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News

From social media to body image and back: Rachel Rodgers reveals the complexity of this bi-directional relationship.

BY KIRAN JOHNSON



A teenager opens their phone and is bombarded by posts of pretty people with defined arms and sculpted abs. They scroll past exercise gadgets and metabolism boosting drinks made to tailor their body to their desired aesthetic. The teenager then spends some time looking in the mirror: I should go to the gym, they think, I should start a new diet.

Social media is arguably one of the greatest factors in the development of self esteem and body image in modern society. Its grip is especially tight on young people, who are psychologically impressionable, whose bodies are changing and who value the opinions of their peers. Many parents, young people and social science researchers have a creeping feeling that there's reason to be concerned, but measuring the impacts of social media on body image is quite complex. That's because social media works as a two-way street: The algorithm influences the user's ideas and the user's online interactions guide the algorithm.

Rachel Rodgers, associate professor in the Department of Applied Psychology, is the director of the Applied Psychology Program in Appearance and Eating Research (APPEAR) Lab, and works to characterize the relationship between social media use and body image, which involves refining the tools for measuring the effects social media has on its users. She also considers how the intersection of race, gender and other identities may affect these relationships.

Rodgers says that the way someone feels about their body on any given day, whether it be love, indifferent or unhappy, impacts how they use social media. This includes all sorts of choices, like how long a user hovers over something; whether they watch a full video or scroll past; whether or not they comment; or the decision to follow a person's profile. These user choices affect what the social media's algorithm shows them, which ultimately, can influence their body image. Over and over, the cycle repeats.

"All that information is collected by the platform and is used to shape what they show me this afternoon, and that is going to have another effect on my body image, which is going to shift a bit the way that I'm using things," explains Rodgers.

Unlike television and magazines, which are a one-way channel of viewer consumption, social media is consumed and then added to by users, the bi-directional nature of social media makes it challenging to understand the extent of its impact.

It's also a difficult phenomena to study because social media's effects on body image are highly individualized — each user spends different amounts of time on it and engages in different types of content for different reasons.

In a 2023 study published in Computers in Human Behavior, the APPEAR Lab and their Australian colleagues followed a large sample of adolescents from schools in Melbourne, Australia over the course of a year. They analyzed trends in how social media changed the body image perception of different groups of users.

The sample was divided into subgroups: "high communicators," who interacted frequently and shared content moderately; "moderate communicators," who interacted moderately and shared minimally; "broadcasters," who frequently shared content and interacted; and "minimal users," who participated in little to no social media use.

In this study, social media use was quantified through a number of variables: time spent on appearance-focused platforms, motivations for social media use, photo editing, appearance-focused conversations on social media, body dissatisfaction, dietary restraint and strategies to increase muscle size.

The results "showed that people whose social media use [was] increasing were also experiencing more body image concerns," says Rodgers. Membership to the higher social media-use subgroups was linked to greater body dissatisfaction, dietary restraint and muscle-building behaviors.

The study's results strengthen support for what is already known about the effects of social media on body image. It also confirms that these effects are not only about the amount of time that people are spending on social

platforms.

“In terms of body image and eating disorder risk, [time] is not the index that is most highly associated,” says Rodgers. “It’s more how much time you’re spending engaging in photo-related activities on social media,” she says. This includes posting pictures and commenting on photos.

Rodgers’ insistence on looking at multiple variables, as opposed to solely the standard “time spent” metric, makes this study unique. Time spent, without any context, does not help the researcher understand the motivations, content or types of activities of the user.

This study is also one of the few longitudinal studies of its kind. A large emphasis was placed on analyzing the data through the lens of subgroups. Rodgers explains that one purpose of this “person-centered” approach is to gain insight into which groups need more support as well as which groups can be learned from, in terms of using social media positively.

“Before deciding how we intervene, I think we really need to understand it all,” she says, considering both the positive and negative impacts of social media. “Some people do really well and use [social media] in really positive ways and get a lot out of it,” Rodgers says.

Body image and identity

This research fits into Rodgers’ larger focus on how appearance serves greater economic and political goals in society. She says that, typically, the current “trending” appearance is one that can only be achieved by people who have the social and financial status and resources to pursue it.

“If we think back to the Renaissance, then more voluptuous shapes were in. And in the Renaissance, only rich people could be voluptuous because they had enough food to eat.” In that era, having this particular body type signaled that a person belonged to an elite class — a class with power and privilege, that had the resources needed to attain this ideal body type.

“People whose bodies looked like that were afforded certain facilities in that society,” she explains.

Rodgers says this phenomena is “oppressive” in that it redirects “resources among groups who are pressured to particularly invest in their appearance when they could be doing other things with their time and energy.”

Rodgers has spent a lot of time thinking about the relationship between identity— including race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation — and body image. In particular, she has examined the relationship between eating disorders and intersectional identity, which can be found in a [2021 study](#) in the International Journal of Eating Disorders as well as a [2022 study](#) in the Journal of Psychological Medicine. For future work, she would like to continue to improve methods for modeling the impacts of body image in these more nuanced ways.

“Modelling [intersections] is very complicated,” Rodgers says, “but it’s also very rich because you get to see this patterning that you really wouldn’t have identified if you were looking at things without this lens.”

Story from the Science Media Lab.

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