Hurry up and 'like' me: Girls, Social Media and Immediate Feedback

Abstract:

At an age identified as the period with the most intense focus on appearance and where young girls are establishing their identity, it appears that social networking sites (SNSs) are playing a pivotal role in determining what is, and what is not, socially endorsed. Qualitative focus group interviews with 28 year seven and year eight girls in three Australian schools were conducted to develop an understanding of the effect of social media on adolescent girls' perceptions of body image and identity development. This paper will focus on one of the primary themes related to feedback. It was found that immediate feedback was highly desired and the immediacy of feedback had a direct influence on the emotional state of the girls. Understanding the impact of SNSs, specifically pertaining to immediate feedback is relevant to educative practices as schools are sites for technological advancements and positive reinforcement of identity.

Keywords: social networking sites, social media, immediacy, feedback, adolescents

The rapid adoption of social media as a means of communication in contemporary Western culture has led to the rise of social networking sites (SNSs) such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter* and *Tumblr*. The definition of social media draws on two related concepts: Web 2.0 and User Generated Content. Web 2.0, a term coined in 2004, describes a new technique in which software developers utilize the web as a platform for continual modifications of content and applications in a participatory fashion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). User Generated Content is the way in which people make use of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Combining these two key concepts, social media can be defined as 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

Social networking sites are sites embedded within the concept of social media. They are broadly defined as websites which promote participants to construct a profile within the virtual space, displaying relationships and connections to other SNS users which are visible to those who have the ability to access their profile (boyd & Ellison, 2007). It has been argued that these sites attract today's youth through mass popularity and perceived social benefits (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Although mass media has previously been identified as the most powerful conveyor of socio-cultural ideals in adolescents and preadolescents (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006b; Levine & Smolak, 1996; Tiggemann, 2003) these new forms of social media have effects that are yet to be completely explored.

Social media differs from other forms of media by its immediacy, interactive nature, active participation and circle of connectedness. The changing social and cultural contexts incorporating new media technologies shape audience practice in new ways. The term

"audience" has been commonly defined to encompass the activities of listening and watching (Livingstone, 2003). SNSs have revolutionised the concept of the audience, resulting in the transformation of the audience into participants and critical users of information and communication technologies (Livingstone, 2003), offering a new way of communicating with a network of members in a 'virtual' (Rheingold, 1993) or mediated community. Within the context of this research, *Facebook* was the most common SNS identified by participants. The concept of a 'mediated community' more accurately describes the community practice of *Facebook*, particularly in the environment where there is a shared sense of belonging and where friends are both online and offline (Goodings, 2011). This connection between participants is reflected through 'adding', 'friending', 'inviting', 'blocking', 'accepting', 'posting' comments, 'sharing' and 'liking'.

The nature of participating in social networking differs for a variety of people. However, it's primary role is designed to facilitate social interaction. Social networking site platforms enable young people to create and share their strikingly vibrant lives with the public (Watkins, 2009). This socialising platform creates new intimacy which becomes integral to the management and development of one's identity, lifestyle and social relations (Livingstone, 2008). This technology enables people to be 'constantly connected, accessible, social, and sometimes, vulnerable' (Watkins, 2009, p. xvii), emphasising the extensive levels of belonging and commitment desired by adolescents and allowing them to stay connected to their peers (Hodkinson, 2011).

Young people are able to provide updates at any time they choose, to display their mood, to keep in contact with a range of people, to form new groups, to develop an identity and to display their lives (as they wish to be perceived) through a wide array of digital content such

as pictures, blogs, short messages, and video (Watkins, 2009). Through replying with 'comments' or 'likes' (a thumbs up button pressed to express a person's like of a picture, video or comment) young people provide one another with instant feedback on their personal 'posts' (a message to appear on a profile or in response to another post of a picture, video or comment). It is here where the immediacy of feedback compounds with multi-reinforcing comments from peers and others to rapidly emphasise the effects of media (as a conveyor of socio-cultural ideals). This differs from other forms of media such as magazines, where the effect is not reinforced immediately on masses as it may take a longer period of time for a group of people to read and discuss the same magazine. Therefore, digital connectedness heavily influences, and compounds the effects of social media through the immediacy of positive or negative reinforcement.

Purpose

As children develop into adolescents and gain autonomy around areas of their lives, social media's impact on the adolescent is yet to be completely understood. This is related to the constant technological enhancements. Despite social surveys and research, it is evident that little is known about children and young people's experience of online social networking (Merchant, 2012), especially from voices of young people themselves (Bartholomaeus, 2013). This paper intends to contribute to the knowledge of SNS practices through the study of social networking interactions of female adolescents. Specifically it will provide information on how adolescent girls use social media from the perspective of young girls. It will explore the feedback provided by peers and others within the mediated community and attempt to understand the effect of immediacy that often parallels the use of social media. It will take particular note of the implications associated with online feedback on self-esteem.

Method

Simpson and Freeman (2004) state that qualitative research is essential to research regarding health education and health promotion in order to understand a variety of perspectives, including those of students themselves. Semi-structured focus group interviews were identified as a suitable data collection technique given their ability to encourage participants to articulate their views and perceptions more explicitly (Punch, 2005) and provide in-depth and rich, interactive data (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Bryman, 2012), explicitly when exploring adolescent health issues (Staempfli, 2007) and adolescents and the media (Borzekowski, 2000). A semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 2002) was employed in each of the focus group sessions to assist the interviewer to adopt a similar line of enquiry for each interview, ensuring researcher reliability. Given the phenomenological nature of the research the guided interview schedule acted as a means through which other questions were asked, particularly in terms of clarification. Interviews took place within the school environment, ensuring that the crucial elements of safety and comfort were met. The focus groups each consisted of three to five participants and lasted between 25 and 70 minutes. Each focus group was audio-recorded by a voice recorder. In the present study, semi-structured interviews were used to better understand adolescent girls' social media use and their impacts on health perceptions and practices.

Participants and Materials

Participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002) via three Independent Schools in Adelaide, South Australia. Twenty-eight participants were recruited from a sample of approximately 180 girls. All focus groups were gender-specific. The gender-specific nature of the study linked to the broader theme of body image and the media, previously linked to

females (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006a; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013a, 2013b). The age range of adolescence was selected as the optimal state of study as it is linked with high social media use (Australian Government, 2008), and considered a critical time for identity establishment, increased self-awareness, self-consciousness, concern with social acceptance, preoccupation with image (Champion & Furnham, 1999; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002; Slater & Tiggemann, 2006). Participants varied in age from 12 to14. The schools were selected based on their status as being Independent schools and all within similar higher socio-economic status (SES) demographics. A study has also linked adolescent girls of a higher SES to increased susceptibility to body dissatisfaction compared with those of lower SES (Wang, Byrne, Kenardy, & Hills, 2005).

Prior to the interviews, the researcher provided an email to the participating schools containing a copy of the letter of introduction, the information letter, a letter to the parents/caregivers and consent and assent forms. In order to participate, students were required to return the parental/caregiver Consent form and the Assent form. The researcher also created a meeting time with the schools to further promote the research project. Once participant response numbers were obtained, participants were then randomly sampled as it was stated that teacher selection may put pressure on girls to partake in the research. Times, dates and locations for the interviews were then arranged for data collection. The researcher encouraged all students to answer as truthful as possible and to respect the research information as stated within the Assent forms.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded by the researchers. A thematic content analysis was then undertaken following the methods outlined by Miles & Huberman (1994).

Each transcript was coded to identify meaningful segments of text. Content and interpretive analysis allowed for pattern recognition (Patton, 2002). Once the transcripts were coded completely and interpreted into broader themes, the data was then compared to the original transcript to ensure an accurate match to the descriptions in-text (Creswell, 2005). Through this process four key themes were identified. Each major theme has been categorised in terms of its relation to the acquisition and understanding of social media use and impacts. The themes included; the immediacy of feedback, impression management, the notion of social media as social control and body image perceptions. Several sub-themes were also identified. The following section presents the theme of feedback.

Results

The predominant theme to emerge from the data for the older adolescent girls was the feedback from people on SNSs. Within this theme, three key sub-themes emerged: desire to obtain immediate feedback, 'trading' for feedback and the emotional effects of online feedback.

Given the shift towards online communicative culture, the ability to participate online opens new opportunities for people to express themselves and receive feedback. The common choice of social media for the older participants was *Facebook*. Most SNSs (including *Facebook*) allow the participants to 'share' and 'post' (communicate) pictures and comments of and about themselves. Participants revealed that profile pictures which are ascribed to their online identity are specifically chosen to be a representative of 'who I am'.

Noting this development, online communication has further evolved to alter common meanings for everyday terms to suit the online environment. For example, to 'like' a photo, no longer only means to appreciate it aesthetically, it also means to click a button labelled 'like' expressing personal approval of that photo. Similarly users can 'like' comments as

well, providing validation for a statement that has been made. Significantly however, the girls were adamant that the conventional and traditional meaning of 'like' still holds more power than the contemporary social media version. Noteworthy, they were cognisant of the 'numbers of likes' that was associated with the notion of popularity. Participants stated:

G23: Yeah, 'likes', everyone thinks 'likes' is really good

G25: Like, if you get lots of 'likes' it means you're popular. It's weird

Researcher: So how many 'likes' means you're popular?

G25: I think over a hundred

G23: Yeah

The desire to obtain immediate feedback

Given its immediate nature the Internet is used as a primary source of feedback for those adolescent girls who use it. The participants in this research sought immediate response to photos, posts and messages. When asked about the length of time they would leave a picture posted with no 'likes' before taking it down, most of the girls identified a minimal length of time. As a result they expressed the need for immediate validation. The following discussion is representative of the girls' comments:

Researcher: And how long did you take before you took it [a picture] down?

G22: About 10 minutes

G25: 10 minutes

G24: Yeah

G23: 2 minutes

Researcher: Did you say 2 minutes?

G23: Yeah (laughs)

Researcher: When you upload a photo are you sitting there waiting [for a 'like']?

Participants (All): YES! (laugh)

Immediacy and expectations for immediate feedback represent a shift in online communication norms. Attaining immediate feedback was at a high priority on these adolescent girl's minds when 'posting' pictures. It was evident that the girls saw immediate feedback as acceptance of the picture, and in contrast, saw that a lack of 'likes' or feedback on a picture as a negative. This desire for immediate feedback then correlated with the use of social media as participants stated that they would wait for the desired feedback.

'Trading' for feedback
New forms of seeking feedback are being introduced, for example, 'like for a rate', 'like for a like' and 'like for a paragraph'. These new concepts introduce trading a 'like' on someone's picture in return for a 'rate' out of 10 of someone's physique, a 'like' on a corresponding photo or a 'like' in return for a paragraph written about them.   Therefore, 'likes' can also have no meaning, and simply be a 'trading' tool.

Researcher: Do you ever 'like' the things, 'like for a rate'? Or 'like for a comment'? Or...

G26: Yeah...

G27: Sometimes

Researcher: Why do you do that?

G26: So you can see how...

G26 & G27: What they think of you

Researcher: And is that important to know?

G27: Um, if it's someone important

G26: Yeah

Researcher: What's important?

G27: Like, close friends, if it was just like um...

G28: Well if it was like you two [fellow participants] I wouldn't really because I already know what you think of me

G27: Yeah, if it was like...I don't know

G28: If it was someone that you kind of knew but you didn't know really, really well and you're starting to get to know them better. You kind of...

Researcher: You like to know what they think about you?

Participants (All): Yeah

This contemporary concept of inviting others to provide a 'like' (or popularity for a photo), in exchange for a 'rate' with respect to the way in which a poster perceives another person's physical aesthetics, and potentially their personality, is akin to 'collecting' and 'trading', collectables in primary school. This is a significant theme in terms of adolescent girls seeking opinions, confirmation and clarity regarding others' perceptions of them and their

bodies. These are important factors in the lives of these young teenagers and social media enables them to enact this component.

A group of girls intuitively indicated that things such as 'trading likes' seemed "stupid" and yet they continued to engage in such practices given the socially constructed actions created by Facebook users, and amongst their own peers.

Researcher: Do you like many people's photos?

Participants (All): Yeah

G25: I do like ''like' and I'll return'

Participants (All) laugh

G25: Why not?

Researcher: So you trade 'likes'?

G25: Yeah

Participants (All) laugh

G25: Sometimes

G23: It sounds so stupid

G25: I know!

Researcher: It's hard when you're talking about it [Facebook]

G23: Yeah

G25: What has Facebook come to?

This realisation of engaging in a seemingly unusual form of behaviour occurred more than once within the same interview. Indeed it was apparent from the participants' responses that these girls had never engaged in a discussion with each other around 'what happens on Facebook' and why they carried out certain actions and, significantly, how certain comments made them feel. Despite this realisation the girls identified a culture associated with Facebook that offered them engagement and participation, which in turn kept them actively involved. It was also a culture that created a feeling of validation, particularly around the comments and photos that they each posted.

The emotional effect of receiving online feedback

SNSs have become a place where judgement is actively sought and feedback about physical aesthetics (i.e. bodies and clothing) and opinions are taken literally and often, quite personally. It was clear that users of social networking sites felt a variety of emotions in response to feedback posted on the sites in which they frequent. The following discussion vindicated such a claim:

Researcher: Do you think that that immediate feedback is really important?

Participants (All): Yeah

Researcher: Because?

G23: Just self-esteem

Participants (All): Yeah

G25: Like when people comment on your photo it makes you feel special

Researcher: Ok. What does 'special' mean?

G25: I don't know, like, loved

Researcher: Loved?

G22: Known

While some positive experiences were expressed, others had the potential to feel disheartened if they received no feedback at all. That is, that they were not 'liked'. The girls in this research spoke about these feelings that were evoked or potentially evoked through these types of situations after posting on SNSs:

Researcher: What do you think if your posts received negative feedback, how would they feel?

G19: Upset

Researcher: Straight away?

G19: Yeah

G20: Depressed

Researcher: Like they didn't like them?

G20: Or really insecure

Researcher: Do you think that if they didn't get a 'like' on it within the first week that they would probably take it down?

G19: Probably

G20: I've seen people do that

Researcher: You've seen people do that?

G20: All the time

The majority of girls in this research expressed a desire for immediate responses to their photos and comments. However, if there was no response after a relatively short period of time (determined by the social networking site user), this was perceived as negative feedback and therefore the pictures or posts were taken down. Immediacy of feedback seems to draw on two major emotions: sadness or exhilaration. If the feedback is not immediate it is considered to be depressing which in turn can have an impact on self-esteem. Alternatively, if the feedback is immediate the participants expressed a sense of excitement in that they felt "popular". At this stage of the girls' social media experience the majority of this immediate feedback for these girls was still somewhat positive. Clearly in the event that negative comments will occur this feeling of excitement and popularity will likely diminish.

On a number of SNSs the user has the capacity to receive feedback on every post. On one in particular site, Tumblr., the sender of a post can receive anonymous feedback. The participants have partial control of their online environment. This constant feeling of having to know what people think about you seemed to be always on participant's minds. The expectation that anonymous feedback is usually negative comes from observing a site and seeing how much "hate" others get on their pictures for "not being pretty" enough.   The participants found this particular notion intriguing:

G25: You can turn off 'anonymous' just so...there's a setting but I have it [anonymous comments] on, I don't know why

G23: It's interesting to see what people say

G25: Yeah

G23: And some people don't hate you at all they...

G25: They say nice things...

Discussion

This paper has presented the voices of young females who are in the midst of a developing 'digital native world'. The girls' data is contextually relevant to their age cohort and provides a unique perspective to understand the way in which adolescent girls in middle schooling years use social media within the context of their lives. As the role and function of global social media grows exponentially, contemporary society will reflect both its positive and negative influences. This paper reports on one of those influences based on the significance of immediacy of feedback among a group of adolescent girls who have just begun to engage with social media. Evidence suggests that this is a new area of female's health and one that is a relevant and significant issue for middle school year girls.

It is evident from this study and in collaboration with the research literature that the Internet has emerged as an imperative mode of communication and relationship formation for adolescents (Valkenburg, Jochen, & Schouten, 2006). The present study suggests that for many participants, the SNS setting ascribes a construction of 'normal' online behaviour. It was clear from participants in this study that feedback was an essential component of SNSs. Additionally, the desire for immediate feedback was even more apparent. There are a number of assumptions one can make in regard to the reasons underpinning the desire for this type of immediate feedback. One might assume that it is the desire for peer acceptance in the developmental stage of adolescence. Alternatively, it could be the development of new media and the new participatory online culture driving this need for validation as a new cultural norm. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the age group involved in this study are at vital stages for young women's development of self, with feedback from their environment

impacting upon their self-perceptions and self-esteem (Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta, & Feeney, 2003).

Feedback received from others is also central to developing the perceptions of oneself (Cassidy et al., 2003). New forms of feedback mentioned by participants, such as 'like for a rate' have introduced new ways of receiving and trading feedback. This concept draws on the ability to gather popularity based on physical appearance. Trading one another for 'likes', comments or posts provides an argument to suggest the craving for validation. Referring to adolescence as a period of time where cues from peers are a vital aspect of creating one's identity (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011), trading 'likes' as a type of public evaluation, although manipulative, becomes beneficial to well-being and self-esteem (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006). For the participants of the current study the majority of this immediate feedback was positive. The participants expressed the unspoken rules of this new type of feedback, stating that positive feedback should be the only response regardless of whether the respondent perceives the individual to be attractive or not. This rule was established to ensure positive feedback was received in return. A study conducted by Valkenburg, Jochen and Schouten (2006) investigating consequences of friend networking sites found that positive feedback benefitted adolescents' social self-esteem and wellbeing, whereas negative feedback had adverse effects. Research underpinning effective feedback states that the environment is a significant factor in determining what type of feedback (positive or negative) will be given (Cassidy et al., 2003). This constant desire for validation may reflect in SNSs becoming a way of enhancing adolescent's self-esteem.

It was evident that the participants within the current study were self-conscious when deciding on photographs to 'post', and concerned with peer judgement. Contemporary SNSs have the ability to heighten the role of impression management through feedback and

immediate responses of others. The immediacy of the transmission of messages allows for the rapid dissemination of information and socially constructed, or influenced ideals. Within social media, this notion of immediacy acts as an instant conveyor of messages to a wide audience producing a homogenising effect, thereby playing a pivotal role in social and cultural conformity.

At the core of this research are adolescent girls' body image, linked with self-esteem and the use of social media, which is closely linked to feedback on personal photos that have been posted online. Attending to the educative needs of girl's body image issues in middle schooling years is imperative in developing attitudes and behaviours that recognise stereotypes and the social construction of what is desirable or 'cool'. Firstly, linking with previous findings (Fuller & Damico, 2008; Merchant, 2012), it is important for educators to understand more about the media that students enjoy before assisting them in critically assessing it. An important aspect in doing this is to learn from students about their current popular media choices, and to acknowledge and validate the learning that takes place in various environments, including in SNSs (Merchant, 2012). Secondly, promoting education around social media, body image acceptance and the societal construction of beauty early in the lives of girls has the capacity to challenge the notion of the importance of social media within contemporary society as being one that provides validation for physical and bodily aesthetics. Also, engaging students in deep analyses of media images, especially around body image issues, increases their empowerment and media literature regarding media and health. Educators should encourage students to think critically and examine media content. An example of this is MediaSmart, an effective media literacy program which develops critical analysis of media, which was found to enhance self-esteem (Wilksch & Wade, 2009).

While is difficult to alter or control the use of social media, schools offer the ideal site in which to educate both girls and boys on the issues associated with comments posted on social media that may disparage an individual and damage their self-esteem. Starting this process in primary years schooling provides a significant period for children to adopt positive attitudes and recognition for adolescence and beyond. Extending this process and taking it away from the school environment, to home and with peers, is the challenge that then needs to be addressed.

It is clear that feedback is a crucial part of a child's and adolescent's development during their time at school (Cassidy et al., 2003). For the girls in this research their desire for immediate feedback demonstrates its value and significance within their lives. This desire for immediate feedback needs to be addressed both at home and school to engage with the changing needs in contemporary society. In relation to this finding there are potential implications for educators particularly in terms of making feedback contemporary and directly related to the student's contemporary needs. The participants expressed a desire for self-validation particularly through 'likes' and related positive comments and feedback. It is imperative that educators have a clear understanding of the way in which contemporary social media impacts on adolescent girls and the role it can play in self-validation. Education practitioners need to link educative feedback to the needs of the contemporary, digitally 'savvy' students. In order to remain relevant, educators should address the issue of immediate feedback and develop strategies to more appropriately engage the student audience through digital educational feedback that is quicker and more responsive to that previously used. Publishing online results, giving students their own 'school profile page', listing individual and collective history of achievements, praising initiatives and having greater emphasis on achievements may provide the same type of validation that is sought from social media. Further research needs to be undertaken to develop best practice models to

assist teachers in the classroom given the rapidly changing nature of social media and the manner in which it is used. By understanding teenage culture, educators will be better able to make important connections within the classroom.

Social media acts as an instant conveyor of messages, which has the capacity to create conformity. Educational institutions can use this to their benefit by communicating desirable school messages within the online world. That is, schools have the potential to convey particular messages that are valuable to the school community using social media as a vehicle for immediate recognition and response.

Limitations

While the findings are insightful, this study is not without its limitations and should therefore be interpreted with caution. First, these collective perceptions result from a homogenous sample recruited from one South Australian region. While it was beyond the scope of the research to capture, with purpose, the influence of demographic location and/or socioeconomic status on social networking site participation and thoughts about online immediate feedback, these variables are important considerations for future research.

Furthermore, although this study makes a valuable contribution to the adolescent social media literature by exploring some key issues around feedback, they emerge from a group of girls affiliated with one age group and one gender. It is likely that the nature of adolescent social media participation may vary with the changing age and gender of the child. While these insights do provide some understanding into an essentially understudied social media area, this sample does not offer a basis for generalisability.

Conclusion

This paper collectively explores some key issues faced by young girls in middle schooling years. While there were clearly some positive perceptions of online feedback, this study also identified a number of potential issues involving the desire for immediate feedback and the repercussions of negative feedback. Importantly, this study not only revealed some of the perceived ideas about SNSs and adolescents, but it also gave insight into the implications for educative needs as technology develops. It has also denoted the need for enhanced scholarly attention in pursuing greater understanding around this forever altering issue.

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