

Representation And Analysis Of The Effect Of Media And Interaction
With Social Media On Its Consumers

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Spring 2022

One thing that has become apparent in recent years is the lack of representation in the media. This spans from representations of all body types, all races, all genders, in general, all types of people. Along with the recognition of the absence of representation came the push for more diverse and inclusive representation. The media aims to shift away from highlighting the unrealistic expectation of beauty and the few who embody that ideal to a wide variety of beautiful individuals, demonstrating the beauty in everyone and the beauty in diversity. Media now is much more inclusive and representative of the population as a whole rather than the elusive idea of beauty only few reach. Although this is a success for the health of the consumers of media, and social media specifically, an important distinction must be made to avoid the detriments of media's affect on society. The best way to reverse and avoid the influence that media has on consumers is to change the perception of media and its underlying purpose.

An important thing to remember while viewing social media is that it is designed to be a "highlight reel" of one's life. Originally, no one wanted to post the discouraging moments, the unflattering images, or the boring days online for the whole world to see. The content put out onto social media was the best times of people's lives, their best photos, the representation that they are successful and happy and healthy. Rettberg discusses the difference between self-representation and presentation within social media. A better understanding of the early stages of social media would be granted by assuming the term "presentation" instead of self-representation. Rettberg (2017:432) says

A representation is an object, a sign that is seen as constructed in some way, and that stands instead of an object to which it refers. Talking about representations lets us analyse the selfie, the tweet or the graph of a run. A presentation is an act, something that a person does, so talking about presentations allows us to analyse the way that the person acts to present themselves.

However, looking at these with the context of social media in mind aligns them more as synonyms rather than contrasting examples. Rettberg (2017:433) goes on to say “Most scholars today see representation as *constructed*. A representation cannot mirror reality because we all have different experiences and interpretations of ‘reality’ ...When representations are shared out of context, their meaning is often constructed differently by the new audience” This analysis demonstrates that presentation and self-representation in social media is less about the truth of the population and more about the identified ideal. The origin of social media, therefore, is to be the “best of the best” of an individual's lives. Thus, the beginning of social media was centered around societal expectation of beauty, generally a very exclusive and not representative of the general population. Furthermore, this idea of the “ideal” is perpetuated by people striving to accomplish what is presented for them, as well as encouragement from those sources that you are not enough unless you meet the criteria of the ideal. Magazine covers encouraging weight loss, how to satisfy men, and a multitude of other “hot taglines” are all written in an effort to communicate that the consumer is not enough as they are and there is a better version of themselves they can strive to be.

This expectation of beauty within social media has made social media ineffective in representing the whole of society and is even more detrimental in relation to the idea of intersectionality. Brooks (2006: 298) discusses the lack of representation of race within the realm of social media, where white women are justly represented, while black women are rarely represented:

We believe the media are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and, thus, in gender socialization. We acknowledge feminism and feminist media studies’ tendency to privilege gender and white women, in particular, over other social categories of experience, such as race and class (hooks, 1990; Dines, 1995; Dines & Humez, 2003). Black feminist scholars have acknowledged the neglect which women

of color, specifically black women, have experienced through their selective inclusion in the writings of feminist cultural analysis...

Thus, it is incredibly important to expand the representation of individuals within social media, research, and even cultural analysis writings. Brooks (2006: 312) concludes by commenting “The research described in this chapter has exposed the various ways the media construct monolithic notions of race and gender... Media will continue to play a prominent role in these struggles [*against monolithic notions of race and gender*], making the work of media scholars all the more important.” Now that the lack of media diversity is established, it is also important to look at why the lack of diversity in representation and ideation matters.

Helberger (2018, 156) argues that media is the source from which ideas and culture derives- which is why it is so dangerous to lack diversity. She states “The true source of digital dominance is the ability to control the way people encounter and engage with information and the ability to steer their choices through the sheer knowledge about their interests and biases. More than ever media diversity has become the result of social dynamics, dynamics that are carefully orchestrated by one or few platforms.” In this way, a handful of ideas and mentalities are encouraged and assumed for an entire society. This then highlights the excluded groups and un-represented populations, furthering the gap between majorities and minorities. Helberger (2018, 158) continues on to discuss the argument as to whether social media platforms are a threat or opportunity to media diversity, claiming that “There is a growing body of research that finds evidence for a positive contribution of social media platforms to media diversity...,” which is beneficial to the encouragement of diversity within the society as a whole. Thus there is indeed potential for media to be beneficial to society, but as it is being produced and consumed at the moment, it is encouraging a specific ideal unattainable by most of the population and therefore is incredibly detrimental to the public.

In general, a lack of representation in the media is detrimental to society, especially to those that do not find themselves represented in the public sphere. Ray (2014) says “This mind boggling amount of media consumption shapes how we see the world we live in. Though they are largely fictional, on-screen images can shape our views of reality. Popular media can have a negative impact on whites’ perceptions of people of color. One study found that nonverbal racial biases in facial expressions and body language, as represented on popular television shows, influence white viewers’ racial biases.” Unfortunately, this analysis describes the ‘top-down’ influence that causes widespread feelings of inequality and under-representation. This then severely mutates the idea of the norm in culture, and is destructive to those not accurately represented. It is then a recurring cycle, as those underrepresented feel inaccurately portrayed and those perceiving the media have more solidified ideas of the underrepresented minority.

Not only is the lack of representation detrimental to society, the presentation of ideals in other capacities is also destructive to consumers. Burnette (2017) states that “Research consistently demonstrates an association between mass media exposure and body dissatisfaction... Mass media are powerful transmitters of societal values and standards, especially those regarding ideal beauty, weight, food, fashion, and gender roles.” Pictures, articles, and statements put forth by those respected and well-loved in society hold value to the consumers of the media. If someone famous and deemed “valuable” by society matches certain ideals, usually that being thin and skinny, admirers and susceptible consumers strive to match that ideal of perfection. These ideals are then reinforced by peers, friends, family, etc. Thus, every source in one individual’s life is telling them they are not enough and that there is a societal ideal that they do not match. They must then do everything in their power to fulfill that ideal so that they may also be seen as valuable. Fardouly (2018) continues on about how the

consumption of media exactly affects the individual: “ According to the Tripartite Influence Model of Body Image..., two key mediators of the relationship between media usage and body dissatisfaction are internalization of the thin ideal and appearance-based social comparisons. Consistent with this model, research shows that women who subscribe to appearance-related pressures and internalize the societal ideals of appearance portrayed in the media, but who fail to achieve those ideals, are likely to become dissatisfied with their appearance.” As media is consumed without an awareness of the tendencies of comparison and the idealization of a certain norm, the destructive nature is amplified.

The effect that media now has on consumers is vastly different than what its intention was. It is safe to say that the media was a way to keep up with the times and spread news rapidly. The adoption of social media into this sphere was again for the same purpose, to keep up with friends and family. The origin of the media was based on truth and communication. It was meant to be a source of pure news and information. It now parades under the same guise, but is not truly representative of the entire population. This can be incredibly damaging to consumers who view the media as truthful. Any idea that someone in power wants to assert is viewed as honest and truthful, and this could be taken advantage of. This, however, is if we as a society continue to view media as a source of truthful information.

My proposition is that if we, as a society, change the way we consume media and interact with social media, we could avoid a few of the many issues it has caused. I was interested in looking into this myself, and spent all of January off of social media. I found that I was less drawn to constantly using my phone when I was bored or procrastinating. More of my day was spent enjoying the little, everyday things in life and searching for joy in places outside of other people. I compared myself to others much less, and was generally happier the whole month.

After I downloaded social media again, I made the conscious decision to use social media as a way to keep in touch with my friends and family and keep up with others' lives, as opposed to where I sourced my truth from. I was so excited to see photos and updates of friends and family having babies, getting married, graduating, and so many more big life milestones. It was incredibly interesting to observe how much more joy I had when I was not comparing myself to others and got to celebrate milestones with friends.

In my capstone, I wanted to highlight the change in representation in the media over time. I feel that there has been a recent, conscious effort to diversify the representation of individuals in high-profile media. This is demonstrated in the change of magazine covers from the 2000s to just recently. Furthermore, in changing the perception of media and how we consume it, we can take more healthy steps towards progress. Representation in the media is incredibly important, and I think the focus on this that has evolved over the years has created a much healthier, loving society. Now that representation has improved, changing how we consume media will lead to better health of our society.

In the artwork accompanied with the capstone, I intended to represent the change in media as well as my own change in consumption of social media. The background of the piece is a collage of various magazine covers over a timeline of about 20 years. In the 2000s, the magazine covers were generally representative of the same type of person. The captions are all about the identified ideal as well. In the more recent magazine covers, there is a much more diverse representation of the general population. I highlighted in yellow the most influential aspects of the magazine covers and what stood out to my eye the most. I feel that the aspects highlighted vary from enviable qualities only possessed by a few in society, to a more robust representation of every interesting and diverse detail our widely varied demographic has. Those

aspects range from being mostly curves and smiles and thin features, to pregnant tummies, varied hair types and styles, and so much more. Then I gathered the words that came to mind when I viewed the pictures in blue bold. It evolved from self-deprecating and negative feelings into wide varieties of descriptive adjectives. I then wrote in red all of the feelings that the magazines evoked in me. Finally, to depict the change in how I consumed social media, I overlaid some of the comments I valued in the past to updates that I interact with now. I really feel that the art piece demonstrates the change of representation in media and in my own consumption of social media.

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