Effects of Social Media on Social Comparison and Self-Esteem in Teenagers

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Social media applications have had a large impact on many different generations. With the rise of technology and opportunity, social media has become the epicenter for teenagers and college students to express and connect with others through pictures, videos, and personal content. According to a new study from Pew Research Center (2015), 92% of teens report going online daily—including 24% who say they go “online constantly.” In the same study, Pew Research Center (2015) found that Facebook remains the most used social media site among American teens with 71% of all teens using the site. Furthermore, a study done by Gonzales and Hancock (2011) found that in some cases Facebook can actually have a positive effect, rather than a negative one on self-esteem and social comparison in teens. As more teens “go online,” teenagers’ self-esteem and social comparison are impacted with the rising use of social media platforms, like Facebook, in both negative and positive ways.

In today’s society, social networking sites have almost become a “mandatory” item to have. Without this, certain barriers are created from you, others, and the online world. But, people who are active on social networking sites also open themselves up to social comparison and public scrutiny from the mass piles of information about themselves embedded in each profile (Pew Research Center, 2015). The piece, Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem, examines two studies that determine whether frequent Facebook use is associated with lower trait self-esteem and the impact of temporary exposure to social media profiles on state self-esteem and relative self-evaluations (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Vogel et al. (2014) argued that exposure to social media and the abundant opportunities for social comparison are associated with negative changes in self-evaluation and self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to a person’s positive or negative evaluation of the self; that is, the extent to which an individual views the self as worthwhile and competent (Coppersmith, 1967).
In one study, Vogel et al. (2014) used 145 undergraduates (106 female) from a Midwestern University with an average age of nineteen. The participants answered a series of questionnaires pertaining to their Facebook use, self-esteem, and extent to which they made upward or downward social comparisons on Facebook. Vogel et al. (2014) found that the results showed that participants who used Facebook most often had poorer trait self-esteem (believing that there is something innately wrong with themselves), and this was mediated by greater exposure to upward social comparisons (when people compare themselves to others who are better than they are) on social media. In study two, Vogel et al. (2014) used an experimental approach to examine whether temporary exposure to social media-based social comparison information would impact state self-esteem and self-evaluations and ultimately provide experimental evidence for the role of upward social comparison (when people compare themselves to others who are better than they are) in affecting well-being and self-evaluations. The same participants from study one were exposed to fictitious social media profiles that varied in terms of whether the information conveyed an upward or downward social comparison status. Vogel et al. (2014) found that the results revealed that participants’ state self-esteem and relative self-evaluations were lower when the target person’s profile contained upward comparison (when people compare themselves to others who are better than they are) information (e.g., a high activity social network) than when the target person’s profile contained downward comparison (when people look down on others who are worse off than they are) information (e.g., a low activity social network).

Today’s technology is changing faster than we ever thought it would; that necessarily doesn’t mean it’s impacting everyone in a positive way. With several social media platforms, such as Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, now, more than ever, cyberbullying impacts
today’s teens in a negative way. Cyberbullying is defined as the aggression (that) occurs through modern technological devices and specifically (through) mobile phones and the internet (Slonje, 2008, p.147). Social media has the ability to connect individuals to one platform. The problem with communication platforms, like Facebook, is that is no tone behind the worlds that are being read, meaning whether the writer is being sarcastic or just stating facts, no attitude is present. Although, the commenter may “reply” with something that could be laughed off as a joke in person, the person reading that comment reads it in his/her own tone. A study done by Peter Smith, who works directly under Mr. Slonje’s supervision, tells us that cyberbullying happens more often than not to students when they are in the comfort of their own home (Slonje, 2008, p. 151). Today’s teens causally scroll through social media platforms to relax and connect with the rest of the world. Smith goes on to say that the 21st century bullies are comfortable hiding behind the screen of their device (Slonje, 2008).

O’keeffe (2011) defines cyberbullying as “deliberately using digital media to communicate false… or hostile information about another person.” The author goes on to tells us about “Facebook Depression” which is a term experts use to define “depression that develops in teens that spend a great deal of time on social media sites and later develop depression like symptoms” (O’Keeffe, 2011, p. 802). Teenagers are wanting to be accepted by other peers and are willing to change who they are so they can be the “perfect fit” for the people they want to be accepted by. Social media platforms do not help teenagers and often give them a lower self-esteem, thinking they cannot be who they want to be in order to be accepted (O’keeffe, 2011 p.803). A study done by AAP Gateway tells us that “teens that suffer from “Facebook Depression” are at risk for “social isolation” and often turn to other internet sites to seek help.
Effects of Social Media on Social Comparison and Self-Esteem in Teenagers

(O’keeffe, 2011 p.802). Although social media connects the world to make it a smaller place, it makes today’s teens vulnerable for cyberbullying, which correlates to a lower self-esteem.

After reviewing two studies conducted on how social media affects the self-esteem of teenagers, both studies showed similar results. While one study was done at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, the results showed: “The use of friend networking sites [is] to stimulate the number of relationships formed on the site” (Valkenburg, Peter, Schouten, 2006, p. 584). It is common to use these social media platforms to not only engage with friends in close proximity, but also to connect with others who may not be considered friends from someone’s daily life. The end results showed that with the more positive interaction one received on their personal pages there was no real correlation with the positive toned feedback and the adolescent’s self-esteem. “Although while reviewing the negative interaction with one’s personal page the study showed that there was a correlation between negative feedback and feeling a negative self-esteem” (Valkenburg, Peter, Schouten, 2006, p. 589).

Next, we have a study done conducting a similar study on the same age group, the study states that “The more negative participants reported feeling about their peer group, the less likely they were to communicate with them via SNS (social networking sites)” (Barker, 2009, p. 209). This study also found that there was no connection between positive reactions during their time spent on social media and high self-esteem, the study focused more on how the results affected each gender (Barker, 2009, p. 209). They concluded “negative collective self-esteem was moderately related to social compensation—those who feel negatively about their social group may use SNS as an alternative to communicating with other group members” (Barker, 2009, p. 211). Even though there was no evidence found that positive comments, messages, and even “likes” correlated to a higher self-esteem, one may believe it does. While it is clear that when
one receives negative attention from their peer group they feel a lower self-esteem and may turn
to a different age group for approval or even a boost of confidence.

Though it has been proven that social media can have negative effects on self-esteem, it
can also have positive effects. In a study by Gonzales and Hancock (2011) about the effects of
Facebook on self-esteem by way of selective self-presentation, it was found that Facebook can
have a positive effect due to the ability to edit and change your own profile to your liking. The
study was done at a Northeastern University and had a total of sixty-three participants. They
were each subjected to three scenarios and asked to complete a survey following a certain
amount of time in their scenario.

In the first scenario, participants were placed in a cubicle with a computer and told to
access Facebook, when the instructor left the participants were to follow instructions to click on
their profile. After three minutes, they were asked to complete a survey. The second scenario
used the same cubicle with random items scattered around (so participants were unaware of the
purpose of the mirror) and a mirror in front of the computer screen. They were then asked to
complete a survey after a few minutes. In the last scenario, in the same cubicle, participants were
asked to sit for a few minutes with the computer screen off and no other items around them.
They were then asked to complete a survey. The study used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to
measure the results of the surveys filled out by the participants. The study found that, “Facebook
has a positive effect on self-esteem relative to a traditional objective self-awareness stimulus”
(Gonzales & Hancock, 2011, p. 81) because surveys of those who only viewed and/or edited
their own Facebook profile had the highest score; especially in relation to the other scenarios for
the same participant. At the conclusion of the study it was determined that, “The Internet has not
created new motivation for self-presentation, but provides new tools to implement such motives”
Effects of Social Media on Social Comparison and Self-Esteem in Teenagers (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011, p. 82). When focusing on the self-presentation aspect there is a greater chance to find that it has a positive effect on self-esteem.

Many studies have been done to find out what the effects of social media has on the self-esteem and social comparison in teenagers and college aged young adults. A majority in fact, show that there are aspects of social media that have an obviously negative effect. There are a few studies that show positive effects as well, but in specific circumstances like the “self-presentation” study. As more teens “go online,” teenagers’ self-esteem and social comparison are impacted with the rising use of social media platforms, like Facebook, in both negative and positive ways. Though, many teenagers and young adults use social media to socialize and occasionally vent, many still appear to use it as a platform to make themselves feel better by making others feel worse. Until cyberbullying, body shaming, and all around hateful behavior has disappeared, the Internet and social media will never be a completely positive place.
References


