THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON SELF-PERCEPTION

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Social networks become a more widespread tool for instant communication. However, users do not only prefer them for the ability to communicate, but they also use these networks because they allow individuals create electronic profiles and share their experiences, emotions, and thoughts with other people (Vogel *et al.,* 2014). Since humans are believed to have the drive to compare their appearance and personality to others, social networks become a specific platform that allows them to evaluate themselves and others, make decisions about their lives, and regulate emotions. Social networks can lead to two types of comparison: upward and downward social comparison. Upward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to superior others with positive characteristics, while downward social comparison relies on the process of comparing oneself to inferior others with negative characteristics. As such, none of these types of comparisons is negative or positive per se, users might interpret them differently. The paper aims to address both positive and negative impact of social media on one's self-perception.

Positive Impact of Social Networks

The first positive aspect of social networks is users' opportunity to create and gather social capital and participate in various civic and political movements and groups. They also encourage individual participation in various activities focused on improving the state of affairs on different levels, including local, regional, and national ones. The participation can take various forms, for example, civic engagement via Facebook and Twitter (charities), offline political participation (elections), and online political participation (email/chat communication with legislators and political figures)

(Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, 2012). Thus, social networks become a powerful tool for political and/or civic engagement of citizens, allowing users evaluate their contribution to the community or, on the greater level, the country. Such engagement can lead to positive self-perception and re-evaluation of one's ability to actively participate and change political processes in the country.

Second, information provided by social networks might be different in nature, since this content is not only used for entertainment. The diversification of the content encourages users to participate in discussions, thus increasing the quality and relevance of information available in such networks (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, 2012). Diverse content can cover various aspects of individual's life, from political to intimate.

Third, social networks can significantly influence one's self-efficacy by providing numerous contacts to people who can share helpful information. Such opportunity is important for people undergoing major changes in their life, such as moving to college, experiencing a divorce process, or moving to another city or country (DeAndrea *et al.,* 2012). Making valuable social connections also improves users' self-perception and evaluation of their ability to cope with difficulties during a transitional period.

<center>Negative Impact of Social Networks</center>

Negative influences of social networks on one's self-perception are related to both downward and upward social comparison. According to Vogel *et al.* (2014), the upward social comparison can be detrimental because frequent exposure to social networks and persistent comparison results in poorer psychological well-being. Furthermore, people with low self-esteem tend to use social networks as safe

environments for self-expression, which only leads to the emergence of a support-upward social comparison cycle, when users do receive social support from friends and followers but also expose themselves to other information that might impair their self-esteem.

It should also be noted that social networks are used to compare one's appearance to others, which can result in discrepancies related to one's face, hair, skin, or whole body. For example, the findings of the study conducted by Fardouly *et al.* (2015) indicate that both men and women agreed brief exposure to Facebook resulted in a more negative mood. Moreover, if individuals tend to make more appearance comparisons, exposure to social networks might lead to a greater desire to change one's hair, skin, and face features. It is possible to assume that such desire to compare one's appearance to others is supported by the vast number of available portrait photographs in social networks, which allow more precise comparison and drive users' attention to their perceived or real flaws.

Another negative impact that a social network can have on one's self-perception is the availability of dangerous and harmful information. For example, a person with suicidal behavior might find various pro-suicide groups that will provide them with detailed information about how suicide is committed. Teenagers and adolescents (as well as adults) with low self-esteem are also at risk of cyberbullying that directly affects the negative self-image of the individuals with impaired self-esteem. Victims of cyberbullying are two times more likely to commit suicide than those who do not experience it (Luxton, June, and Fairall, 2012). Therefore, users need to be attentive to the behavior of those with whom they communicate.

Cyber bullying is an extreme form of negative feedback that users might receive when communicating online. Social networks can also cause other maladaptive technology-based behaviors, such as negative online peer feedback and increase in isolation and depressive symptoms. Thus, social networks do not always positively influence users' self-perception and can even have extremely negative impact on it. In order to distinguish critical feedback from harmful behaviors and maintain normal self-esteem, users need to critically evaluate the content and communication available in social networks, as well as understand its influence on their mood and well-being.

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