The Constant Pressure to Stay Fit: A Toxic Facet Of Social Media

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Entertainment, communication, shopping, marketing, accessing information: the ways that social media can be utilized are countless. It would not be wrong to say social media is where everything happens in the era we are living in. However, these many functions come with a price; it is hard to dissociate ourselves from social media, and thus, it has a considerable effect on us in several aspects. Social media usage seems to be often associated with some serious psychological issues regarding self-esteem and body image. This is understandable as we are exposed to a worrying amount of different content on social media platforms, and this content can shape our thoughts strongly without us realizing it. Unfortunately, this power of social media may have a negative influence on self-perception or even physical health.

Social media is so intertwined with everyday life that it is hard to distinguish the line which separates reality and its altered reflection on social media. In other words, people often tend to ignore that the content they are seeing is specifically tailored for social media platforms. Influencers, YouTubers, celebrities, and brands which use social media for business are going through a quite complicated process to create content that thousands of people will see. It is not hard to guess that professional people are hired, and professional tools are used because the result needs to be "flawless" to get attention. This is the reason why our social media feeds are filled with six-packs, thin waists, long legs, and muscular arms. Since many people do not take the work behind the content into account as they consume it very fast, they accept these tailored looks, with which they are surrounded online, as the norm. Yet, it is impossible to comply with the notion set on social media of what a human being should look like to be considered "beautiful and fit" as it is simply unachievable by natural means.

Consequently, this false conception of beauty that social media creates results in body dissatisfaction and body-image issues. Accordingly, some studies have shown that the increase in social media usage seems to be related to the rise in body image problems in young adults and adolescents (Fardouly & Vartanian & Diedrichs & Halliwell, 2015). Mindless usage of social media affects the evaluation of self-worth drastically, and the content which is not realistic generates feelings of being inadequate in terms of looks. This feeling of inadequacy can eventually worsen and result in dangerous psychological issues such as depression and eating disorders.

The rules determined by social media of what is healthy and good-looking are certainly not flexible, and those who do not conform to them are criticized mercilessly. The public embraces these unrealistic beauty standards. Most people do not hesitate to make rude comments about the appearances of others based on little things, and social media facilitates this. Especially when the comments section of celebrities' accounts is explored, there are many hateful comments directed at their bodies. The reason why their appearances are criticized widely is

that they have extensive publicity. With the developments in social media, everyday people like us get to experience this publicity to some extent too. Today, an average person is interacting with hundreds of people daily, which would not be possible if it were not for the social media platforms. In addition to that, new ways to share things on social media platforms such as stories or live videos give people the feeling that they are in the spotlight all the time.

Moreover, people tend to compare themselves to others more than they used to due to rapidly increasing social media usage. This paves the way for insecurities since people inherently know that their looks will be commented upon and compared to the aforementioned standards. Studies reveal the positive correlation between a person's number of Facebook friends (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017) and the number of comments on their posts (Hummel & Smith, 2015) with the presence of body image concerns and eating disorders.

As previously addressed, the judgemental atmosphere on social media creates a constant pressure for females to be thin and males to be muscular. This causes a demand for quick solutions -although calling them solutions is not appropriate- such as fat-loss pills, flat tummy teas, and appetite suppressants: nutritionists and medical professionals firmly against using them as they can do serious harm to human metabolism. Nevertheless, social media creates a space for their marketing. Producers usually make deals with celebrities, influencers, or anyone who can reach a broad audience to promote their products via social media posts. "Do you know how I achieved the perfect body? This pill/tea/supplement that I am using works miracles!" this sentence and its variations are things we run across on social media platforms a lot. Some former employees of Flat Tummy Co., one of the most popular weight-loss product brands which use social media fiercely, admitted that the influencers they hire to promote their products do not even use them (Wong, 2018). This is not a surprise, but being skinny is so glamorized by social media that many people buy these products even if it means putting their health at risk. This demonstrates the cruciality of the damage caused by strict beauty standards and proves how hard it is to regulate social media.

The lack of regulation in social media also allows anyone to share anything. There are a lot of "fitspiration", "weight-loss journey", "clean eating" accounts, and they are booming at the moment. A considerable amount of them is run by people who do not have expertise on the issue. Not being professional, the posts they share usually lack a scientific background, and the driving force behind them is mainly weight-loss oriented. Risky content they share includes dangerously low-calorie meal plans, shock diets comprising one type of food, and diets that are not suitable for everyone.

Furthermore, demonizing certain types of food is prevalent among this kind of accounts. To exemplify, everybody is probably familiar with the post template that shows a snack and exercise next to each other. Below them is written how long a person should do the shown exercise to burn the calories that snack contains. The title is usually a dramatic "Is it worth it?". These and similar content imply that calories are bad unless burnt and presents exercise as a punishment for eating. After all, the people behind the accounts we are talking about are influencers; their followers apply their tips. Even if they have good intentions, they are still

reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards. This faulty approach is sadly common on social media and incites disordered eating habits. Besides that, social media platforms are evolving per beauty standards. There are now special platforms for calorie tracking where people can interact with each other, like FatSecret. The projection of harsh beauty norms and unhealthy eating habits that social media promotes can be clearly seen in the posts. Also, the competitive environment exists on these platforms too. People are constantly shamed about what they eat and their calorie intake. This whole thing is harmfully triggering for people with a history of eating disorders and overall psychologically damaging.

All in all, social media is an indispensable part of our lives. However, it helps to promote monotypic beauty standards that mostly revolve around being skinny and, therefore, jeopardizes our mental and physical well-being to a certain degree. We as human beings are still adapting to the prevalence of social media and the wide network it enables; therefore, it is normal to struggle while dealing with the so-called musts social media imposes on us about the way we should look. The key here is always being careful and skeptical of what we are presented on social media; otherwise, its influence can quickly become toxic!

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