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FEMINIST FORUM COMMENTARY

Social Media and Body Image Concerns: Further Considerations and Broader Perspectives

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Abstract In this paper we provide a commentary on Perloff's theoretical perspectives and agenda for research that examines the effects of social media on young women's body image concerns. Social media are the main form of mass media being used by the youth of today, and researchers in the U.S. and Australia have commenced studying how these may be affecting body image concerns. However, the processes underlying how social media may influence young people's body image appear to be no different from underlying other forms of mass media. Research is needed to more fully evaluate youth's experiences of online appearance culture and how this may foster both negative and positive peer interactions. We also need more studies which compare the influences on social media with other media forms as there is no clear evidence that social networking sites and other forms of social media are more detrimental to one's body image than other forms of media. We also consider factors that may protect young people from internalizing appearance ideals that are promoted by the mass media. In addition, we consider broader conceptualizations of body image so that a wider range of human experiences can be studied.

Keywords Body image concerns · Social media · Mass media · Embodiment

As highlighted by Perloff (2014), social media in our digital world are overtaking other forms of mass media, as the main medium, where the young and the not so young source information about body image ideals. He demonstrates that 'social media and contemporary digital technologies are the playing field of today's youth, places where lessons are learned, attitudes are formed, and body image concerns can be cultivated and metastasized into convictions" (this issue). It is not clear whether Perloff views the social media as exerting a more negative impact on youth's body image than other media forms, such as magazines and TV advertising. Only a few studies have compared social media with other forms of mass media. One study with preadolescent girls conducted in Australia showed that the relationships observed for Internet usage and body image concerns tended to be larger than those found for magazine and television exposure (Tiggemann and Slater 2014). Two other studies, one conducted in the U.S. with adult women (Bair et al. 2012) and one conducted in Australia with adolescent girls (Tiggemann and Slater 2013) showed that Internet usage was associated with body image concerns but the effect sizes were small and similar to other media forms.

Perloff demonstrates that the social media, in Western countries such as the U.S., U.K., and Australia, have infiltrated individuals' lives in ways that was not possible with previous mass media. Researchers that have evaluated the use of the social media in these countries have highlighted how the social media are omnipresent and available anywhere and anytime; they allow the easy transmission of images and ideas around the globe; they allow instantaneous and interactive communication with others; and they provide easy access to one's peers (e.g., Eveland 2003; Perloff 2014; Sundar et al. 2013). However, this does not negate the influence that other forms of media have had and continue to have. For example, the birth of photography in the 19th century and its expansion into the 20th century was a water-shed (Stuart 2013). It gave us easy access to the female and male body form in advertising and it has been used to promote the objectification of women (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Moreover, all forms of the

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mass media can be viewed as modern art that simply mirror our cultural ideals (Wimmer and Dominick 2013). At the other extreme, the mass media reinforce stereotypes and exert pressures that often undermine individuality and freedom, and rely on marketing forces to promote new fads and fashions (Wimmer and Dominick 2013).

Although Perloff clearly demonstrates the distinctive attributes of social media, the processes underlying how the social media promote body image concerns appear to be no different from other media forms. These include exposure to unrealistic body images; modelling; pressure to conform; gender-typed socialization; objectification of the body; internalization of appearance ideals; increased negative affect that results from viewing unrealistic images of the body; social comparisons; interactions with peers and other normative influences; the adoption of appearance management behaviors and body change strategies to improve oneself; and compensatory motivations such as disordered eating as a way to validate one's self-concepts.

It not yet known whether the social media may heighten the effects of some of the above processes. For example, via the internet young women may be exposed to a higher dose of body images, which are available anytime and everywhere, and this may lead to more body dissatisfaction. However, given that the internet includes both realistic and unrealistic images, in the longer term some of these images may lead to less body image concerns and provide a more supportive and naturalistic environment for young girls. Also given that these images are everywhere, young women may become more desensitized and pay less attention to the content of the messages. The online environment in countries such as the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, is also filled with more pictures of contemporary and everyday peers than are found in TV programs and magazines (Amichai-Hamburger 2007), and was labelled by Perloff (2014, this issue) as "the media of one's peers". Thus, in the on-line environment, followers will have lots of opportunities to compare themselves with their peers. However, some of these comparison targets may not be as confronting as those found in magazines and TV advertising. We conclude that research is now needed to more fully study the culture and nuances of these online environments and examine how these differ from other mass media.

The mechanisms underlying the above processes are still very poorly understood. For example, we have a limited understanding of how young women and men interpret media messages and how these are reinforced by their peer interactions (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli 2013). In our qualitative study of Australian preadolescent boys and girls, we examined how body ideals are shaped by both media and peer influences. We found that boys were mostly interested in watching TV programs about sports, they admired and wanted to be like sportsmen, and their interactions with peers centered around playing sport and talking about sports and sportsmen. It was this focus on sport that shaped boys' ideals pertaining to fitness and muscularity. For girls the focus was more on looking good and fashions, and this reflected their interest in the actresses and singers that they admired from their favorite TV programs and was but further reinforced by their peer conversations, which were also about actresses and singers from these TV programs (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli 2013). An in-depth study of girls' and boys' interactions with their peers on social networking sites would help us better understand differences in the lived experiences of boys and girls in terms of how they interact with their peers and interpret media messages, and how these gendered motivations and interactions develop.

Perloff subscribes to the scholarly consensus (e.g., Levine and Harrison 2009; Polivy and Herman 2002) that media effects are transactional and reciprocal and that psychological characteristics can predispose individuals to search out content that potentially instigates self-defeating cycles of intersections between media and personality-based susceptibility characteristics. He argues that the "media rarely exert simple main effects or occur in isolation, but interact with context" (this issue) and vulnerability variables, such as low self-esteem and perfectionism. Levine and Harrison (2009) also maintain that media effects involve "reciprocal transactions between the nature and context of the medium and the psychology of the perceiver" (p. 506). This echoes the earlier views of Polivy and Herman (2002), who explained that "the media are often blamed for the (increasing) incidence of EDs [Eating Disorders], on the grounds that media images of idealized (slim) physique motivate or even force people to achieve slimness themselves" but given that "exposure to the media is so widespread that if exposure was *the* cause of EDs, then it would be difficult to explain why anyone would *not* be eating-disordered" (p. 192).

We are not passive victims of media forces and we do not need to follow fashions and fads driven by marketing forces. In fact, even children as young as 8 years old are able to critically evaluate media messages, as was found in our qualitative study of Australian preadolescent children (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli 2013). Girls were aware that celebrities' looks are enhanced by designers and make-up, which has the potential to make viewers feel bad about their own looks. Similarly, boys noted that sportsmen's endorsement of sugar- filled sports drinks were at odds with the pursuit of fitness and health. Individuals also bring different kinds of experiences when interacting with the media, and these may be more influential than the actual media content and the different media forms. More research is needed to study the different experiences that may protect young people from internalizing appearance ideals promoted by the mass media. Perloff and other researchers (e.g., Dittmar 2005) place more emphasis on individual vulnerability factors while the protective factors that may promote resilience have been neglected.

Some of potential protective factors that have been identified but have yet to be fully evaluated include being self-directed and assertive, being a member of a family where there is a low focus on weight and attractiveness, social acceptance of diverse range of body shapes and size, and close relationships with friends or romantic partners who are relatively unconcerned with weight (Shisslak and Crago 2001).

Perloff (2014, this issue) also highlights "the proliferation of pro-anorexia or pro-ana and pro-bulimia (pro-mia) Websites (approximately 400) that unabashedly promote anorexic and bulimic lifestyles". The websites often include religious and inspirational themes that "offer confessionals, and share religiously-tinged messages about skinniness as salvation" (this issue). These are reminiscent of the strong tradition linking anorexia like states with extreme forms of religion and spirituality which has been studied by researchers in the U.S. (Coakley 1997) and in the U.K. (Lelwica 1999). Coakley (1997, p.1) has pointed out that the "secularized Western obsession with the body" can be seen as a replication of the age-old ambiguity towards control of the body and its naturally appetitive constitution which is found across different religions. Coakley examines Christian religions and Judaism, but also considers older religious traditions such as Zaroastrianism and Sufism. She concludes that the body has generally been perceived as the locus for potential defilement due to the constant presence of temptation related to the satisfaction of appetite while successful control and mortification of appetite carries the potential for sanctification. In his paper on the development of Greek Christianity, Ware (1997, p. 93) also highlights this conflicted attitude involving, "my body, my helper/my enemy… this body which is none-the-less the pivot of my salvation".

Griffith (2004) has studied the way in which the ambivalence of attitudes towards the supposedly secularized body affects the development of identity in some contemporary Protestant youth in the United States. These youth struggled to express their own individuality because they are caught between their religious principles related to the dangers of the fallen body which demands perfectionism and discipline to save it; and the surrounding secular culture in which other youth seem to be allowed an anything goes attitude in the exploration and expression of their own identity via appearance management behaviors. According to Griffith attitudes toward the body as the outer indicator of the interior worth and the long affirmed belief religious attitude that one can really only detect the true inner-self by its fruits—such as love, joy, goodness—have now become too often blurred into an unbalanced if not a total reliance on the focus of body image and appearance. Many of the young people in Griffith's study were experiencing being caught between the norms of a secular youth culture (which they perceived as allowing greater freedom for self-expression) and the expectation of disciplining the body that is so integral to Protestantism. Consequently, she says, they had become "crushingly preoccupied with bodily control" (p. 247).

Perloff's transactional model of social media also focuses on how heavy users of pro-ana and pro-mia sites already have significant body image concerns and eating problems, and how these can be amplified via two pathways: normative influences (Gunther and Storey 2003) and narrative-induced transportation (Green and Dill 2013). Normative influences involve beliefs that one's peers are being influenced by media messages and this can lead to pressures to follow their peers. Narrative-induced transportation involves the seeking out of others via social media who are eager to share similar experiences and struggles in relation to the attainment of stereotypical ideals and who now adhere to this ideal as an alternative norm (Bardone-Cone and Cass 2007; Levine and Chapman 2011).

Lastly, it is important that we extend Perloff's transactional model of social media and body image concerns to include more expansive conceptualizations and models of body image and embodiment, such as those advocated by Grosz (1994) and Weiss (1999). Much of the current research in the field relies heavily on narrow constructs that focus primarily on body dissatisfaction, while the more positive dimensions of body image such as body appreciation and body acceptance have been ignored. Grosz (1994, p. 21) explains that:

> Some better understanding of "embodied subjectivity" of "psychical corporeality" needs to be developed…but within our intellectual heritage there is no language in which to describe such concepts, no terminology that does not succumb to versions of this polarization. The (new) models must demonstrate some sort of internal or constitutive articulation—or even disarticulation—between the biological and the psychological, between the inside and the outside of the body—while avoiding a reductionism of mind to brain. It must also have a psychical representation of the subject's lived body as well as of the relations between body gestures, posture and movement in the constitution of the processes of psychical presentations.

Weiss (1999) called for a *New Age Project* involving the concept of embodiment as incorporating the use of human-imagination as agency. She argues that:

> Exploring the corporeal possibilities that have been foreclosed by a given culture's own imaginary brings into being a new imaginary—one that does justice to the richness of our bodily differences… (and) which situates the body-image within a vast horizon of possible significances. To change the imaginary, we must in turn create a dynamic image of non-docile bodies that resist the readily available techniques of corporeal inscription and normalization that currently define 'reality' (p. 67).

Another example of the changing conceptualization of the role of the body in the experience of being has been suggested by Levin (2003) in his article looking towards a post-modern body/mind medicine. He explains that:

> The body cannot be represented as a mere substance. It has become necessary to represent it, rather, as a system of organized processes, intercommunicating and functioning at different levels of differentiation and integration… This dynamic, synergetic body is seen as a system functioning within a multi-factorial network of causes and effects, within a world of social, cultural and historical influences and meanings (p. 94).

Similarly, Johnson's (2007) and Shapiro's (2011) multi-dimensional account of the body, or rather of our inter-related bodies, incorporate biological, ecological, socio-cultural dimensions, and ultimately phenomenological expressions of embodied identity. Blackman (2008) also discusses a fuller realization of the experience of embodiment as involving a multiplicity of networks, connections, operations and possibilities. These broader conceptualizations of the body will assist us in the development of a framework for inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue.

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