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The Psychology of Social Networking: the Challenges of Social Networking for Fame-Valuing Teens' Body Image

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Abstract The article argues that youth's exposure to thin-idealizing content posted by their adored celebrities on interactive and highly engaging social networking sites poses potential challenges for these young people. Celebrity SNS presence responds to youth's desire for social connectedness, public approval, and fame, which are highlighted at the time of their identity search and establishment. SNS content likely interacts with teens' unique developmental characteristics, personal background, and interests to propel processes such as identification and social comparison with famous personae leading to negative body image perceptions. The article suggests that even ostensibly "innocent" SNS content that presents thin-idealizing images and messages about the body may place pressures on youth and encourage a preoccupation with and risky behaviors associated with body image even unintentionally. The article further recognizes that netusers, readers, and social networking sites all share in the responsibility to minimize the risks posed to youth in this context.

Keywords Social networking · Body image · Adolescent development · Fame valuation · Celebrities

Social networking sites (SNSs) serve as a central platform for adolescent online activity and engender both positive and potentially harmful outcomes for youth. SNSs' distinctive features – prominent visual presence, interactive capabilities, and global connectedness – enable them to uniquely respond to adolescent developmental needs, including identity establishment, the development of body image perceptions, and the quest and appreciation for social approval and fame. The current article argues that there is a potential meaningful link between social networking sites and youth's body

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image perceptions; following Cohen-Almagor's (2015) argument about the moral and social responsibility of different agents to online content and its consequences, the article further recognizes that netusers, readers, and social networking sites all share in the responsibility to minimize the risks posed to youth in this context. The article begins by reviewing youth use of SNSs and the ways in which these networks respond to the developmental needs of adolescents, continues by addressing the mediated thin ideal and its potentially dangerous presence and promotion within SNSs, and suggests theoretical perspectives that shed light on the uses and effects of SNSs on adolescents. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of the social responsibility of different agents and possible interventions in this realm.

1 Social Networking Sites and Adolescent Development

Social networking sites are "Internet applications that enable the sharing of content" (Cohen-Almagor 2015, p. 29) and which allow people "to meet, communicate, and . . . create online communities" (Dror and Gershon 2012, p. 3). Adolescents spend about 9 h a day with entertainment media; 58% of teens use social networking sites (SNSs), averaging 2 h of use a day (Common Sense Media 2015). Social networking likely appeals to teens due to technical reasons, such as its accessibility on mobile technologies, but also because of the large range of interpersonal communication opportunities that it offers: to stay connected with others, make new friends, exchange ideas, and access information easily, blurring geographical boundaries and connecting people around the globe, mostly free from parental supervision (Dror & Gershon; Wiederhold 2012). Alongside the opportunities it offer to teens, social networking also poses challenges and risks, such as threats to privacy, engagement in risky behaviors, and addiction to and obsession with social approval by other users, such as is indicated by "likes" (Campbell 2014; O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 2011; van Oosten et al. 2015).

Social networking seems to satisfy several adolescent developmental needs. First, it allows teens to practice identity establishment through performing self-expression and self-presentation tasks, such as choosing, editing, and manipulating pictures (Livingstone 2008; Shapiro and Margolin 2014; Tzavela and Mavromati 2013). Second, it provides opportunities for youth to seek social approval from others through "likes," verbal and emoji comments on, and shares of their posts, thus fulfilling their desire for personal visibility and public recognition (Jang et al. 2015).

Third, adolescents have a strong attraction and aspiration to fame, which has in recent year become one of the most highly appreciated values for this age group (Uhls and Greenfield 2012). One manner through which social networking responds to adolescents' fame valuation is through providing them with opportunities to "befriend" and follow famous celebrities on SNSs (Greenwood 2013; Soukup 2006). In general, mediated personae are recognized as important role models and as targets for identification and social connectedness for young audiences (Giles and Maltby 2004). Relationships that audiences form with these personalities are associated with enhanced audience's cognitive elaboration, self-efficacy perceptions, and the establishment or reinforcement of attitudes (e.g., Igartua 2010). Specifically, adoration of celebrities has long been recognized as an integral part of identity development in adolescence (Maltby et al. 2003). Celebrities and personae associated with entertainment, sports,

and media are among the most commonly followed themes on SNSs (e.g., Boyd 2007) and celebrities have increasingly been realizing the power of social media and have been using them to promote their self-presentation and business (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2015; Stever and Lawson 2013).

2 The Mediated Thin-Ideal, Youth Body Image, and Social Networking Sites

The thin-ideal is the praised association of an overly thin body shape with positive, successful, and attractive characteristics (Eyal and Te'eni-Harari 2013). It has long been established that the media, both traditional and on newer platforms, both of famous people and of real-world peers, largely depict and promote this thin-ideal. Even in reality-based televised genres, the most common body characteristic is thinness – curvaceous for women and muscular for men (Flynn et al. 2015). To complete the picture, television shows, especially those targeting youth audiences, portray much weight stigmatization, most often directed at over-weight characters and commonly accompanied by audience laughter in the sound track (Eisenberg et al. 2015). Recently, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2016) analyzed "fitspiration" photos (that is, images that support a healthy lifestyle, intended to increase viewers' motivation to engage in physical exercise) on the SNS Instagram. The authors found that such photos are abundant and that the most common body shape they present is the thin and toned body. The concern is that SNS content, much like thin-idealizing messages in traditional media, promotes unhealthy body standards that may lead to negative self-perceptions without providing youth with the tools needed to critically assess this content and deal with the pressures it places on them as it sets "almost impossible standards for both women and men" (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, p. 6).

Indeed, adolescents' involvement with thin-ideal supportive messages through social networking may place youth at risk for negative body perceptions. This is especially true considering that another important marker of adolescence is a preoccupation with body image and a desire to present an ideal self-image. Indeed, young people use social media and its visual features to express their idealized selves more than their authentic, real selves (Manago et al. 2008; Zhao et al. 2008).

This age group undergoes meaningful developmental advances, increasing their vulnerability to media effects in this realm. Physical changes (i.e., puberty), the taxing emotional process of establishing a coherent sense of personal identity, the emotional separation from the family, the increasing attraction to the peer group and the growing peer pressure, and cognitive changes in information processing abilities all take place simultaneously and can leave teens challenged in their self-perceptions (Erikson 1968; Piaget 1952; Steinberg and Morris 2001). Dahl (2004) discusses the health paradox of adolescence – that is, the unevenness between the "strength and resilience" of this age group (p. 3) and the grim consequences of their harmful health-related decisions which are often the result of emotional obstacles to effective health management.

Interplaying with these social and emotional characteristics of adolescence, this period involves significant neurobiological changes in the brain that also render teens vulnerable to concerning media effects (Casey et al. 2008). Specifically, due to imbalanced growth in different areas of the brain – those that are responsible for

sensation seeking desires, on the one hand, and those in charge of self-regulation, on the other – and due to individual differences in neural responses, adolescents are more prone than other age groups to engage in risky behaviors and questionable decision making. Thin-idealizing messages on SNSs may place much pressure on youth to engage in risky health behaviors in order to achieve these unrealistic yet highly attractive standards at a time in which adolescents may be less capable to self-regulate their behavior and make sound choices in this context.

In an age that promotes the thin-ideal, body appearance becomes an important focus for adolescents and occupies much of their mental effort. The link between exposure to thin-ideal images and representations in the media and body image has been studied with traditional media (e.g., Clay et al. 2005) as well as with Internet and SNS content. For example, studies have examined the phenomenon of pro-Anorexia web sites. These are social and largely interactive environments that provide a community to users and visitors (Norris et al. 2006). The large majority of these sites offer content supportive of Anorexia and other eating disorders. Common themes on these sites have been found to include discussions of control and coping, success stories (as well as weight-loss tips and stories intended to provide inspiration to become thin), thinness as perfection, revolution and transformations, as well as isolation and deceit (Borzekowski et al. 2010; Norris et al.). Over 10% of adolescent girls have reported visiting such sites (Custers and Van den Bulck 2009) and their use of these sites was positively associated with a drive for thinness and negatively with appearance perceptions. In a meta-analysis of pro-Ana exposure effects studies, Rodgers et al. (2016) found large effects of these websites on body image dissatisfaction and negative mood.

The current article proposes to extend the consideration of the link between SNSs and body image beyond the focus on pro-Ana sites (Perloff 2014). The study suggests that even ostensibly "innocent" SNS content that presents thin-idealizing images and messages about the body may place pressures on youth and encourage a preoccupation with and risky behaviors associated with body image even unintentionally. Indeed, recently, scholars have recognized that social networking can play a role in teens' development and maintenance of their body image (Cohen and Blaszczymski 2015). Active engagement with SNSs has been linked with men's and women's' objectified body consciousness, thin-ideal internalization, drive for thinness, and appearance investment (e.g., de Vries et al. 2014; Manago et al. 2015; Slater and Tiggemann 2015; Thompson and Lougheed 2012; Tiggemann and Slater 2013). Teens' preoccupation with appearances and body image, coupled with the above-mentioned high value they attribute to fame and public recognition (Uhls and Greenfield 2012), may drive them to seek social networking content that endorses both fame and the thin-ideal without providing critical tools with which to make healthy decisions. The ongoing and seemingly intimate access to favorite celebrities via social networking may be most appealing and engaging for teens.

3 Explaining the Link between Social Networking Sites, Youth Fame Valuation, and Body Image: Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical perspectives can shed interesting light on the important link between social networking and youth body image. One such example guiding research on the

media has been social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) which views the immediate environment as well as the mediated one as platforms for people through which to compare themselves and engage in self-evaluations relative to others. The goals of this comparison process are to learn, understand, receive reinforcement for one's status, and enhance current states (e.g., Martin and Gentry 1997); this can lead to building or breaking one's self-perception (Krayer et al. 2007).

Indeed, social comparison processes highly characterize adolescence, also relative to media models and, specifically, in the context of body-related comparisons (Clay et al. 2005; Eyal and Te'eni-Harari 2013). For example, self-comparisons on Facebook profiles have been found to be prominent, especially among women (Haferkamp et al. 2012). According to social comparison theory, comparisons can be directed upward or downward (Suls et al. 2002). That is, one can aspire to achieve a higher standard (upward comparison) or, alternatively, one can use the models in the environment to feel better about oneself (downward comparison). Because celebrities, much like other personae in the media, are often highly attractive and represent the beauty ideal – which involves a component of thin idealization (Ahern et al. 2010) – such comparisons are likely to be of the upward type, resulting in less than positive self-appraisals, including feelings of inadequacy, lowered body satisfaction, and even depression (e.g., Bessenoff 2006).

Another approach to the study of body image effects is offered by the uses and gratifications perspective (U&G). This approach sees the audience as an active agent in the media environment, choosing the technologies and content to which they are exposed based on their motivations and needs (Rubin 2002). The perspective places a heavy emphasis on psychological and social characteristics of the individual media consumer, their life status, expectations, and attitudes. These antecedents then translate into communicative uses which may, under some conditions, result in audience effects (Rubin). Pai and Arnott (2013) noted that many studies applying the U&G approach to the study of social networking to date, have focused on examining different cognitive and affective motivations for Internet and SNS use (e.g., García-Jiménez et al. 2012).

Within the broad context of U&G theorizing, Perloff (2014) suggested that social media, and among them SNSs, are an especially pertinent arena within which to explore media uses, gratifications, and body image effects. He offers a helpful theoretical framework incorporating the basic components of U&G logic and linking together social media and its gratifications, personal factors (i.e., low self-esteem, depression, and thin-ideal internalization) and other mediating psychological processes (e.g., identification and social comparison with mediated personae), and body image effects (i.e., body dissatisfaction, adverse moods, and, ultimately, eating disorders). According to this model, social media's unique characteristics of enhanced interactivity, heavy reliance on the visual, and incorporation of peer communication all join together to create opportunities for negative body perceptions. This is likely especially true for adolescents due to their developmental characteristics detailed earlier. Perloff highlighted pro-Ana websites as dangerous platforms for negative body image outcomes and we propose that even more seemingly benign SNS content such as celebrity profiles and posts can be potentially problematic, even though its promotion of the thin-ideal is not necessarily intentional and explicit.

4 Conclusion

In this article, we contend that youth's exposure to thin-idealizing content posted by their adored celebrities on interactive and highly engaging social networking sites poses potential challenges for these young, developing individuals. Social psychological media theories provide a framework within which to explain such outcomes. Celebrity SNS presence responds to youth's desire for social connectedness, public approval, and fame, which are highlighted at the time of their identity search and establishment. SNS content likely interacts with teens' unique developmental characteristics, personal background, and interests to propel processes such as identification and social comparison with famous personae leading to negative body image perceptions. Perloff (2014) specifically addressed pro-Ana online content and the consideration can be expanded to supposedly audience-friendly content – celebrity profiles on SNSs – which might pose challenges for youth, albeit unintentionally. This content, in emphasizing and glamorizing the thin-ideal may pose pressures on adolescents to engage in risky and unhealthy behaviors in order to achieve these standards all the while claiming an emotional price on their self-perceptions.

Moral and Social Responsibility Implications Cohen-Almagor (2015) defines moral responsibility as "the personal responsibility of the agent to conscience" and social responsibility as "the societal implications of a given conduct" (p. 13), thus recognizing that we are part of a society and are accountable for it. We argue that concern should be directed also at seemingly mundane online content which can potentially impact young people: the presentation of extreme and unhealthy body ideals – specifically, the thin-ideal – by adored celebrities in SNSs. In light of the dangers posed to adolescents by their exposure to thin-idealizing content posted by celebrities on social networks, there is clearly a need to protect youth from such online content. It is important to remember that such SNS content is not entirely risky and likely carries important promises and positive implications for young people as well, in response to their social connection and role modeling needs. A similarity can be drawn to the free-speech debate about pro-Ana online content, which reflects their perceived ambiguity. Research has shown both the potential health harms of pro-Ana content (e.g., negative affect, lowered self-esteem; Bardone-Cone and Cass 2007) as well as the potential solidarity and social support that these environments offer to visitors and users (e.g., Tong et al. 2013; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2013) which has been linked with limited to null detrimental effects on normal-weight women (e.g., Delforterie et al. 2014). Because of this ambiguity, the free speech debate about pro-Ana online content has focused primarily on morality (Balter-Reitz and Keller 2005); this debate can be extended to celebrity-specific SNS content as well.

Thus, we propose that relevant parties, including netusers and readers, should practice moral and social responsibility. First, it is important to increase awareness among both netusers and readers of the thin-ideal, generally, and its unique manifestations in SNSs, specifically. To achieve this, it is important to construct media literacy programs that will provide youth with tools to critically engage with thin-idealizing messages and ensure a responsible and developmentally safe way to avoid and overcome the Internet's dark side. Taking youth's interests into consideration, such media literacy programs should specifically focus on popular content and celebrity SNS

presence and its link to body image. Youth should understand and internalize the role of celebrities in their lives and the effects such content may have on them. Once such recognition is achieved, youth themselves can become advocates of more responsible online content with regard to body ideals, they can create online groups or forums that discuss these issues and educate about their dangers, and demand changes in visuals and verbal comments that refer to the body and body ideals. As Cohen-Almagor (2015) writes, "the open architecture of the Internet is such that we *all* shape the Net by our actions. We therefore all have a vested interest in ensuring that it facilitates the positive elements of society" (p. 57).

Another relevant approach is to enlist the celebrities to be themselves pro-actively socially responsible. As many celebrities use their SNS profiles to promote their self-business, by educating them about the implications of their posted content for their followers, perhaps their accountability will increase and the nature of the content will be self-regulated. This is in line with Cohen-Alamgor's (Cohen-Almagor 2015) recommendation to extend the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to the online environment and to uphold "norms of CSR benefits for both the firm and the societies in which it operates" (p. 176). Posting realistic, non-manipulated pictures and content is also in line with the increasing appreciation of "truth" and "authenticity" (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Budding examples of this can be seen in the current trend of female celebrities to post unmanipulated, supposedly realistic pictures of their post-pregnancy bodies in SNS profiles and to admit that regaining their original thin body shape is not an easy challenge (Hileli-Avraham 2016).

An alternative to altering the content itself is to add warning labels signaling to profile followers and visitors that they may encounter thin-idealizing content on the profiles. Specifically, celebrities can choose to voluntarily disclose information about any digital manipulation of photos. This can signal to adolescents that their cognitive and emotional guards should be in operation when encountering and processing the content, which they may even choose to avoid altogether. This is similar to research which has shown that adding warning labels before entrance of pro-Ana sites can limit the number of potential visitors to these sites (Martijn et al. 2009). By having the celebrities themselves practice responsible online behavior, they may turn from netusers to what Cohen-Almagor (2015) calls Netcitizens, or "good citizens of the Internet" (p. 82) who are answerable for the implications of their online actions.

The focus thus far has been on the responsibilities of netusers and readers which are, as noted by Cohen-Almagor (2015) both voluntary and self-directed. But one should remember that "Netcitizens, when acting collectively, have power. They are able to change companies' policies and conduct" (p. 225). And, indeed, it may be timely for the SNSs themselves to work alongside their users, generally, and celebrity users, specifically, toward the creation of a set of agreed-upon guidelines or codes for responsible content posting and sharing specifically with guidelines about thin-idealizing and digitally manipulated content. Considering the developmental markers of adolescents, as detailed above, ethical guidelines and codes for SNSs should specifically address the needs and vulnerabilities of the young population. For example, considering the sensitivities to body-related pressures, such codes should require the disclosure of digital manipulation use on visual images and prohibit the posting of visual and verbal messages that encourage the thin-ideal, such as visuals of clinically underweight individuals (similar to the Israeli "models law" which prohibits the use of models

with a low BMI in advertising, Globes 2012). To offer suggestions for positive steps which could be upheld by the SNSs, an ethical code can encourage the presentation and highlighting of diverse, realistic, and imperfect body shapes. Such a guideline can also serve the purpose of increasing transparency in the online environment, which, in turn, will contribute to greater trust in the content providers (Cohen-Almagor).

Further, such a code could encourage netusers and readers to pro-actively report on any messages that could either further stigmatize over-weight and obesity or encourage extreme forms of unhealthy behaviors in order to achieve an ultra-thin body. On the part of the SNSs, the code could require that they make such reporting not only possible but also easily accessible and simple to technically master all the time maintaining the reporter's privacy, similar to Cohen-Almagor's advocacy for reporting anti-social and violent actions online.

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