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The Adverse Effects of Multimedia on Adolescent Self Esteem

During adolescence there are many apparent changes experienced, some being physical, academic, and social changes. What adolescents may not realize is that they are undergoing psychological changes as well. With a changing self concept, the knowledge of one's self, those in adolescence experience the development of a complex self esteem. One's self esteem is the attitude toward one's self concept, that is, the emotion attached to how one thinks about one's self. During this unstable period of life, adolescents are extremely impressionable thus many factors influence their self concepts including parents, teachers, peers, and the media. According to Carlson, those in preadolescence rely on their peers to develop their self concepts and self esteems, however during adolescence, self concepts and self esteems are influenced mainly on how well one fits with their gender's roles (Carlson, 1965). One hypothesis is that the media reinforces these gender roles having a strong influence on adolescents' self concepts and self esteems. Further, it may be that certain types of media create general ideals for adolescents and other types of media instill these ideals on adolescents' everyday lives, overall affecting self esteem.

The two general types of multimedia are defined based on level of involvement and action of the individual with the media. Specifically, multimedia can be one or two sided so that the individual is either passively or actively engaged in the media. Individuals passively engage

in many different types of one sided media including television, magazines, websites, and movies. In such forms of media, ideals are expressed as factual for the user to see and believe to be true without the individual having to fully involve himself. On the other hand, individuals actively engage in other forms of multimedia including numerous types of social media and means of communication. These individuals are participants of the media such that they are fully involved by contributing messages or pictures and these contributions stem from the ideals from the afore mentioned media. Self concepts may be affected by participation in media such that others' comments towards the individual or in general are influential and in addition, one's ideas about himself may be affected based on his own contributions. The generation of ideals from one sided media in combination with the instilling of these ideals into the individual's actions and interactions has a strong influence on self concepts and self esteems, especially during adolescence.

One sided forms of media have a strong influence in that they exemplify what adolescents believe to be what is normal and cool. Prime examples of this fact are seen in the effects of the messages sent through magazines and television shows. In fact, there is a strong correlation between the viewing of "photographic idealized images" (i.e. "attractive" models) in magazines and negative effects on body dissatisfaction and mood (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002). The results of a study by Hargreaves and Tiggemann were found to support the sociocultural theory which states that "unrealistic ideals of attractiveness, such as those portrayed in many television commercials, responsible for current high levels of body dissatisfaction" (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002). This evidence exemplifies the idea that one sided media creates a standard that people believe they must live up to.

The messages engrained in television shows dictate what the watchers think to be the right thing to do. For example, the MTV series *16 and Pregnant* and its spin off *Teen Mom*, though providing a clear depiction of the associated hardships, glorify teen pregnancy for the viewers. It is argued that these shows make teen girls want to become pregnant so that they can be a subject and become famous (Bedyaniak, 2011). These two shows set the ideal for adolescents that it is cool to become pregnant thus influencing their self concepts.

A rather different example of influential one sided media is the internet, specifically pro anorexia and pro self injury websites. Unfortunately there are websites dedicated to teaching viewers how to properly be anorexic and to self harm. These websites, undoubtedly frequently visited by curious adolescents, create the mindset that these behaviors are good. They also may instill thoughts into adolescents' minds such as "If all of these people are anorexic, should I be concerned with my weight and eating, too?" and "If all of these people are depressed and self harm, maybe I should be, too" which certainly would have an effect on self concepts and self esteems. Research has found that viewing pro anorexia websites has more negative emotional and psychological effects compared to websites that highlight the female figure (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006). These websites teach viewers that it is crucial to be thin and the way to reach this goal is anorexia, thus it is likely that viewers, especially vulnerable adolescents, will experience adverse effects to their own self concepts and self esteems.

Similarly, pro self harm websites are negatively influential to viewers in at least two ways. The communities formed on these websites create the message that self harm is normal and effective which influences viewers to question their own mental health and coping mechanisms ultimately altering self concepts and self esteem. According to Whitlock, Lader, and Conterio pro self harm websites are also barriers to recovery in that viewers may rely on the

community for support rather than relying on the appropriate therapies and therapists (Whitlock, Lader, & Conterio, 2007). With television shows and movies exemplifying anorexia and self harm as common issues and as escapes or coping mechanisms, these websites provide the information to adopt these behaviors giving the extra push to curious viewers.

Based on the ideals created by these one sided forms of media, individuals' engagement in two sided forms of media actively reinforces these ideals affecting their self concepts and self esteems. The main difference between the two forms of multimedia is the level of responsibility. With two sided forms of media, individuals are interacting with others with the set of ideals in mind; the adverse effects of the creation of these ideals are multiplied as the interactions have an attached feeling of responsibility. Further, the people involved in this type of media are not anonymous community members or celebrities; rather they are peers, which elevates all interactions and communication to a new level of relevance and personal reality.

An example of a major problem associated with such interactive forms of media is cyber bullying. A common mean of cyber bullying includes posting harassing or hurtful messages, photos, or videos either privately or publicly on websites such as Formspring and Facebook. On Formspring, there is the option for the message to be anonymous which often increases the level of cruelty of the message based on the lack of responsibility. On Facebook and other messaging sources, however, this anonymity is not an option yet cyber bullying persists. Harsh messages from people that you know to be your own peers can be extremely detrimental to mental health. According to Patchin and Hinduja, cyber bullying is especially detrimental for adolescents as this time of life is crucial for identity development and cyber bullying "...ties into a child's perceptions and acceptance of his or her changing self and plays a critical role in directing his or her personal and even professional growth trajectory" (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). The study by

Patchin and Hinduja concluded that low self esteem is an outcome for both the bully and the bullied, and that such low self esteem has further negative effects in multiple areas of both parties' lives (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). The personal interaction of both bullying and being bullied affects the overall self concept and self esteem and unfortunately this is exemplified too often in the news when bullying leads to suicides.

Based on the ideals set by television, movies, magazines, and other influential sources, adolescents today believe that it is important to be sexually involved at a young age. This ideal is expressed through a form of interactive media that has negative effects on adolescents' self concepts and self esteems, namely text messaging. With this focus on sexuality, text messaging has relatively recently escalated into "sexting" which is a form of text messaging in which one sends sexually explicit pictures or messages through cell phones or other forms of communication. During adolescence today there is peer pressure to engage in sexting, as well as for the receiver to expose the sender. Such exposure of personal information, a form of cyber bullying, would undoubtedly have negative effects on the sender's self esteem because of shame from both the engagement and the exposure. According to McEachern, "students who are victims of sexting may feel isolated, fearful, and discouraged about school, causing them to be absent more often, withdraw from school activities, and decrease their academic performance" (McEachern, n.d.). Unfortunately, there have been cases in which sexting led to depression and suicide, thus the negative outcomes are immense.

All in all, multimedia has adverse effects on adolescents' self concepts and self esteems. The media sets unrealistic standards for adolescents to live up to, and when they feel that they don't measure up, mental health is at stake. Though the type of multimedia engaged in has an effect on the specific outcome, both one and two sided forms of media have adverse effects, thus

it is essential to stress the overall relationship between the media's messages and adolescents' mental well beings. A study by Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliwer, and Kilmartin found that positive body image is directly correlated with positive self esteem; both were found to be influenced by sociocultural influences such as harassment, family and peer relationships, and the media (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliwer, & Kilmartin, 2001). Also according to Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliwer, and Kilmartin, the media negatively affects adolescents' psychological states with impacts including body image problems, negative gender stereotypes, and eating disorders (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliwer & Kilmartin, 2001). Based on unfortunate events seen on national news, it is obvious that it is not unheard of for media influence to have a role in an adolescent's suicide.

With the knowledge of this adverse relationship between the media and adolescents' self concepts and self esteems, it is important to make efforts to prevent and cope with the negative effects. Teachers, school counselors, and parents should be made aware of warning signs of risky media use and other behaviors as well as of lowered self esteem and depression. Though it is nearly impossible to control what ideals are created and sustained through the media, it is important to instill the ideas in adolescents' minds that the media does not portray the average person and it should not be used as a reference point especially during identity development. The importance of prevention is supported by Clay, Vignoles, and Dittmar's suggestion to "draw a distinction between simply being aware of cultural standards of female beauty, and internalizing them as a personal belief system" (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005). Awareness of the impact that media has on self concept and self esteem is beneficial, but in order to truly prevent the extreme negative outcomes that are associated with the media it is crucial to teach adolescents how to decipher what is reality in the media's messages.

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