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Social Media and its Effects on Mental Health

Social Media and technology have become an integral part in people's lives allowing them to stay connected to those not directly around them, but the debate regarding its influence on mental health is often not spoken about. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and many others are intended to unify a community as well as bring its viewers happiness and entertainment. Using its visual-oriented posts such as people's everyday activities, fitness inspiration and so much more really draw people in and compel them to stay online. As stated on Instagram's website, the company believes that "It's (their) responsibility to foster a safe and supportive community for everyone" ("The Instagram Community"). If the intention of these platforms is to provide happiness and entertainment, then why is there an upsurge in teenage mental illnesses across the globe?

In the United States alone, about 80% of women and 34% of men are not satisfied with how they look. It is not only an issue with adults either, 53% of 13-year old females in the US are unhappy with their appearance and by the time they reach 17, that percentage increases to 78% (Gallivan). Due to its normalcy created in today's society, teenagers spend a large portion of their time on these social media platforms and leave physical interaction and face-to-face conversation behind. Celebrities "direct" connection with their fans is a new aspect to fan/celebrity relationship that had never been available before these kinds of platforms. These interactions draw people in and allow followers and users of the applications to be introduced to a new type of connectivity. While the initial intention was to bring communities together, the use

of these platforms has grown to providing fitness inspiration, direct connection with celebrities, and the potential of increasing a person's self-consciousness due to the increase in beauty ideals and standards. Social media platforms have allowed people to join together and feel like part of a community but debates still remain regarding its effects on the proliferation of body image issues as well as other mental illnesses and the ethical obligations of influencers and companies with the use of photo editing and its effects on onlookers.

Before social media, people would often get information on their favorite celebrities from sources such as magazines and news articles. Teens would read articles in magazines such as *Seventeen Magazine* where they would learn the details about their favorites teen crushes' lives and take quizzes to identify their compatibility with them. Adults had many options as well, having *People Magazine* and news shows that broadcasted the celebrity lifestyle. In today's world, celebrities have the ability to directly connect and communicate with fans with popular apps such as Instagram and Snapchat or even post videos on the well-known webpage YouTube. These celebrities can now post whatever they want whenever they want, often times without having to go through their team of publicists, agents, managers and more which they normally would for a typical TV or magazine interview. No longer do people only see their favorite celebrities on television or when a new issue of a magazine comes out, but now it is a constant connection. Eager fans of these celebrities now have access to whatever the celebrities allow them to know from their posts, whether it be updates on personal lives, the different vacations they've gone on, and essentially any other information they are willing to share to their large audiences. With this positive aspect of connectivity comes its counterpart. Many celebrities and influencers alike edit photos that they post causing an increase in the acceptance of an unattainable beauty standard created by society. Though these platforms give celebrities the

possibility of sharing their lives like regular people, it brings up the query on whether these celebrities should be allowing the acceptance of this unrealistic beauty standard and whether these photo edits effect those that see them.

Body image and how people view themselves has always been important, but with this rise in social media, users have become more conscious of how themselves and others look and compare them to these body image standards that have been set by society. Formerly, people would see touched up images of models on the cover of magazines or advertisements and many would compare themselves to these figures who were often extremely thin supermodels that were retouched using different kinds of editing software. Now, with everything moving more towards social media sites, these images are everywhere from posts on Instagram of people that have become "Instagram models" as well as throughout all the advertisements on these sites. It is no longer something that people see once in a while, but it is now a constant. Although these advancements in connectivity between one another has been beneficial for many, the exposure to these images have become excessive and creates a negative impact on the body image standards that society constructs and rationalizes it through the amount of likes and comments they receive. As stated in an exploratory analysis done about social media and body image, "advertising has been described as an internalizing or normalizing means to spread unrealistic beauty ideals" (Aparicio-Martinez), and now it is everywhere people look when on any media sites whereas a few years ago it was mainly on print. While it is great that people are benefiting from these new platforms, there is an increase in numbers of influencers that spread this idea of an unrealistic body image and normalize it. Companies also contribute to its normalization by allowing it in their advertisements and broadcasting those ads everywhere from commercials and magazines to websites and various social media platforms. Due to this surge of influencers and the abundance

of these photos all over, it brings up the debate of the ethics behind these types of images when it comes to both companies' advertisements and influencers posts.

In the past it was a common argument that models pictured in magazine covers and advertisements were extremely skinny, and the photos were edited as if the original image was not up to beauty ideals. Though this fact became prevalent, viewers still compare themselves to these images causing people to become more conscious of their own bodies in comparison. In a study regarding this topic, "Of American elementary school girls who read magazines, 69% said that the pictures influence their concept of the ideal body shape, 47% say the pictured make them want to lose weight" (Gallivan). Just from seeing these photos once and a while, this was still an incredible impact on how society views beauty standards, and now in the year 2022, these images have not only multiplied, but popularized. The ideal beauty standard and its effect of kids and women started before social media, but has social media caused a rise in the issue? These media platforms had taken the issue of young children and many adults comparing themselves and their bodies to these unrealistic beauty standards and amplified it. It is no longer a choice to see these images due to its abundance across so many different types of platforms, especially social media. These images can be seen while people are relaxing watching TV or looking through a magazine, to when people go on social media, and even when a person is searching the internet and seeing advertisements on the sides of the websites.

Advertisements are no longer the only culprit for these edited prints, but celebrities have become part of the problem as well. Celebrities and Instagram models have often been accused of editing their photos. It is not uncommon when people are able to spot out little errors in the editing, such as a curve in a doorframe or an over pixilated area of the photo making it obvious that it was tampered with. Though many people, not just celebrities, edit their photos, should

these influencers with huge followings be editing their photos into unrealistic body ideals? Those

with such large audiences that are editing their photos are promoting these unrealistic body

images to their audiences and influencing those that see the photos which causes self-

consciousness and the feeling as though it is something that is necessary to look good in

society's eyes. These posts cause people to feel like the way they are and how they look is not

normal or do not meet the standards of today's society causing them to become more self-

conscious and, in return, try to change themselves to conform.

Back in 2014 there was a memorable instance where a celebrity was caught editing their

photos, and it was the world-famous popstar Beyonce. While celebrating her 33rd birthday with

her family on a yacht, she decided to post a photo from the experience. Not long after it being

posted did people notice that the image looked as though it was tampered with. While walking

down the stairs on the lavish boat in a bathing suit, it was noticed that between her legs there was

a distortion on the stairs. Between her legs you could see that the stair that should be straight was

now at an angle, and once people took notice, she began to get accused for trying to edit her legs

to be thinner and make others think that her thighs do not touch, because that is what society says

looks good. *Cosmopolitan* wrote an article on this stating, "Photoshopping is bad for women's

sense of self. We see photoshopped images of celebrities and aspire to a standard of beauty that

is actually impossible to achieve. By calling celebrities out, we are letting other women know

that, *See? Nobody actually looks like that"* (Frey). This was also not the only time Beyonce, as

well as many other celebrities, have been accused of photoshopping pictures they post. That

same year there was another photo that Beyoncé posted that had a distorted phone and wine

glass, clearly indicating it was edited (Croffey). Not only do these images support the unrealistic

beauty standard that society has created but it also gives women an opportunity to critique

themselves. Women can easily begin asking themselves whether or not they look good enough or reach the benchmark that society has created.

With time passing and technology making huge advancements, these edited photos are becoming more and more common. No longer is it just edited magazine covers and high-end advertisements, but it is everywhere. With the enormous pressure from society to look a certain way, users of social media have now been given the tools to edit their own photos. Advancements in app development now let those with smartphones have access to a world of possibilities with the tap of a finger to their screen. Apps such as FaceTune allow its consumers to manipulate and edit photos however they please with capabilities such as adding filters, whitening teeth, clearing blemishes, and warping bodies. These apps even found ways to add extra profit for themselves by requiring the app user to pay extra for certain editing features. The more that the users are willing to pay, the more access they are given to such amenities. Some social media platforms have these filters available for free on their apps such as Instagram and Snapchat, where with one swipe of a finger a filter can be added to the photos that change colors, smooth out skin, and even reshape the figure in the photo. People are no longer comparing themselves to these unrealistic beauty ideals but are not trying to conform to society's standards by changing the way that they look. This allows for the mindset that unless a photo is edited, it is not good enough to post.

In an article "Immersed in Perfection" published in *Psychology Today,* the author Abigail Fagen goes into detail regarding the usage of these types of apps and how it affects its users.

"Face tune and other editing applications are so widely available that unrealistic beauty ideals are invoked by classmates, coworkers, neighbors, and friends… It can erode self-

esteem. And it can drive a wedge between the self-posted online and the self-reflected in the mirror- one's ideal self and one's real self." (Fagan)

Because it has become so common for people to edit their photos, it may seem like a harmless act to whiten teeth, synch in waists and much more, but it is creating a larger issue. It is normalizing this unrealistic standard that society is not only promoting but financially benefiting from and causing people to not only not accept themselves, but not even recognize themselves once the filters are off.

These changes to the body have not just stopped at 2-D, they have now found its way into reality. Many of those that have been using photo editing apps have gotten so used to how they look on the screen, that they are not happy with their real self and want to make permanent changes to their appearances. "Photo editing is driving clients to redesign themselves. People historically came to cosmetic surgeons with photos of celebrities whose features they hoped to emulate. Now, they are coming in with edited selfies" (Fagan). These warped images that people are creating of themselves have become so realistic and appealing that people want to make themselves look like these edited photos because they think they look better than their actual self. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the number of minimally invasive procedures between 2000 and 2018 have tripled (Fagan). Rather than using cosmetic surgery to fix one feature that has been bothering a person their whole lives, people now want to edit their faces and bodies to the way that society makes others feel like is acceptable. This unrealistic beauty standard that society is popularizing and accepting is no longer only being impacted by edited photos of models and celebrities. Edited photos that people are now so used to making of themselves because these standards have made them feel like the person they are is not good enough.

With these abundant amounts of focus being put on social media and its posts, it is easy for users to be consumed by their image, leading to the increase in mental health cases and body image disorders such as body dysmorphia. In a research study held about discovering a possible connection between eating disorder attitudes, body ideals and social media, it states that "The media plays a vital role in formulating what is attractive in society, increasing the thin beauty ideal among females being unattainable. These ideals confirmed the way young people perceived themselves and, therefore, how they value themselves" (Aparicio-Martinez). These unrealistic standards that have been set now lead many to not accept or like themselves the way that they are and crave for a solution for a nonexistent problem that they have been convinced of. According to the ANAD website, The National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders, 28.8 million Americans will suffer from an eating disorder in their lifetime, which is about 9% of the United States population. These are disorders such as body dysmorphia or extreme binge eating. Not only do these disorders affect people's day to day lives, but oftentimes can lead people to suicide. About 26% of people with these eating disorders are known to have attempted suicide, and about 10% do lose their lives (Lyster-Mensh).

Due to an influx in these disorders, there have been many organizations that have been created to help out those suffering from these problems. Founded in 2001, NEDA, The National Eating Disorder Association, is one of many resources that were created for issues that relate to body image such as anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders. NEDA strives to give support to those suffering from these mental illnesses as well as the families that are affected. These illnesses are very serious but are treatable and that is what different organizations such as this aim to do.

Having noticed these unrealistic beauty ideals are being promoted in almost every advertisement and all-over social media, some celebrities and companies are fighting back. Aerie, a lingerie store that is connected with the popular brand American Eagle, is one example of a company that noticed this trend and wanted to do its part to end it. "The brand, founded in 2006, is aimed at the 15-21-year-old demographic, meaning young women in high school and college. And it's widely held – and proven by numerous studies and surveys – that young women's sense of body confidence is so often influenced by the images of female beauty they see in media" (Krupnick). To combat these unrealistic beauty ideals, Aerie launched an ad campaign in hopes of promoting the beauty in every woman, no matter the size and shape. Their plan is to emphasize their nonuse of supermodels and promote using natural images. To endorse their new line of lingerie, the company is using women of everybody type and emphasizing that they have no need to retouch any of the images because every woman is beautiful, a message that they want to promote. In the photos that were used in the campaign, taken by photographer John Urbano, the images all state in bold and bright lettering that the girl has not been retouched. They even decided to add a message to their consumers on one of the advertisements with the message:

> "Dear Aerie Girls, we think it's time for a change. We think it's time to get real and think real. We want every girl to feel good about who they are and what they look like, inside and out. This means no more retouching our girls and no more supermodels. Why?
>
> Because there is no reason to retouch beauty. We think the real you is sexy. Xoxo Aerie."

Although one ad campaign is not going to fix the society's view on women's body image, Aerie chooses to be part of the solution rather than financially benefitting by spreading a message of nonacceptance and animosity. With these new images of nonretouched women and showing

ladies of all shapes and sizes, they are hoping to prove to their consumers that they themselves, and everyone around them, are beautiful no matter what shape or size they are. Everyone is beautiful in their own way and there is no reason to promote a message that says otherwise. These standards for beauty are not only unrealistic but untrue, and they want to be a good influence on other brands alike and hope that others follow.

With Aerie being an example of a company pushing for change, some companies are still stubborn to join the movement. The well-known lingerie brand Victoria's Secret is one of them. Having been scrutinized for their use of only exceptionally thin models and their acceptance of unrealistic body standards, the brand still seems to be keen on not using any plus-size models. The chief marketing officer of the brand, Ed Razek, has spoken about the subject and explains that the company feels the public has "no interest" in using women larger than a size eight in their shows, explaining that they have a separate brand for plus-size women (Alexander). This refusal to change and adapt to promote a positive message to women is keeping the world from standing up against this unrealistic body images for women and keeps pushing for these unrealistic standards. The hesitation and disinterest to change can equally create an issue in societies eyes regarding why some companies do not want to make a change. Is it really that bad to be larger than a size eight? What is so terrible about the body when it is not up to societies standards? These thoughts not only can hurt a person's self-esteem but also can be bad towards mental health.

With the push for change from various individuals, there has been some legal action taken against these retouching of images and the use of extremely thin supermodels. A very distinguished law that was passed was the Photoshop Law in Israel. This law pushes for change by having two main parts. The first part requires that the models used in images must have an

18.5 BMI (body mass index). This is imperative because an individual that is under 18.5 BMI is technically in the underweight category, those that are between the body mass index of 18.5 and 24.9 are considered to be in the healthy BMI range ("What Is the Body Mass Index (BMI)?"). This being incorporated into the laws in Israel keeps advertisements from using women of an unnatural weight, which onlookers could view as the standard of societal beauty. The second part of this law states that advertisers must label any retouched images. This allows all those consumers or viewers of the advertisements to recognize that the image has been tampered with. With France also joining the push for change, they passed a law back in October of 2017 which regarded the labeling of retouched images as well as requiring models to go through medical examinations every other year to validate their health. Governments recognizing an issue among advertisements and its effects on people's mental health has pushed them to pass these laws which will hopefully create a positive impact on the society's views on body image.

The Unites States has also strived to make a change. Having passed the Truth in Advertising Act Bill in March of 2014, the US has attempted to make a push against the photoshopping by regulating the extent of altering images that are possibly misleading, manipulative and could possibly be contributing to the negative body image. Though this is a great attempt, there are still holes in the law. Due to the fact that the Unites States has freedom of speech and other such laws, it makes it hard for this law to be carried out. Since there is not exact definition of what images are too manipulative or misleading, it allows some to not have to label images when it is most likely necessary. This law is a great first step in the United States, but changes need to be made to make it more effective (Navamanikkam).

The impact of posts on social media and from advertisements on people's body image is very influential on how people view themselves physically, but it can often lead to other mental

illnesses. Due to its connectivity and activeness, many find themselves consumed with their online presence and spend much of their time on social media. In a study about "The Predictive relationships between the Social Media Addiction and Social Anxiety, Loneliness and Happiness," it speaks about the possibilities of addiction to being on social media and how it can affect those using it stating,

> The increase in the popularity of social media and becoming dependent on the virtual structure of these social networks leads to an increase in the number of individuals with negatively affected lives by being isolated from real life and individuals with damaged relationships. Social media applications have been widely used with the emergence of interactive web technologies, and the overuse of these applications cause addiction problems (Baltaci).

One topic that is brought up is social anxiety and how people can cope with that anxiety by going online because they feel that it is easier for them to express themselves socially online rather in a real-life social setting. Social anxiety can also be known as a "social phobia (that) has become increasingly common in contemporary societies due to the increased isolation in impersonal living environments…" (Kalyva). This disconnection from society can lead people to their technology more due to its comfort and it has the connection to people being addicted to the internet leading to misuse and addiction which will, in return, lead them to experiencing other negative aspects of social media such as the acceptance and obsession with unrealistic beauty standards, creating a whole new problem. The youth is the significant age group that can have issues with technology misuse, especially university students. This is true due to the new experiences these students have while at school and the separations from their families (Baltaci).

In the study regarding happiness and social media usage, it was discovered that there was a connection between social media use and these anxieties and loneliness. "…individuals who are happy in their social environment and do not worry about being evaluated in this environment usually do not search for different online communication tools. Thus, their possibility of being addicted to social media decreases" (Baltaci). Once online these people using these sites now have the connectivity and feeling of a community that they have been yearning for. But now, being on social media, there is an abundance of negative content that can lead to other bad outcomes, such as the body-image issues and the effects of them which was spoken about prior.

Depression and suicide in the United States is very serious especially among people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four, causing suicide to be the second leading cause of death among this age range. It is even known that 8.3% of people within this age range have had serious thoughts about it (Kerr). Social media is definitely not the main cause but there is a chance that it can be a part of the problem. Being stripped from society and seeing how others live their lives compared to their own can easily lead a person to feel down about themselves.

Both men and women are being constantly shown images of the way they are "supposed" to look and cause for people to not accept themselves for who they are or the way they look. These unrealistic standards not only make people feel bad about themselves but push themselves to do unhealthy and unnatural procedures to themselves in hopes of fitting a standard that is unattainable. These disorders that people are obtaining are not only all consuming but there are many that do not seek help for such problems. Only about one third of people with anorexia actually seek help from a professional, and for binge eating only about a half. It may seem like the lesser of disorders compared to others but these eating disorders are "second only to opioid

overdose as the deadliest mental illness" (Lyster-Mensh). Programs such as The National Eating

Disorder Association have been created in hopes of helping these problems that sometimes can

come from such platforms. The overuse of social media is another negative aspect that can lead

to loneliness and depression and many are seeking help for such disorders. If more people took

action against this false promotion of beauty standards and promoted more body positivity the

way the brand Aerie did, there would most likely be fewer eating disorders and suicides that

came from it.

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