LET'S TALK BODY: AN APPLIED SENIOR PROJECT ON SOCIAL MEDIA BODY
IMAGE


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By

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the overwhelming presence of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok in the recent generation's (Gen-Z) daily lives. Influencers have become the new celebrities by creating a "relatable and desirable" lifestyle that users aspire to gain. However, the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards and buy promoted products can lead to negative effects on users' mental health and self-esteem. The authors of this paper (Tonges and Dwyer) have created a podcast and Instagram account to encourage an honest conversation about the impact of social media on one's actions, emotions, and brain chemistry. By analyzing social media through communication theories such as Social Cognitive Theory, Users and Gratification Theory, and Cultivation Theory, the authors hope to shed light on the problems associated with the use of social media.

**Let's Talk Body**

There are just over 2 billion users on Instagram and 1.2 billion users on TikTok according to *Business of Apps* (2023). Social media platforms such as these two apps have taken over our generation's screen time. Influencers have become the new "celebrities" by sharing their life through Instagram pictures and 3-minute videos. There is a sense of relatability because we can all use and post on these apps, it's common ground (Steuer, 2023). From our observations we inferred that social media users idolize these influencers, often leading viewers to feel the need to become more like the people on their for you pages. As users, we view influencers' platforms and are influenced by how we need to look a certain way to be seen as beautiful (Kim, 2022). When products are promoted, we consumers think if we were to purchase the products, we will be like the influencers we look up to (Steuer, 2023). In the article "Find your influence," Alice Wholey mentioned that these influencers create meaningful relationships with their audiences. The trend of what is cool is run by people who have millions of followers not truly by what is useful and is a necessity (Wholey, 2022).

Social media has taken over as an industry creating millions of jobs, not only as an influencer (Talavera, 2020). Often influencers hire assistants, teams, and a manager to support them through their careers (Talavera, 2020). Most big companies that have nothing to do with social media use these platforms as marketing opportunities (Talavera, 2020). Katie signed an offer with a technology company to run all their social media platforms. If platforms such as TikTok and Instagram were not so influential I would be going into a completely unrelated career. From experience working in the social media realm, we pay influencers who are well-known in the technology industry to promote our products. Similarly, people who use social media as a career and are idolized on these apps have earned a lot of money from those who

view their content (Hund, 2023). There is a lot of money in this industry and often influencers

lose track of their moral high ground and promote products they don't like for the check (Hund

2023).

As continuous users of social media, we have been influenced before by buying products

that influencers we watch use. Not only have we fallen into the trap of paid promotions, but they

feel less than when posting on social media and not getting as many likes or comments as the

people we follow. All of us can use and post on the app, but we do not all get a massive

following overnight. Sometimes users correlate that with not looking like the people we see on

our for you pages (fyp). Unfortunately, it is common to look for validation through likes and

comments. If you read this and feel like you do not fall into these categories of being overly

consumed by media effects, you don't realize it.

For our project, we created a podcast and Instagram in hopes of opening conversations

about how social media plays a role in how we act and think. After speaking with peers and

reading the cited sources we believe social media effects can alter our emotions, actions, and

brain chemistry. Through this paper, we will be talking about the problems we have found with

the overuse of social media. In each podcast, we focused on a different topic and related it to a

Communication Theory. Talking about the "celebrities" of our generation in relation to the

Social Cognitive Theory, the addictiveness of social media relating to Users and Gratification

Theory, and finishing with the diet culture's effects on views connecting to Cultivation Theory.

**The Importance of Social Media**

Social media is an essential tool for spreading messages to many people. It has been a

pervasive product of technology for years, providing users with a variety of benefits, such as

reinforcing friendships, fostering interaction, and access to information (Boyd, 2007). People can

share their happiness online when they travel to luxurious places, acquire new possessions, or accomplish something they are proud of. Users believe that by posting socially desirable content, they can present to other people a better image of themselves (Mehdizadeh, 2010). However, over the past few years, social media evolved into a place where people compete with one another by posting content that users will interact more with (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Several platforms created social media influencers (SMIs) who influence the behavior and ideology of users that observe their content. SMIs play a significant role in multiple organizations' marketing strategies and might change how people process a commercial designed to enhance corporate reputation.

In the *Journal of Advertising* article, *Under the Influence: Social Media Influencers' impact on Response to Corporate Reputation Advertising,* three studies were conducted to understand influencer impacts on how people respond to commercials designed to enhance corporate reputation. Study 1 found when a commercial was introduced by an influencer, message attitudes, and perceived corporate reputation were more positive from reduced persuasion knowledge (PK). Study 2 indicated the influencer enhancement effect disappeared from sponsorship disclosure. Lastly, in Study 3, the style of the influencer's message influenced the response to the corporate commercials, with a narrative introduction engendering more favorable message attitudes and corporate reputation perceptions through decreased PK (Kim et al., 2021). According to Freberg et al. (2011), SMIs "represents a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90) Industry estimates suggest that corporate spending on influencers is projected to grow exponentially (about 40% annual growth rate) for the next five years (Schomer, 2019).

**Social Media: A Reward and Validation System**

Social media can be seen as rewarding because it can generate money, fame, and luxurious possessions. The article, *Envy on Social Media; the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,* found in The *International Journal of Information Management* conducted two studies across three different social media settings to investigate two types of envy: benign and malicious envy. When audiences view information posted on social media, they may compare themselves and their situation to what has been posted. Viewers that perceive themselves to be lacking in comparison, could experience envy or negative self-evaluations. Envy influences human behavior. The results show that malicious envy is negatively related to the dependent variable of social media use intention while benign envy facilitates it (Wu, & Srite, 2021). When SM users access their connections on SM, they learn of others' positive information, such as traveling, shopping, and achievement experience. If the social comparison is upward, malicious envy and/or benign envy will be activated. Envy can result in users enacting certain behaviors that they see on social media. Users want to gain the same satisfaction and rewards they perceive from social media.

The communications theory: Uses & gratification theory, created by Katz, Blumler, and Gutevich claims that people actively seek out and use media to satisfy certain needs or gratification (Katz et al., 1974). Uses and gratification theory believes that the selection of media and specified content to gratify a specified need is purely the discretion of the user who is independent in their choice. Furthermore, active users can evaluate and examine various kinds of media to select the content and media for the gratification of their cognitive needs. A study presented in the article, *Cognitive Needs and Use of Social Media: a comparative study of gratifications sought and gratification obtained,* compared the gratification sought and gratification obtained for cognitive needs from social media among information professionals in

the limelight of uses and gratification theory (Hussian et al., 2020). People use social media for

different needs to gratify, and social media provide the versatility of information in the form of

pictures, videos, posts, tweets, live streams, stories, messages, etc. to gratify these needs (Du,

Kerkhof and Van Koningsbruggen, 2019; Lee and Ma, 2012; Leung, 2013; Mäntymäki and

Riemer, 2014). The study concluded with the identification of major gratifications sought and

major gratifications obtained from social media for cognitive needs among information

professionals (Hussian et al., 2020).

### The Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem and Body Issues

Recent research suggests that social networks have replaced traditional media as the main

channel by which beauty ideas are conveyed (Stein et al., 2021). This often results in body

dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem among users. For female social media users, thin-ideal or

fit-ideal content, would arouse body-related envy and increase exercise motivation for

appearance-related goals (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Social media influences the way

we perceive ourselves and can alter people's concept of beauty. The study, *Every (Insta)Gram*

*Counts? Applying Cultivation Theory to Explore the Effects of Instagram on Young Users' Body*

*Image,* scrutinizes the social network Instagram as a potential cultivation system for young

adults' body image (Stein et al., 2021). The study recruited 228 participants aged 18-34 years

and explored 3 orders of cultivation: changes in weight-related knowledge, attitudes, and self-

reported dietary restraint. A notable shift of focus regarding social media and studies now

addresses the impact of social networking sites (SNSs) on people's perception and evaluation of

physical appearances (Choukas-Bradley, Nesi, Widman, & Higgins, 2019; Holland &

Tiggemann, 2016; Tiggemann, Hayden, Brown, & Veldhuis, 2018). The cultivation theory (CT),

proposed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), assumes that the repeated and extensive use of mass

media will entice audiences to absorb the broadcast information into their worldview, successively homogenizing viewers into a singular mainstream (Stein et al., 2021). This is an explanation for the study's patterned results that found frequent explorations of strangers' social media content (the specific activity operationalized in our "browsing index") could be related to the cultivation of a "third-person gaze," in that the frequent exposure to the appearances of strangers exerts a stronger influence on other-related than on self-related body schemata (Stein et al., 2021).

**RQ1: The effects social media have on their audience's relating to Social Cognitive theory, Users and Gratification theory, and Cultivation theory.**

## Method

We are using informal methods to approach our senior project by creating an Instagram and podcast, *Let's Talk Body*. On our Instagram, we posted two photos to our feed twice a week along with two stories each week that either spread positive messages or allowed us to collect data from our followers, using polls. Our main goal for our Instagram was to post our podcast and to spread awareness of the false perceptions created on social media. Recently, we created and posted a graphic introducing the idea of positive affirmations, putting out a positive message. We wanted our account to send a positive message about being confident in your own skin and not allowing social media to persuade you that you need to change yourself. Instagram allows us to connect and communicate with our followers in a more personal way.

Our second method revolved around the creation of our podcast where we opened the conversation about the problems stemming from social media platforms. Each podcast was connected to a specific theory we have studied in Communication. While tying in each theory we also presented peer-reviewed sources to back up our statements. When researching our sources,

we found journals relevant to our topic and explained the connection to the theory in the podcast

episode. Throughout the quarter we outlined and recorded three podcast episodes presenting a

different problem and communication theory. These two tools allow us to be informative, yet

inspiring. By using these two informal methods, we hoped to impact our audience in a positive

and inspiring way – by continuing to have a real conversation about how social media affects us

personally while connecting how we feel to the research we have found.

## Findings and Outcomes

Throughout the course of 8 weeks (about 2 months), the account @lets.talk.body

produced three, 15-minute podcast episodes incorporating current pop-culture events and

communication theories. Each podcast curated important messages that were combined with a

conversational tone and educational content. Before the release of each podcast, the Instagram

account ([@lets.talk.body](#)) posted pictures relating to the message discussed in the episode. Using

both the podcast and Instagram, @lets.talk.body gave an honest conversation about the harmful

effects of social media on a user's mind and body.

Despite several topics covering the harmful impacts of social media on the user's mind

and body, Instagram was the main source of content delivery to add a positive component to a

toxic environment. The creation of each post was done on a software called "Canva" and

presented with a theme of bright colors to match the style of spreading positive messages.

Instagram was the best form of social media platform to advertise our podcast because analytics

were displayed for user interaction. Using this data allowed us to incorporate methods that would

create the best results for engagement. The Instagram account also included pulls on its story that

allowed us to interact with the users to understand what social media topics are relevant to the

audience. Alongside positive Instagram posts, the captions included messages relating to that podcast topic and inspirational messages for the week.

In preparation for the podcast, various amounts of research were required to create a meaningful and impactful conversation. The first podcast (15:53 minutes) focuses on social media influencers being called celebrities and how money plays a role in body image issues. These factors create unrealistic body standards leading viewers to feel discouraged about the way they look. Current social media sensations were discussed as examples of overnight internet fame. Apps including TikTok and Instagram are being utilized to create influencers, which are human advertisements. This podcast discussed the communication theory: Social Cognitive Theory. The peer-reviewed journal titled, *Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication* by author Albert Bandura was published in *Media Psychology 2001.* Verification of thought by comparison with distorted media versions of social reality can foster shared misconceptions of people, places, and things (Bandura, 2001). It is notable that media messages today have a key role in the consumer's self-reflection. Social verification can foster bizarre views of reality, especially if the individual has shared beliefs with the reference group. Consequently, their conceptions of social reality are influenced by vicarious experiences. Such as what they see, hear, and read. Author Bandura notes: "The more people's images of reality depend upon the media's symbolic environment, the greater its social impact" (Bandura, 2001).

The second podcast (15:28 minutes) incorporated the Uses and Gratification Theory and its relation to the toxicity of social media along with its addictiveness. Social media users constantly compare themselves to other users but rely on it to gain validation and gratification. This podcast contained findings from the peer-reviewed source by Hussain et al. titled, *Cognitive needs and use of social media: a comparative study of gratifications sought and gratification*

*obtained* published in 2020. The study in the article compares the gratification sought and obtained for cognitive needs from social media among information professionals in the limelight of uses and gratification theory (Hussain et al., 2020). Authors Hussian et al. note: "It has been evident in the analysis that gratifications sought for cognitive needs from social media are significantly different from gratifications obtained from social media among information profession" (Hussain et al., 2020) Additionally, this study established the fact that there is a significant difference based on gender in respect of gratification sought and gratification obtained for cognitive needs from social media among information professionals.

The third podcast (17:39 minutes) referenced the peer-reviewed journal: *Every (Insta)Gram Counts? Applying Cultivation Theory to Explore the Effects of Instagram on Young user's body image* by Stein et al. (2021) and discussed how recent research suggests social networks have replaced traditional media as the main channel by which beauty ideals are conveyed. This often results in body dissatisfaction and reduces self-esteem among users and the article scrutinizes the social network Instagram as a potential cultivation system for young adults' body image. Cultivation theory examines the long-term effects of television viewing on the viewer's conceptions of social reality. The pattern in the study's results suggested that frequent explorations of strangers' social media content could be related to the cultivation of a "third-person gaze." The journal concludes, "frequent exposure to the appearances of strangers exerts a stronger influence on other-related than on self-related body schemata" (Stein et al., 2021).

## Evaluation

The Instagram account followed 53 and was followed by 43 and generated an average of 9.5 likes per post. As though these statistics are not high in comparison to larger accounts, the

Instagram account primarily targeted an audience of 20 to 22-year-old women. To gain a larger, diverse following the account could have been advertised more by personal accounts to reach more people. The podcast, being the focus of the project, received more attention than the Instagram account. The Instagram could be improved in terms of more posts per week and interactive content.

To evaluate the Instagram from an audience perspective, interactive Instagram stories were posted to receive feedback. Questions were generated to gather informative data from the followers. Some questions included: "What did you like about our Instagram?", What could we have done better with our Instagram?", and "Were our podcasts engaging & informative?". These open-ended questions allowed for detailed and constructive feedback. At the end of the story, a google form was linked to evaluate. The responses were positive and encouraging. The Instagram had a pleasing aesthetic, fun content, and a positive message. Users noted that more interactive content is desired to improve the quality of work. User @brooke.dwyer stated more interaction "would create more room for relationships with the audience and foster conversations catered to their needs". Another User @cami_hart12 noted that "our content was very related because it discussed current trends and social media topics that were applicable to listeners."

The podcast received remarkable feedback. The topics covered were relevant and informative. The conversations were honest and tackled taboo topics, which seemed refreshing. Creating these podcasts required research of pop culture and studies from peer-reviewed sources relating to communication theories. Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratification Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory were applicable in understanding the effects of social media on the user's mind and body. Furthermore, analyzing several social media phenomena fostered new perspectives, which produced educational and candid conversations.

## Conclusion

A pressing issue with social media is the body image issues created due to the diet cultures promoted (Kim, 2022). As users of social media we have found there is pressure for users to think they should look a certain way. Throughout this paper we talked about the different fad diets promoted such as bloom, parasites cleanses, and the use of drugs especially one popularly used by celebrities called, Ozempic. Many of these fad diets have been debunked by professionals but social media is more powerful and influential. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have the potential to be very addictive due to the constant stimulation and feedback that is acquired by notifications like comments and notifications.

Social media is a powerful tool that allows companies to promote their products to users whether that be through ads or influencers paid promotions (Steuer, 2023). These platforms use communication theories such as Social Cognitive Theory, Users and Gratification Theory, and Cultivation Theory to market themselves and products strategically. These theories focus on creating a sense of desire and urgency towards the users, so they feel the need to purchase the product being promoted by influencers. Often, influencers lose sight of their morals and promote products solely for finical gain regardless of the products actual value.

We know that social media has both positive and negative impacts on its users. As it offers businesses the opportunity to reach a large audience fast it has also led to body image issues. We created our Instagram and podcast with the sole purpose of having an open conversation about the problems we have seen and experienced using social media. While talking about these issues on the podcast and posting encouraging messages we wanted to provide our viewers with a sense of community and comfort; by acknowledging their feelings and experiences.

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**Appendices**

Podcast Link:

https://open.spotify.com/show/31WegYpR2ozOdFhDyTQXjM?si=a4cff0b4b2af4268

Instagram Link: https://www.instagram.com/lets.talk.body