facial appearance. Famous people, such as Kim Kardashian, Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid and Kaia Gerber, are all on the social media platform, Instagram and are followed by millions of other users. These celebrities portray an unrealistic ideal of body image. “Viewing idealized made-up images (selfies) of attractive women taken from Instagram reduced young women’s facial appearance satisfaction and lead them to want to change more aspects of their face, hair, and skin than women who viewed appearance-neutral control images” (Fardouly & Rapee, 2019, pp. 132). Young women, in this case, are changing their physical appearances on social media to be more like the celebrities they look up to. For instance, several YouTube channels are creating contents such as “People Instagram Like Kim Kardashian For A Week” (As/Is, 2017). In this particular video, there were talks of how the youngsters were unsure about being as ‘great’ as the celebrity herself and even though they used the filters, they could not capture the same essence of the icon. One of the participants, Sam Stryker shared the amount of work added to put a single picture on Instagram and even stated that “being good at Instagram should be an Olympic event” (As/Is, 2017, 3:17).

Advertisements and Marketing promoting unrealistic body image and facial appearance

Advertisements on social media platforms promote unrealistic body image and facial appearances. Like on other media platforms, social media is also used as a marketing

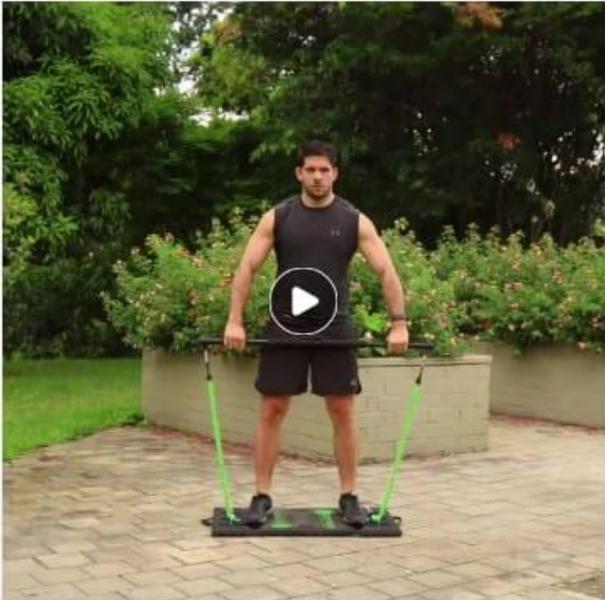
strategy. Several firms market their products on social media platforms, for instance, through ads in between stories on Instagram and on the news feed of Facebook. “[Advertising] tells me to stay young, it tells me to stay thin, it tells me to be very social. The majority of advertisements I see are geared toward cliquish type of atmosphere where a lot of people are always involved in a lot of things” (Shields & Heinecken, 2001, pp. 13). Figure 1 shows an example of an advertisement on Facebook, concerning fitness. Though, consumers might argue that they are not affected by advertisements, “the influence of advertising in general is greater than people realise or are willing to admit” (Zawisza-Riley, 2019, pp. 54). Based on algorithms and big data, users of social media are presented with specific ads such as weight loss ads, college applications ads and consumer products ads. Adverts about body image such as dieting ads, fitness ads and makeup ads often pop up on social media feeds as shown in figure 1. These ads are mostly persuasive and unrealistic. For instance, there are ads promising extreme weight loss in a short amount of time or complete removal of blackheads on the face with only one use of a particular product. These types of marketing collaterals are promoting unrealistic body image and facial appearance. Influenced by the advertisements, users, dissatisfied with their physical appearance, are signing up for dieting and fitness plans and buying all sorts of products to try on their skins.

Figure 1

A picture containing the game, man, board, young

BodyBoss Portable Gym 2.0
Sponsored
ID: 256023011169657

★★★★★ "It really works and very mobile!" Get \$30 off your next purchase with code: 30off 🎁



BODYBOSSPORTABLEGYM.COM ||
\$30 OFF Body Boss Portable Gym! Use Code: 30off
30 Day Money-Back Guarantee

Stop Now

Note. From *A picture containing the game, man, board, young*, by LeadsBridge 2021 (<https://leadsbridge.com/blog/facebook-ads-tips/gym-ads/>). Copyright 2021 by Asaolu Hephzy.

Projecting an identity to project and promote unrealistic body image and facial appearance

The social media users of today, especially the younger generations are creating a separate identity of themselves on the social media platforms to conform to the ideals of unrealistic body image and facial appearances and in the process, promoting this advocacy. “In relation to body image, it is well established that self-presentation on social media is of central importance to young people and can drive the ways in which young people participate, interact and communicate” (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017, as cited in Goodyear, 2020, p. 48). This proves how users each express their identities to speak the language of social media, which in this case, is promoting unrealistic body image and facial appearance. Social media has become a network where, along with the ease of sharing and long-distance communication, it “is a key resource in young people’s life for the development of identities and relationships as well as emotional regulations, self-expression, learning and much more”

(Goodyear, 2020, p. 48). Basically, being on social media, one eventually starts to fall for the advocacy of unrealistic body image and facial appearances. Users will post pictures and videos of themselves which make them feel inclusive on this platform. Users thus form an identity which may not reflect their real self at all. Their social media identity only reflects how they wish their lifestyles to appear as and not how they actually are. For instance, users may post pictures of themselves where they appear slim or have no spots on their faces. In short term, social media users portray idealistic and perfect identity on social media which do not reflect how they may be in real life. And along with the unreal identities, users are also indirectly continuing the advocacy for unrealistic body image and facial appearance by following the crowd. Due to this advocacy of unrealistic body image and facial appearance, there also appeared to be consequences. Some of them, according to Tiggeman and Zinoviev (2019), are body dissatisfaction and eating disorder. It is also said that “taking and posting self-photos on social media leads to feelings of increased anxiety and lower physical attractiveness” (Tiggeman & Zinoviev, 2019, pp. 132). Steps, such as heavy dieting, are taken by users who are easily influenced by the unrealistic portrayals of body and face on the social network.

Conclusion

As discussed above, the community of social media has a long way before body image and facial appearance can be portrayed positively instead of advocating them in an unrealistic manner. Though, there were campaigns such as the “No Makeup Selfie” campaign, the response was mixed and the campaign even faced backlashes as described above. The advocacy for unrealistic body image is forcing a change in identity or dividing the factor where users can advocate for unrealism on the social media community and not in the physical world. Due to unrealistic body image and facial appearance advocacy, users of social media platforms are somehow forced to follow the crowd to achieve their common goal of popularity. They eventually conform to that lifestyle and community and start promoting an unrealistic identity themselves. Some studies above also show some improvements of decreased body dissatisfaction and acceptance of personal identity on the virtual community through the enhancement-free pictures of users like actors, models and influencers. Without the usage of hashtags, there seemed to be slight improvement in the projection of self-identity on social media platforms. However, it is still not strong enough to fight the advocacy for unrealistic body image and facial appearance. Other measures, apart

from hashtag campaigns, need to be considered on the online platform itself to promote the advocacy for positive body image and demote the advocacy for unrealistic body image and facial appearance.

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