Understanding the Complex Relationship between Social Media and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become an integral part of society, serving to connect individuals across the world and making the world a globalised place. The development of self-esteem in today's world has been hypothesised as being closely linked to social media, especially for young teenagers. To a large extent, self-esteem is derived from formal and informal associations that we engage in and social media has become an alternate for both forms of association. For many individuals, establishing and maintaining a virtual identity takes on a priority, one that can be understood from a psychodynamic perspective. Jung's concept of the persona and Roger's concept of the ideal self can both be utilised to understand an individual's growing dependence on social media and the consequent influence it has for the human psyche. Without realising the illusion that is portrayed, most fall prey to making upward comparisons with their peers and others. Thus, for those in their adolescence, without the required maturity, social media can become a lethal weapon that appears to reinforce negative perceptions about the self.

Keywords: Social media, Self-esteem and Adolescence, Psychodynamic Processes

1. Introduction

Self-esteem is a central component of an individual's personality, influencing almost all aspects of life. The development of self-

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esteem starts in our formative years and is an ongoing process throughout our life span. The prevailing zeitgeist at any given point of time exerts some influence on the network of factors that have a say on the development of our self-esteem. Examining this in today's context, no part of the broader culture has been left untouched by social media. Thus, there arises a need to understand how social media affects the development of self-esteem.

Self-esteem is an encompassing term. There is an elemental self-worth that we are born with; however, this understanding works much like the tip of the iceberg. A comprehensive definition of self-esteem would include two fundamental components- confidence in our ability to think and cope with the demands of life (self-efficacy) and confidence in our right to feel happy and be successful (self-respect).The essence of self-esteem is to be able to trust one's mind and believe that one is worthy of happiness. To say that it is a judgement or a feeling will be simplifying it; it acts as a motivator, driving behaviour (Brenden, 1995).

According to the identity theory, the self primarily develops through various social interactions and a multitude of social factors that influence self concepts (Stryker & Burke, 2000). It is not only our interactions with family members but also the social roles we adopt that colours our perception of ourselves (Reitzes & Mutran, 2006). With regard to the social atmosphere in today's world, social roles for many people are adopted and lived via the interface of social networking sites.

Understanding how social media adversely impacts self-esteem requires an in-depth exploration of the comparisons people engage in. "Social comparison" is understood to be an elemental drive, serving a varied set of functions such as regulating our emotions, inspiring us, satisfying affiliation needs and evaluating ourselves (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Social comparisons can either be upward or downward. The former occurs when we compare ourselves with those judged to be superior to us whereas the latter occurs when we compare ourselves with those judged to be inferior to us. Both types of comparisons typically serve to function as self-enhancement strategies. Often, the comparisons are made on a certain dimension or domain (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018).

Traditionally, social comparisons were made on the basis of our interactions with people around us, in an offline capacity. Considering the pervasive nature of social media, most social comparisons are now made online and there is a proclivity towards upward comparisons. Although upward comparisons can enhance self-esteem, it is likely to make people feel inadequate, form more negative self-appraisals and cause negative feelings (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). The mediating role is played by the degree of similarity between us and the target we are comparing ourselves with. If the similarity is judged to be high, it will lead to more positive outcomes on self-esteem and if it is judged to be low, it will lead to negative outcomes on self-esteem (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018).

Social media has become a space where young people develop their identities without interference from their parents (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2016). Adolescence has been identified as a vulnerable period in the human lifespan and social media may have further exploited it. A survey was conducted to study the pattern of social media use and how this related to the quality of sleep, depression, and self-esteem in teenagers. The study revealed that adolescents who spent more time on social networking sites and were "emotionally invested" in social media had lower self-confidence, experienced poor quality of sleep and had increased levels of depression and anxiety (Woods & Scott, 2016). For many adolescents, accessing social networking sites (SNS) is akin to a ritual; their day begins and ends with it. Due to the amount of time spent on SNS and the attention it draws, adolescents are engaging less in solitary activities and face to face interactions with peers (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

Adolescence has a huge role to play in the development of self-esteem. This becomes evident when we look at the two keys tasks in adolescence- to develop an identity and autonomy (to stand out) and to establish affiliations and gain acceptance from peers (to fit in) (Brown, 2008). Earlier, these were undertaken through social interactions and feedback received from those around, most of which involved face to face interaction. Today, establishing an identity while trying to fit into social groups is done through SNS. A noteworthy aspect with regard to SNS use in adolescents is

cyber-bullying. With how rapidly information is communicated in SNS, within a short span of time, adolescents may become targets of humiliation, with a wider expanse of an audience (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

However, the vulnerability may not be limited to adolescents alone. Even for those in their early adulthood years, social media can serve as a trigger, exposing underlying predispositions. There are multiple factors that have to be examined when considering how identity is built on social media and how this identity maybe different from the offline identity we assume. Social media is unique in its ability to connect people across the world, allowing information sharing like never before. In doing so, it has been able to satisfy the inner need we have to know about other people. For some people, social media acts as a safe haven to explore the social world. Especially for individuals who are socially anxious or have less desirable physical traits, social media acts as a second chance, without the pressures of the external world (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). For others, social media is used to broaden their social relationships. It may be finding new friends, exploring shared interests, rekindling old relations, and so on. Whatever maybe the case, the platform offers people the chance to present themselves with tailored information for the world to see. Some of this information may be true, some false; the profile they construct is the one they want the world to see.

In face to face interactions, we cannot control the flow of information to a large degree. What we consider as desirable and what we consider as undesirable is all part of the presentation even though we may want to desperately hide the flaws. Social media counters this problem, offering people a chance to build an alternate identity wherein they can include what they want and exclude all that is perceived as unpleasant or negative. Underlying the popularity of SNS such as Facebook and Instagram is the opportunity available to build an attractive identity. Individuals often spend a lot of time and energy constructing an online persona that highlights their most desirable attributes (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014).

This is not to say that the concept of online identity is a lie or a hoax; it does not suggest an underlying pathology either. The need

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for acceptance and approval has been present with us since the beginning of civilisation (DeWall & Bushman, 2011) and these needs partly explain why we are so attracted to social media. For those who have experienced difficulty in socialising, social media is a way to overcome certain obstacles and enjoy the experience of making friends and sharing ideas. For those who want to climb the rungs of the social hierarchy, social media becomes a tool to be wielded. The problem arises when emotional investment increases in our online identity even while glaring differences exist between the online and offline identity. This would not only adversely impact our self-esteem but also lead to some kind of pathology.

We might be able to understand this better with Rogers' concept of the real and ideal self. According to Rogers, the self is the result of an individual's experiences. Unconditional positive regard is necessary for the development of a healthy self; reality being that most people grow up with conditional acceptance. Feelings of worth develop only when the individual behaves in a certain way. Out of this dichotomy, gradually built over the years, comes the ideal self (what he/she wishes to be) and the real self (what he/she is) (Gladding, 2004). Applying this knowledge to the current argument, our offline identity serves to be the real self while the online identity serves to be the ideal self. In the absence of SNS, the ideal self could have remained as an abstract concept in our mind, fuelling our anxiety and negative self-evaluations but never really taking a concrete shape. With the inclusion of SNS, the question arises as to whether we have now found a way to give shape to our ideal self; in other words, are we living under two identities?

This is also where the problem lies. Having an online ideal self is not a therapeutic act, at least not in the long term. For a while, the individual may feel excited about the possibilities associated with the ideal online identity. However, eventually, the discrepancies between the two identities may only become exaggerated because of social media to such an extent that the individual tries to shun the real identity. Thus, the question of social media adversely affecting self-esteem has relevance and pertinence.

Another way to understand the online identity is via the lens of persona, as described by Jung (Guo & Ma, 2018). Persona has been described as the "mask of the actor." Persona is that which in

reality we are not but is mistaken to be by oneself and others. The persona can be perceived as an obstacle because it is designed to serve two functions- to make a marked impression on others and to obscure our real identity. Jung was of the view that identifying with the persona was the greatest mistake one could make when working towards the goal of individuation (Bolea, 2016). In explaining our downfall when we live in the world of our persona alone, Rogers said, "identification with one's office or one's title is very attractive indeed, which is precisely why so many men are nothing more than the decorum accorded to them by society…This is why the office- or whatever this outer husk may be-is so attractive: it offers easy compensation for personal deficiencies" (as cited in Tacey, 2012).

Thus, the online identity we so meticulously establish may serve the function of an ideal self or a persona but either way it isn't our real self. Social media has a lot of benefits associated with it- rapid dissemination of information, exploring social ties, establishing new relations, and connecting with people from different cultures. However, living through a pseudo-identity should not be one of them. Adolescents are especially prone to experimenting with this aspect of social media. When this is seen in the context of their age and lack of maturity, the consequences may be long term for one's self-esteem.

Most people are drawing a sense of worth and approval from their online identities alone, not fully realising the extent of pervasiveness these identities carry. There is an imminent need to educate people especially adolescents and their parents about the strong yet complex relationship between social media and self-esteem. In doing so, we can hope that people become mindful of their online identities, seeking healthier ways to cope with perceived flaws.

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