



‘VULNERABILITY HACKING’, SOCIAL MEDIA AND EATING DISORDERS


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IMPACT OF MEDIA ON BODY IMAGE

- Research has obtained considerable evidence for how mass media effects thinness ideals and body dissatisfaction (Bell and Dittmar 2011).
- Studies show that exposure to thin-ideal media images increases dissatisfaction with our bodies (Homan et al. 2012).



COMPLEXITY OF THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN EATING DISORDERS

- Western socialization encourages societies to self-objectify and internalize the value of outward appearance.
- Internalization of thin-idealized female beauty is a culturally stereotyped standard in contemporary Western media (Levine and Chapman 2011).
- Biological determinants of body image perceptions are complex, and media influences are just part of a host of interconnected psychological and normative processes

SOCIALISATION & CULTURAL NORMS



- Girls as young as 3 years of age ascribe positive characteristics to thinner icons (Harriger et al. 2010).
- Self-objectification, the process by which girls come to view their bodies as objects to be looked at, is an important social learning factor (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997).
- This internalization of an observer's perspective can lead to body surveillance, which can produce body image disturbances, termed "normative discontent" (Erchull et al. 2013).



THE QUESTION IS ALWAYS ‘WHAT IS THE STRENGTH OF THIS EFFECT?’

MOST META-ANALYTIC STUDIES INDICATE THAT THE EFFECTS ARE MODEST; AND ARE LIKELY TO OPERATE IN CONCERT WITH INDIVIDUAL VULNERABILITIES (LEVINE AND CHAPMAN 2011)



THEREFORE, THE IMPACT OF
INDIVIDUAL PREDISPOSING
VULNERABILITY
CHARACTERISTICS ON BODY
DISSATISFACTION AND
EATING DISORDERS
CANNOT BE OVERLOOKED.

APPLICABILITY OF RESEARCH TO SOCIAL MEDIA

- Most studies have focused on the effects of conventional mass media—magazines, TV and music videos on body image perception.
- But steep declines in magazine readership, and television viewing suggests that these are not the media that primarily exist in the contemporary world.
- The new medium for creating social norms is now online social media.

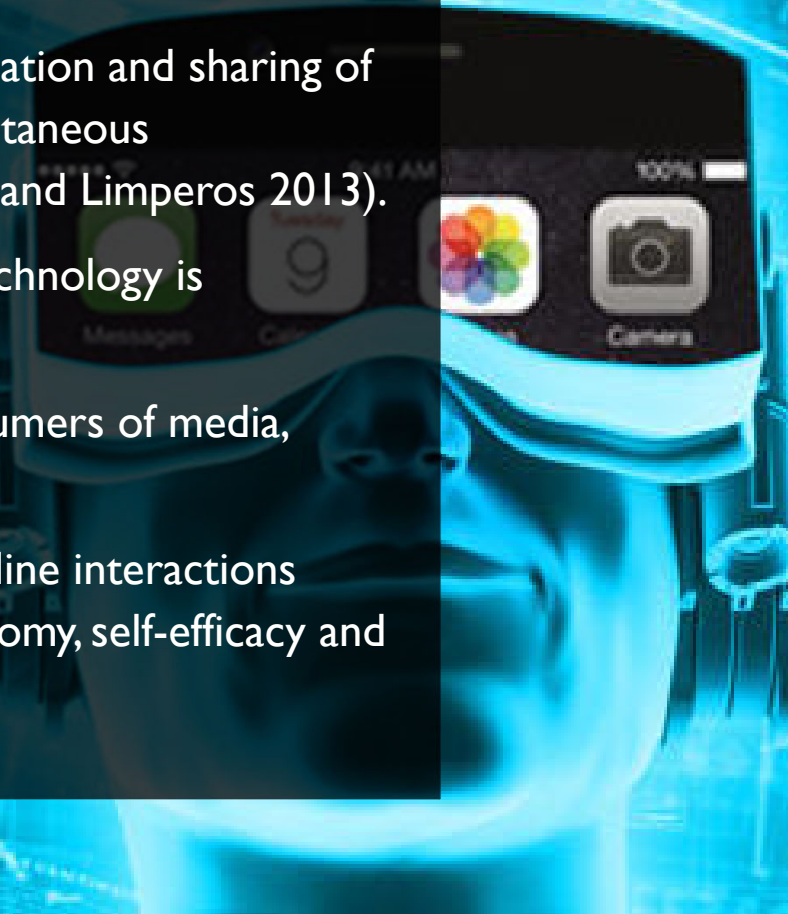




THE INTERACTIVE CONTENT WE SUGGEST
THAT IT COULD HAVE A MORE SIGNIFICANT
INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL COMPARISONS,
THEREBY CREATING UNHEALTHY COMPARATIVE
PROCESSES WHICH INFLUENCE YOUR'S BODY
IMAGE CONCERNS

THE 'REACH' OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- Websites, and SMS allow for the rapid creation and sharing of user-generated messages, as well as instantaneous communication with other users (Sundar and Limperos 2013).
- A key distinguishing feature of internet technology is interactivity (Eveland 2003).
- Users are now producers as well as consumers of media, often simultaneously.
- Users can shape, customize and direct online interactions thereby appearing to enhance their autonomy, self-efficacy and personal agency (Sundar et al. 2013).





THE SOCIAL MEDIA FACTOR

- SMS are more personal outlets because content can revolve around the self, illustrated by terms like ‘You’Tube, ‘Self’ies, and the ‘I’-phone).
- These interpersonally rich modalities offer graphic apps, videos and transformative multimedia cues that create a feeling of presence
- This powerful medium can transport individuals to psychologically involved domains that can manipulate belief and change attitudes (Barak 2007).



THE SOCIAL MEDIA FACTOR

- The differences between conventional media and SM have important implications for body image concerns.
- The 24/7 availability of SMS for viewing, content-creating, and editing allows for exponentially more opportunities for social comparison and dysfunctional surveillance of disliked body parts.
- A simple Google search for the term 'weight loss' will yield 990,000,000 hits

THE OBVIOUS AND THE INSIPID INFLUENCERS

'PRO-ANA SITES' AND 'HEALTH & WELLBEING INFLUENCERS'

OBVIOUS INFLUENCE OF PRO-ANA SITES

- Pro-Anorexia (Pro-Ana) and Pro-Bulimia (Pro-Mia) websites explicitly promote anorexic and bulimic lifestyles (Levine and Chapman 2011)
- Images of thin female beauty dominate over 400 sites like *Thinspiration* (which often list one's weight alongside a 'before and after' weight-loss image).
- The iconic Kate Moss soundbite—"Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels"—exemplifies the ethos of the Pro-Ana site philosophy.





**BUT HOW DO THESE SITES
INFLUENCE USERS?**

INFLUENCE OF PRO-ANA SITES

Pro-Ana Sites usually contain 3 core themes

- Perfection (linking thinness with perfection);
- Transformation (claims that ED can help transform an individual from “hated and fat” to “desired and thin”);
- Success (association of strength with one’s ability to keep the weight off).

THE POWER OF THE ECHO CHAMBER NARRATIVE

- A narrative is a symbolic coherent story with a setting, characters and conflict that offer a resolution to a social problem

Thinspiration, sites can be viewed as narratives, offering:

- Setting (a site featuring a sometimes-cult-like devotion to thinness ideals);
- Characters (the many young women who blog and post pictures share skinniness as a salvation);
- Conflict (they play on the theme of an internal psychological conflict with claims that their society does not understand their needs);
- Resolution (the celebration of emaciated girls who serve as role models for troubled users)



INFLUENCER

LESS OBVIOUS INFLUENCE OF THE
INFLUENCER

A group of people, including men and women in traditional clothing, are dancing in a grassy field. The scene is captured from an elevated perspective. A dark semi-transparent box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title and a list of bullet points.

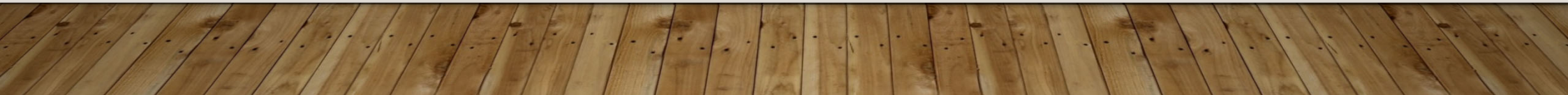
NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION IN INFLUENCER SITES

- Narratives can transport individuals into worlds, where users become transfixed by the narrator's vision and become psychologically open to the world-view presented in the story (Green et al. 2004; Green and Dill 2013).
- Transportation is more likely where narratives feature characters with whom individuals can identify, a plot that can be mentally imagined and events that are relatable
- The more that influencer sites (a) promote identification, (b) are perceived as realistic, (c) contain rich imagery, and (d) elicit perceptions of similarity, the greater the likelihood they will impact more on body image perception

SOCIAL MEDIA DOES NOT ACT IN ISOLATION

- Given the multifaceted nature of body image disturbance, it is unrealistic to expect that exposure to SM alone will exert a direct impact on body disturbance
- Simple exposure to online comparisons with thin attractive others will not automatically lead to body dissatisfaction in ALL adolescent girls.
- Research suggests that the combination of vulnerability and media thinness portrayals can exert influence which can result in serious psychological implications.

**BUT DOES THE INTERACTIVE ALGORITHMIC
REACH OF SOCIAL MEDIA MAKE NARRATIVE
TRANSPORTATION MORE LIKELY?**



INTERFACE OF VULNERABILITY AND SM CONTENT

- Media effects involve a complex transaction between the content and what the individual brings in terms of needs, and personality factors (Valkenburg and Peter 2013).
- Only by formulating a clear hypotheses about which individuals are particularly susceptible to the effects of media are we then able to specify the conditions for “media effect”
- ‘Media effect’ involves “reciprocal transactions between the nature and context of the medium and the psychology of the perceiver;”
- These person/media intersections can sadly lay the foundations for self-defeating and self-perpetuating cycles of media engagement.

WHAT CONSTITUTES VULNERABILITY?

- Low self-esteem, depression, perfectionism, the centrality of appearance as the currency for self-worth, place users at risk for body image problems.
- These predisposing individual characteristics are known as “differential-susceptibility variables” (Valkenburg and Peter 2013).
- Social media gratification interacts with these predisposing individual factors to create attitudinal and behavioural outcomes.
- Psychological processes, such as social comparisons mediate the impact of social media uses on body image concerns





SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

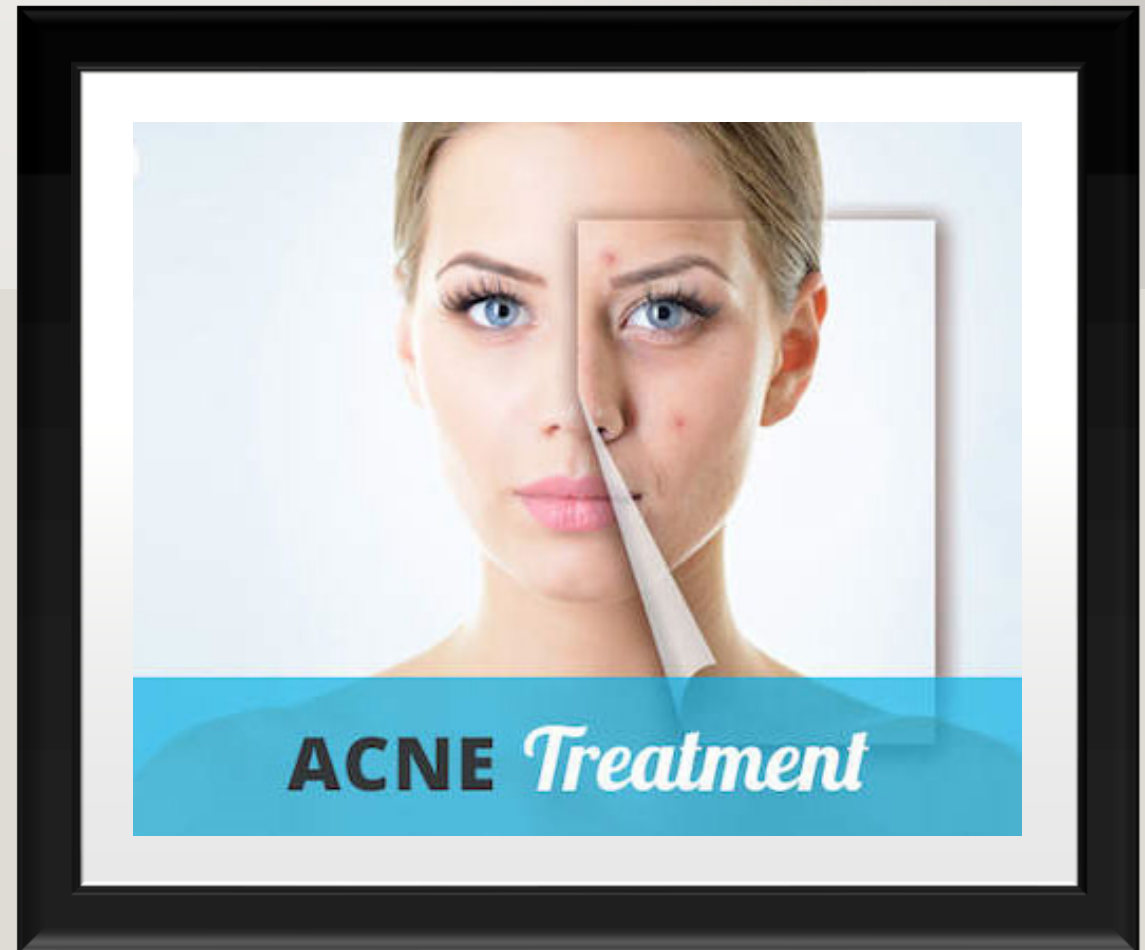
- SCT implies that people find it functional to compare themselves to others who are similar in attributes that are central to their definition of self (Wood and Taylor 1991).
Intriguingly, upward social comparisons with attractive *peers* can actually lead to more negative self-attractiveness ratings than comparisons with attractive models, who are perceived as less similar and therefore a less diagnostic comparison group (Cash et al. 1983).
- The online environment is filled with pictures of peers and opportunities for social comparisons.
- Negative comparisons can be particularly likely when users do not acknowledge that their peer's photos have been digitally altered (Tiggemann et al. 2014).



BUT WHICH COMES FIRST? COULD SM
USE BE MAKING US FEEL MORE
VULNERABLE?

VULNERABILITY AND SM MARKETING ALGORITHMS

- We often search for sensitive answers via an online search engine
- Search engines are designed with specific algorithms that collate this information to link us to further analogous information
- The goal of SM is Personalisation
- But this may not always be a good thing



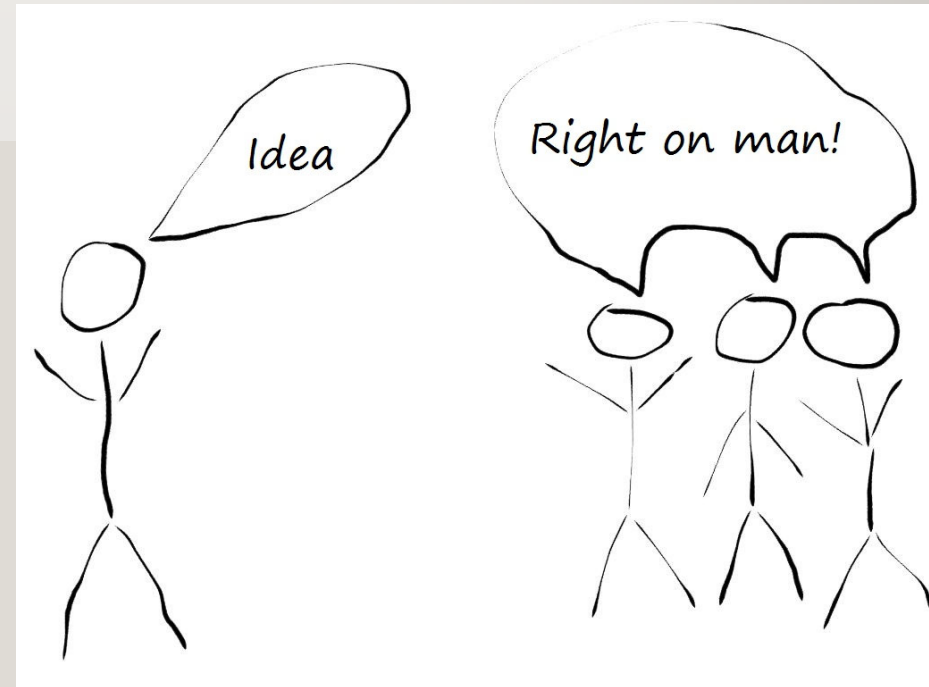


THE INTERNET OF THINGS

CONNECTION IS
KEY:
ONLINE
ALGORITHMS CAN
MEDIATE OUR DESIRE
AND MANIPULATE
OUR EXPECTATIONS

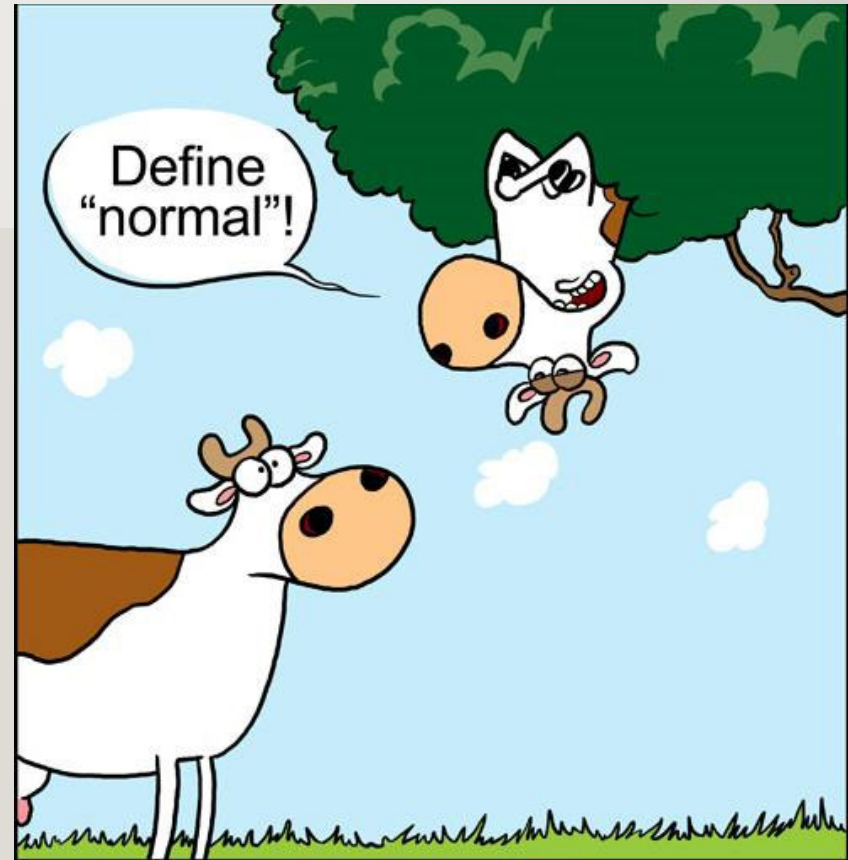
DISORDERED EATING ECHO CHAMBERS

USERS FREQUENTLY SELECTIVELY GRAVITATE TO CONTENT THEY ALREADY AGREE WITH, FIND APPEALING, BECAUSE THE CONTENT IS IN SYNC WITH THEIR ATTITUDES OR PERSONALITY-BASED PREFERENCES



ECHO CHAMBERS THAT CREATE SKEWED CULTURAL NORMS

- Park (2005) suggests that time spent on websites with similar content can bolster beliefs in the prevalence of thinness norms.
- Reinforcing unrealistic, dysfunctional body image ideals, leading to even greater body image disturbance, which in turn can exacerbate disordered eating





INITIALLY, THE REALITY IS
REFINED BY GOOD IDEAS.
WHO ARE THE TOWN
PLANNERS OF AN ONLINE
VILLAGE OF DESIRE? THAT
WE ALL INHABIT

**THERE IS NO ETHICAL
CONSIDERATIONS
INVOLVED IN THE TOWN
PLANNING OF THIS VILLAGE**

ITS NOT PERSONAL, ITS PERSONALIZED



WWW.

Search

THEY ARE ONLY
INTERESTED IN GIVING
YOU WHAT YOU WANT,
NOT WHAT YOU NEED

NO ONE IN THIS
SPACE WILL TELL YOU
THAT YOU HAVE HAD
ENOUGH.

ALGORITHMS ARE
DESIGNED TO HACK
NOT ENHANCE

THE WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION IN THE ARMS RACE FOR ATTENTION

Auto-play the next video

Variable reward systems/
collectibles

Use of red icons and tones that are associated with importance

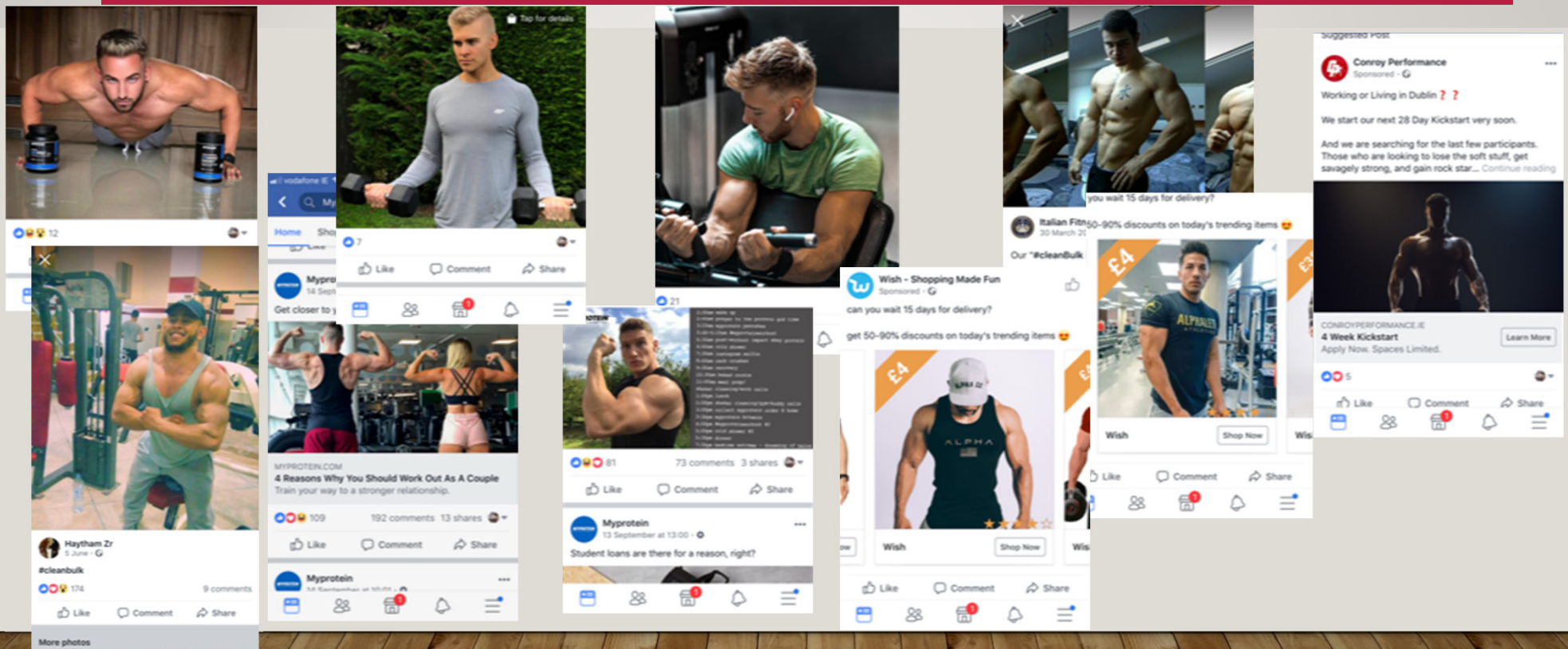
Push notifications and manipulate feedback

SnapChat Streaks



MY MOMENT OF WEAKNESS

MY TIMELINE EVER SINCE.....



THE FEEDBACK LOOP SPIRAL

Individuals who have these susceptibility characteristics gravitate to appearance-focused social media content, seeking particular gratifications, such as reassurance and validation.

These gratifications propel users to spend considerably more time on SM, triggering a host of psychological processes.

Continued use then leads to increased body dissatisfaction and negative affective reactions and so a feedback loop ensues.

Motivated all the more to alleviate the resultant negative affect the user seeks even more validation, thereby selectively exposing themselves to SM yet again.

REINFORCING SPIRALS TOWARD VULNERABILITY





HOW SM INFLUENCES OUR CHOICE ARCHITECTURE

- The interactive features of SNS raise the possibilities of a host of cognitive and attitudinal effects.
- Users who are low in self-esteem and high in thin-ideal internalization, perfectionism and appearance-based self-worth can turn to social media to seek reassurance and validation regarding physical and social attractiveness, as well as to escape from appearance related personal distress.
- Reassurance needs can be satisfied by compulsively checking their profile pictures and spending considerable time comparing their Instagram pictures to those of less attractive friends
- They may also try to ritualistically escape personal problems by obsessively following celebrity role models.
- These strategies try to satisfy psychological appearance-gratifying needs and convince users that they measure up to idealized others.



BUT BECAUSE ULTIMATE SATISFACTION OF THESE NEEDS TYPICALLY CANNOT COME EXTERNALLY, BUT INTERNALLY, THESE USERS CAN END UP FEELING DISAPPOINTED AND HURT.



DOES THIS EFFECT MEN?

- Men also report how sociocultural factors (including media depictions) can influence body image concerns
- The male body ideal is more variable than the idealized female image, containing features of leanness, strength (“ripped”) muscularity and height.
- Although much less is known about media effects on male body satisfaction, research has reported positive correlations between consumption of media and body dissatisfaction and the use of muscle-enhancing supplements (Levine and Chapman 2011).
- Experiments have uncovered that exposure to muscular media images can cause male participants to report less satisfaction with their bodies (Galioto and Crowther 2013),



IS IT AGE/ ETHNIC IDENTITY SPECIFIC?

- Age brings maturity, suggesting both that SM effects will have less affective impact as users get older
- Research has found that ethnic identity can protect users, e.g. Latina women describe less harmful influences of exposure to thin-ideal media images than White women (Schooler and Daniels 2014)
- However, the proliferating effects of global SM suggest that SNS can penetrate cultures and nationalities previously immune from Western-style body image ideals.
- The introduction of television in Fiji caused women to view their bodies differently and to adopt more slender Western-style ideals of female beauty (Anderson-Fye 2011).
- Unfortunately, SM may convince young women (and men) from non-Western cultures to rethink their attitudes toward their bodies,

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THIS EVOLUTION



- The technological 'Weapons of Mass Distraction' challenge our ability to be alone with ourselves.
- Without reflection and space to be with ourselves we never get to know ourselves.
- Not knowing ourselves leaves us open to feeling vulnerable

THE MOST IMPORTANT
RELATIONSHIP YOU
WILL EVER FORM IN
YOUR LIFE IS THE
RELATIONSHIP YOU
HAVE WITH YOURSELF

THE IMPACT OF
DISTRACTION ON
RESILIENCE AND
VULNERABILITY

RESILIENCE IS NOT BORN OUT OF
ADVERSITY AND TOUGH TIMES...
IT IS CREATED THROUGH A GOOD
SENSE OF SELF THAT REFLECTS
AUTHENTICITY AND ACCURACY

SM CAN DISTORT AND INTERFERE WITH OUR SENSE OF SELF

WHAT CAN WE
DO TO
PROTECT YP
FROM NEGATIVE
SM INFLUENCE?

We need to learn to regulate
our own desire

We need to be critical
consumers of technology

We need to invest in developing
a relationship with ourselves

We need to disconnect and
realign our own value systems



THE MIRROR OF DESIRE





THANK YOU

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