How Does Instagram Influence A Woman’s Body Image and Mentality of One’s Self?

Colleen LeFevour

Popular Culture

May 4, 2015
In the world today there are many factors that influence individuals’ lives; some are positive while others are negative. One extremely popular demand for both women and men, young and old, is the social media. The internet is a very large pool full of opportunity for many factors of the world. Factors such as fame, promotion, inequality, perception, production, and globalization all take part in the world behind a computer screen. This paper will focus on how these factors play a role on the social media network, Instagram, and ultimately, how Instagram influences a woman’s body image and mentality of one’s self.

**What is Instagram**

Co-founders, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, formed Instagram “which has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to teens, musicians and anyone with a creative passion” (Instagram 2015). One may ask how someone has formed such a company with great output. The answer: former connections. Kevin Systrom “was part of the startup Odeo, which later became Twitter, and spent two years at Google working on products like Gmail and Google Reader. He graduated from Stanford University with a BS in Management Science & Engineering and serves on the boards of Walmart and KCRW” (Instagram 2015). Ultimately, elite status and prior engagement in the social media world gave him the upper hand in developing a company with such a profit. However, someone may wonder how there is profit within the company if the use of it is free by their users. Just like Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, Instagram makes profit through paid advertisement by larger companies that want their ads delivered to the community of three-hundred million users. An example of their advertisement can be found [here](#).
The importance of studying Instagram, just like any other social media website, is to grasp an understanding on how the influential factors play a role in any average person’s life. Specifically with Instagram, pictures and portrayals of individuals are what is being analyzed and the effect it has on those that see it every single day. For the most part, users of social media visit their page and others at least once a day if not multiple times every day. The interaction of users on Instagram gives users a thrill to constantly check their posts in order to stay in contact with others. Most importantly, this interaction is what must be studied. The sharing of photos influences many aspects of people’s lives without individuals being completely aware of their influence. So, this paper will analyze how fame, promotion, inequality, perception, production, and globalization all play a role in the influence on women, specifically.

Influences on Women’s Body Image

Appearance

Instagram, being a social media network of strictly pictures, allows for individuals to view others in belly shirts, panties, swim suits, and naked modeling pictures that expose thinness to women that are viewing them. However, many of the pictures are by accounts that are celebrities, sponsored by fitness companies, and/or favored by other users. Ultimately, this leads to a sense of body dissatisfaction for women. “Body dissatisfaction has been connected to media consumption in that media are often identified as sources women turn to for information about their physical appearance, and thin models and actresses are ostensibly the standard in current media” (Van Vonderen 2012: 51). With regard to a study that was done based on self esteem with relation to social media influence, a theme was found. “A theme that is evident in both parts of
the project is the clarity with which the act of comparing one’s body shape to others – whether peers or media figures – appears important to notions about body image and attitudes toward one’s own body. Media figures and peers serve as references for body image standards that are also likely to connect in some way to eating or exercising behavior” (Van Vonderen 2012: 52).

This specific finding discusses media figures that are used as references. More specifically, celebrities play a role as a significant media figure in the eyes of your average citizen. Therefore, the pictures that are presented by Kylie Jenner (lip modification), Amber Rose, and Kim Kardashian, just to name a few, are pictures that do not portray an average women; instead, they show how a body can be modified in order to portray an image that society ‘thinks’ is ideal. This then leads to many women feeling dissatisfied with their bodies and resorting to unhealthy ways of modification that will be discussed into further detail later on.

Furthermore, users of social media, especially Instagram, are seeking fame through what they consider popularity. Dara Greenwood states “Leaving aside the complex question of whether social media activity reliably assuages social or emotional distress (recent research suggests that Facebook use may, in fact, decrease emotional well-being; Kross et al., 2013), a craving for positive feedback and validation may be a common thread that links a desire for fame with social media use” (Greenwood 2013: 223). This validation is given through the “like” option and is often times measured by the thousands of likes a picture receives. This is an example of a “famous” person on Instagram. The fame is solely based off of her number of followers compared to who she follows and her likes on a page. In reality, she was just an ordinary girl living an ordinary life until she portrayed herself a certain way through her pictures.
Not only are women being exposed to pictures of body images and ‘ideal’ ways to look physically, but they are also being influenced by constant promotional lines through Instagram that refer to these ‘idealized’ body images. Majority of them are witnessed based and are posting pictures of extremely fit, skinny girls, that are what so many women feel they ‘need’ to look like. These promotional lines use specific hashtags to influence their consumers, such as #fitchick, #fitfam, #fitspo, etc. Also, they base their posts off the quality of the picture rather than the quantity and most importantly the motivational quote under the post that often reads along the lines of “work for what you truly want” (Lundberg 2014).

Influence of Women’s Mentality

Social Inequality

Many times women are seen as the underdog within our society because of the inequality that is evident in the workforce and home. The mentality that comes along with inequality can cause great hardships mentally. Ultimately, there are boundaries that are placed in this world between men and women, certain ways to act, etc. However, the social media world rids these boundaries that exist because it allows individuals, for the purpose of this paper, women, to portray themselves in any light that they desire. In real life, we often use physical cues to help us identify our role and put the appropriate boundaries in place, but online it is more difficult to determine where our boundaries lie” (Kimball 2013: 187). This ability to adjust and work ways through boundaries on social media is what allows women to be influenced by false information. For instance, if a woman portrays her social capital through Instagram as knowing individuals that are higher up in society, then she may feel obligated to portray an economic, cultural, and/or
symbolic capital that is actually not reality for her. Therefore, Instagram, influences women’s mentality through a desire to portray social equality amongst its users by comparing pictures of themselves to others.

**Codes of Gender - Expectations**

*Role Performance*

Regarding women’s mentality and the influence Instagram has on the way they portray themselves through the world of social media, role performance is performed; its as if the website and/or app is the stage and a specific role must be played in order to attract certain attention. For instance, roles such as a mother, a sibling, a model, a professional, and/or a teenager. These are considered “codes of gender;” a specific standard or code that must be met in order to be portrayed a specific way within the eyes of society (Jhally 2010). More detailed, a mother often times portray herself through Instagram by posting multiple pictures of her children, family portraits, cooked meals, and cuddled nights. Then, a sibling may post family portraits, but depending on how close in age the siblings are the girl posts sappy quotes under sibling pictures expressing the love they have for each other. It’s ultimately a sense of nurturing that is often related to women. Then, a professional often posts pictures of work outfits, places traveled for business, and high-end accessories that they feel portray their lifestyle to outsiders looking in. Then, the typical teenage girl plays a role that has desires to attract teenage boys. They often post selfies with either their breasts and butts hanging out to show they are physically attractive because God forbid a personality matters; they will post group photos of friends to show they have an active social life and are well-liked; they will post pictures of high-end items
every so often to make it seem like they have their own money for purchases, when in reality it is their parents proving the items as gifts or every day purchases. These codes that are abided by in role playing a specific gender do not alter much based on age. Every women has this mentality that they must impress someone else because they need to be known as ‘good’ enough. Can this be from the constant struggle women face in a world of inequality? Absolutely, women just want to be known and have a voice in the world.

**Line Between Reality and Simulation**

*Physical Effect on Women’s Mentality*

Instagram, being a social world within a computer screen or phone screen, can be considered a simulation life. Perception of one’s reality has the ability to be distorted because it can be altered by choice of what the user wants to post. For instance, if a profile is constantly posting quotes that pertain to a happy lifestyle, it can be assumed that they are doing well for themselves and want to share their positive energy. However, in reality, that user may actually be feeling the opposite and hiding it through portrayal of the opposite feeling.

On the other hand, researcher Adam Waltz discusses his research as the following: “we show that because simulation enables people to generate a meaningful experience, it can also have benefits for one’s sense of meaning. Given the links between meaning in life and a variety of positive outcomes, this research suggests that one way to improve psychological and physical well-being is to at least occasionally take a moment to distance oneself from the present time and place” (Waltz 2015: 351). Physically, generating a meaningful experience within Instagram, can potentially cause an individual to distance themselves from a world of stress and anxiety.
However, it can also distance an individual in a negative way. For instance, if a person feels as if they are physically appearing in reality as a figure that is not ‘ideal’ or comparable to what is being portrayed as ‘ideal’ through social media, they might result to wanting to change their physical appearance. Since many users of Instagram are average individuals with middle class income, they do not have the ability to afford plastic surgery to change their appearance. Therefore, resorting to unhealthy ways is often times occurring. Examples of this would be women wanting to be skinner than they are and coming anorexia or bulimic to obtain goal weights quickly. With relation to anorexia disorders related to social media, “people turn to learn more about the celebrities that received media attention. When perceived anorexic celebrities are given attention that does not account for their disordered eating practices, their image may be viewed in a positive light, implicitly reinforcing a broadly embraced cultural notion that thinness is desirable” (Yom-Tov 2014: 200). Unfortunately, when women are given exposure to individuals through Instagram that are considered ‘idolized,’ more often than not they are celebrities, this image is the desired way of wanting to look. In a world where the American Dream is constantly being desired, fame and fortune is often seen as a way to obtain the American Dream; therefore, leading to people believing they must physically appear as desirable as the celebrities that are living the high standard life style.

Emotional Effect on Women’s Mentality

Women’s mentalities are altered due to social media, especially Instagram. When constantly comparing images of one’s self to others through social media, where portrayal is not always truthful, women are ultimately comparing themselves to images that are physically
unobtainable. Therefore, feelings of depression and envy can erupt. “Envy, like depression, involves social evaluations but where depression is hypothesized to be a modern-day mismatch of an adaptive response, elicited by overstimulation of high status prestige cues. It has been hypothesized that the adaptive function of envy is to motivate and prompt action when one’s nearest competitors are perceived to be out-competing one” (Blease 2015: 10). Due to portrayal of ‘high status prestige’ people are assuming in order to have a lifestyle that is great and fabulous they must look and feel as happy as others. Sadly, the idea of being content with one’s self and loving themselves for who they truly are is often times being overlooked in social media, especially Instagram. With Instagram being strictly pictures that are posted for content, appearance outweighs the importance of personality. A person’s first impression is all through the quality of a picture; the location, the objects within a picture, and the appearance of one’s self is all that truly matters when it comes to being noticed through someone’s finger flick to scroll through a mass number of photos.

Globalization

Social media is available for individuals throughout the world to access. Of course, there are some countries that ban the use of internet and often times look down upon the idea of it. But, is it for a good reason? Are the influences of social media truly hurting communities and/or groups of individuals? Possibly, yes, if analyzed correctly. Due to America being the top tier within the world, the influence westernization has on others is extremely relatable to social media’s influence directly. With relation to Instagram, celebrities that are known throughout the world that are actually within the American pop culture scene, still have influence on others, for
example Japan. Just like America, eating disorders are prevalent in Japan and can be determined as being influenced by media. Research states that “estimated rates of anorexia nervosa in Japanese females and males (aged 13-18) to be 2.3%. Approximately 5-10% of female adolescents display eating disorder symptoms, compared to 2-3% for their male counterparts, and eating disorder rates in Japan are estimated to be increasing among all age groups” (Nielson 2013: 5). Not only are eating disorders a similarity, but also body dissatisfaction being the cause of these disorders is. Body image, which is so important in the American culture has become something with high importance throughout all cultures due to ideas being passed through globalization. More specifically, women are facing the most internal struggle due to social media, and Instagram aids this struggle by focusing so much importance on body image and what is thought of as ‘ideal.’ In the study of Japan, body image is more focused on by girls rather than boys; this can be assumed that globalization has spread the American culture of body image through oceans and borders to other cultures. “Girls in this study internalized the thin ideal more than boys, experienced more body appearance dissatisfaction, and more weight dissatisfaction than their male counterparts” (Nielson 2013: 7). Unfortunately, this is not surprising data due to the fact that women all around the world feel they must be physically attractive to the opposite sex in order to have status in the world.

All in all, the world that exists within a computer screen can cause great harm upon individuals that use it. Unfortunately, many people are not aware of the circumstances that social media can inflict. The importance of understanding how Instagram influences a woman’s body
image and mentality of one’s self is crucial because all age groups partake in the community of Instagram. Understanding the effects of how pictures are perceived and portrayed can actually help aid the misunderstanding of body image within the American culture, more specifically. If American cultures perception of body image was not so drastic and of great importance, many other cultures would not adapt to that way of life. Thinness and attractiveness are outweighing the importance of personality and morality of individuals. Thus, individuals are developing disorders, physical and emotional distress, and lack of appreciation for themselves because there are ‘ideals’ that are being made that are ultimately, unrealistic to obtain by your average individual.

The need to deescalate emphasis on the body image within social media networks is crucial. Suggestions for this would be to prevent the behavior of comparing one’s self to others rather than dealing with the outcome. Therefore, further research in determining ways to diminish idealistic viewpoints is crucial. There is clearly a way to change viewpoints of a culture and/or society because this drastic emphasis on body image was not always the case within American culture. There was a time when women accepted their bodies and focused on their being and characteristics of personality, rather than body image. The most important step that needs to be taken in order to rid the emphasis and negative factors of social media, such as Instagram, is to stop reacting to the problems it is causing, and start preventing the behaviors to begin with. Social media has positive attributes in the sense that it allows individuals to be open and expressive of personal ideas and that part cannot be missed, but unfortunately, it is outweighed by the emphasis of body image in the world today.
Work Cited


Instagram. 2015. www.instagram.com


