Social Networking Site Consumption and its effect on Gender Stereotype Perceptions

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The media often display gender at its cultural norms; women are portrayed as attractive, submissive, and nurturing while men are shown as dominant, withdrawn, and achievement-oriented (Mahalik et al., 2003). Therefore, it may be considered that social media use plays a part in the way that adolescents perceive gender norms and stereotypes. This study examines whether or not social media consumption is associated with gender stereotypes and aims to determine if social media are instrumental in the formulation of gender stereotypes in adolescents (Ward, 2018). Data were collected through a quantitative survey powered by Qualtrics. The survey was sent to 1321 adolescents from the ages of 13 to 18. Of the 1321 surveyed, 627 are male and 694 are female, with roughly equal groups of African American, Asian American, and White students. Correlations were used to compare the mean scores of variables across gender. The results of the study show that social media consumption does correlate to the perceived gender norms of both boys and girls. These results suggest that media consumption may result in a damaged self-image in adolescents or other harmful outcomes. In the future, youth may be advised of the ill effects of media consumption on their self-image and gender perceptions so that they may be able to combat the negative effects of it.

Introduction

1. Context

As more teenagers begin to create social media accounts and interact with each other online, the role that these sites play in influencing the users' views of gender stereotypes should be considered. With the rise of social networking sites (hereafter referred to as SNS), adolescents are permitted to display an image of themselves that fits their liking (Trekels, 2017). The adolescents that use these sites will often post content in which they are complying with current beauty ideals (Siibak, 2010). This is because those who use these sites have an unlimited amount of time to edit their pictures (Walther et al., 2010) and thus can essentially make themselves look however they like upon uploading the post. This could serve as a reason for the correlation that social network site use predicted increased body dissatisfaction (de Vries, 2015). When an adolescent sees a picture of someone else of the same gender, their first instinct is to compare themselves to that person (Feinstein, 2013), leading to depressive symptoms. With that, increased pressure for female sexual objectification and intensified social comparison may also negatively impact their identity development (Manago, 2008).

Relation to Gender Stereotypes

In an attempt to win back their self-esteem after seeing these pictures, adolescents may respond by posting pictures where they are complying with the same beauty norms, ensuing a vicious cycle of stereotyping. This is ultimately due to the assumption that by embracing these gender norms, they will then be rewarded in the form of romantic success, popularity, or a self esteem boost (Trekels, 2017).

Specific Stereotypes

In 1986, Anthony Easthope wrote that society "lay[s] on a man a burden of having to be one sex all the way through" (Easthope, 1986: 6). Easthope describes the male stereotype as having to abolish all notes of femininity from a man's lifestyle and demeanor. As it is currently described, profile pictures of male social media sites function on many levels to portray masculinity (Siibak, 2010). Men are also considered to be primarily sex driven (Ward, 2002) as well as being assertive and dominant (Williams, 1975). As for females, they are expected to wear skimpy and sexy clothing while having a "beautiful body" (Signorielli, 1994). The "sex stereotypes via the adjective check list" study done by John E. Williams in 1975 highlighted adjectives that at least 75% of college students assigned to a certain gender. Of these, males were described as aggressive, assertive, confident, dominant, independent, and unemotional whereas females were seen said to be appreciative, attractive, dependent, flirtatious, and

submissive (Williams, 1975). More recently, a 2016 study done on gender stereotypes in selfies begins to point towards gender stereotyping in SNS; these stereotypes were described as "kissing pout, muscle presentation, faceless portrayal" (Döring, 2016). The stereotypes identified on SNS by Döring suggest a focus on the sexualization of the body rather than stereotypical personality traits.

2. Types of Media → The present study

Mass Media

In terms of the media in general, there has been some research correlating media exposure to increased perceptions of gender stereotypes. These studies range from television shows to magazine consumption to music taste. For example, it has been found that for both girls and boys, preferences for hip-hop and hard-house music were associated positively with gender stereotypes while preference for classical music was negatively associated with gender stereotypes (ter Bogt, 2010). In MTV commercials (which frequently showcase hard-house and hip hop music), the women who appear in them wear skimpier and sexier clothing, have more beautiful bodies, are more physically attractive, appear less frequently than men, and are more often used as objects of one's gaze than males (Signorielli, 1994). A similar trend has been recorded in video games. (Dill, 2007) found that college freshman considered female video game characters to have a curvaceous figure, to be provocatively dressed, and aggressive (although the commonly used word for females was "bitchy"). Their male counterparts were characterized as muscular, cocky, "cool", and aggressive. Apart from electronic media, one study actually found that magazine reading, but *not* television exposure was correlated with weight dissatisfaction and an internalization for thin ideals in females (Manago, 2008).

Social Media

Although there has been substantial research correlating media exposure to gender stereotypes, the portion of that research focusing on social media is much smaller. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide literature on the relationship social media has to perceptions of gender stereotypes in adolescents. It is important to understand the role that SNS play in shaping gender stereotypes in today's youth because once I identify the effect it has, any negative effects associated with it may begin to be combatted.

The present study

I tracked how social media use correlated to adolescents' perceptions of three gender specific stereotypes. The attitudes against women scale for adolescents (hereafter referred to as ATWS) as it was described in (Galambos, Petersen, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985) was the first

of the scales that was tested. These stereotypes included “Swearing is worse for a girl than a guy”, “On a date, a guy should be expected to pay all expenses”, and “On average, girls are as smart as guys”. These questions measured egalitarian perspectives towards the female gender. The second grouping of stereotypes was the masculine roles attitudes scale (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1994). These questions focus exclusively on men following the cultural stereotype that they should embody masculine traits. The masculine roles attitudes scale (hereafter referred to as MRAS) included questions like “A man always deserves the respect of his wife and children” and “A young man should always be physically tough, even if he is not big”. The last grouping of questions was defined as women as sexual objects (hereafter referred to as WSO). These questions were geared towards women being perceived as being objects for male sexualization; they included “Women who wear tight or revealing clothing are asking to be hit on by men” and “The best way for a girl to attract a boyfriend is through her body and looks”.

Methods

The sample included 694 participants who identified as girls (52.4%) and 627 participants that identified as boys (47.4%). Of the 1324 participants, 471 identified as Black (35.6%), 387 identified as Asian (29.3%), 436 identified as white (33.0%), and 29 participants identified as Other (2.2%). The ages of the participants ranged from 13 to 18, with an average age of about 15.

Social Media Use

Participants reported how often they use each of the following social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and Snapchat, using a scale from 1 to 6. One was the minimum amount of use and 6 was the maximum amount of use.

Gender Stereotypes

Three types of gender stereotypes were assessed: ATWS, MRAS, and WSO. The ATWS included 12 items that were scored on a range from 1 to 6, 1 being the belief most consistent with a stereotypical attitude (except in cases where scores were reverse coded). The MRAS included 8 items that followed the same 1 to 6 scoring pattern as the ATWS. The WSO scale had a total of 6 items and also followed the 1 to 6 scoring pattern.

Qualtrics panels were used to recruit participants that were within our parameters. Qualtrics recruited boys and girls between the ages of 13 and 18 who identified as black, white, or asian. The participants were from different areas around the country, therefore making the present study generalizable in that the participants were not isolated to a particular region of the country.

Qualtrics also gathered parent consent from the participants, as many of them were under the age of 18.

Results

The results showed that both boys and girls identify with all three stereotypes to some extent. The mean value for the boys' perceptions as they were consistent with the ATWS was M=2.91 whereas the girls' was M=2.38, which was the stereotype that both groups agreed with the least. As for the MRAS, the boys had a mean overall score of M=3.87, where the girls' mean score was M=3.36, which was the stereotype that both groups agreed with the most. The boys' mean score for the WSO was M=3.49 where the girls' was M=3.01. As shown, boys were found to have more stereotypical views of gender than girls, regardless of social media use. The boys' mean value for the ATWS was 0.53 higher than the girls', the mean value for the MRAS was 0.51 higher than the girls', and the mean value for the WSO was 0.48 higher than the girls'. As for the Social Networking Sites, the participants reported accessing all six of the SNS as well. The scores each specific SNS are as follows: for Facebook M=3.55 for boys and M=3.21 for girls, for Instagram M=3.95 for boys and M=4.29 for girls, for Tumblr, M=2.39 for boys and M=1.81 for girls, for Twitter M=2.93 for boys and M=2.56 for girls, and for Snapchat M=3.65 and M=4.14 for girls.

As hypothesized, social media use does correlate to greater perceptions of gender stereotypes in both boys and girls, overall (see appendix a). With that, the rate at which boys' stereotypical perceptions increased with social media use was greater than that of the girls. In terms of overall social media use, the correlation to the stereotypes for the boys was .32** for the ATWS, .42** for the MRAS, and .41** for the WSO. The correlation between overall social media use and these stereotypes was still present, just not as extreme for the girls, with .11** for ATWS, .21** for the MRAS, and .19** for the WSO. As for the SNS by themselves, Tumblr was the site that correlated the most with increased stereotypical gender perceptions. The correlation between Tumblr and the stereotype scales for boys was .38** for the ATWS, .45** for the MRAS, and .45** for the WSO. The same correlation for the girls was not quite as strong, but still proved to be the strongest of all the SNS with .23** for the ATWS, .25** for the MRAS, and .25** for the WSO. Twitter and Facebook also corresponded with an increase in stereotypical gender ideas, just not to the extent of Tumblr. For boys, both Snapchat and Instagram appeared to lead to higher stereotypical gender perceptions, but this effect was not present in the girl data. For girls, the only significant correlation considering Snapchat and

gender stereotypes was 0.92* for the MRAS stereotype. The Instagram data showed no positive correlation at all between Instagram and gender stereotypes. The only significant correlation found with the Instagram data was negative, a -0.94* for the ATWS stereotype.

Discussion

The present study aimed to identify a correlation between social media use and perceptions of gender stereotypes. The correlations found shed light on certain ill effects of using SNS as an adolescent and the ways in which the specific SNS matters. With these findings, one may consider implementing policy that would serve to reduce the time children spend on certain SNS or even social media as a whole. These findings prompt more research on how adolescents interact with social media and identifying the full scope of effects that social media use has on adolescents.

1. Findings

Every SNS was positively correlated with stereotypical gender perceptions for both boys and girls for at least one of the three stereotype scales. The only exception was girls who use Instagram. When girls accessed Instagram, no significant increase was found in their perceptions of both the MRAS and WSO stereotypes. For the ATWS scale, Instagram use actually correlated negatively with the stereotypical perception. Essentially, Instagram made girls feel as if they should regard themselves as equals to males, whereas the other SNS proved to do the opposite. This may be due in part to a feature Instagram has where a computer program tracks your search history and outputs similar posts onto your feed. Therefore, if girls frequently visit profiles that post body-positive images and embody progressive views of gender and equality, their feed will begin to fill with these positive images and ideologies, thus ingraining them into the minds of those who read them. Conversely, if an adolescent was to search for pictures of girls where they are displaying stereotypical characteristics consistent with the WSO scale, their feed would show them more of these images. This may be the case for boys, as Instagram correlated significantly with all three of the stereotypes for them, but this negative effect was not found in girls. Another interesting finding was Snapchat being correlated with the MRAS by a slim 0.92* and not at all with either the ATWS or WSO for girls. Snapchat, along with Instagram, had strikingly lower effects on gender stereotype perceptions than every other SNS for both boys and girls. A possible feature of this could be found in a feature unique to snapchat; snapchat is like a texting app in that someone’s interactions on the site are limited to those with people that they are already “friends” with. To add a “friend” on Snapchat, you must receive

consent from both parties before you can being to communicate. Therefore, Snapchat is different from every other SNS in that it does not allow a platform for cyberbullying from random people that the user does not know. This allows less room for people to transmit stereotypical ideals in a massive fashion, ensuing that adolescents are much less likely to experience stereotypical gender propaganda. In all, certain functions of SNS may determine how likely they are to transmit gender stereotypes.

Aside from that, the results show a large discrepancy between the stereotypical perceptions of boys and girls (see appendix b) with boys having more stereotypical views of gender regardless of social media use. Further, boys access SNS more often than girls and have higher correlations to the ATWS, MRAS, and WSO for every SNS they use (see appendix a). This begs the question, why? It could be that boys use social media differently than girls do, or it could be that boys are more readily influenced by gender norm propaganda.

2. Implications

There is currently minimal policy regarding who can access SNS and only some policy towards what can be done or shown on those sites. From this research, it is evident that social media use is detrimental to both boys and girls due to its influence on their perceptions of gender stereotypes. As Tumblr and Facebook proved to be the most harmful to adolescents, it may be considered that access to those sites should be limited or moderated in some way. All SNS should try and reduce the amount of stereotypical information they output and recode their programs to eliminate any explicit or potentially harmful material. These sites should also begin to promote body-positive messages on their sites and give preference to those pages on any sort of search setting they have. Proper use of social media should also be encouraged for adolescents who frequently visit the SNS. They should be taught to avoid any material that could potentially be harmful to themselves or someone else. They should also be made aware of the stereotypes described in this paper and learn to disregard them when scrolling through an SNS.

3. Future Research

This study prompts more research to be done on the negative effects of social media use in adolescents. As the positive correlations between social media use and stereotypical gender perceptions is so strong, it would be interesting to see how using SNS correlates to other ideologies. Of course, there has been research correlating social media use to depressive systems (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), but it would be interesting to discover any subtle damaging effects of SNS. Aside from that, the demographics of the adolescents may have some impact on

how social media affects them. It would be interesting to see how one's socioeconomic status plays a role in how they use SNS and it affects them differently. Race, age, and sexual orientation may also play a part in the way they interact with SNS. In the future, I would like to work with these variables to increase the literature on social media use in adolescents.

4. Limitations

In terms of the shortcomings that this project faced, the WSO scale was not a previously defined scale, like the MRAS and ATWS are. Further, the data were cross-sectional so I could not determine whether SNS use was influencing stereotype beliefs or if youth with more traditional stereotypes were more prone to using SNS. Although the sample of participants was taken from across the country, the data is not necessarily representative of all adolescents. The study did not include Latinx youth, which suggests a large inconsistency in the data.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Boys | Girls	SNS Total		Tumblr		Facebook	
ATWS	.323**	.113**	.381**	.227**	.285**	.153**
MRAS	.424**	.206**	.445**	.248**	.343**	.201**
WSO	.405**	.185**	.458**	.246**	.330**	.205**

Boys | Girls	Twitter		Instagram		Snapchat	
ATWS	.241**	.125**	.148**	**-.094***	.202**	-.024
MRAS	.300**	.165**	.269**	.004	.284**	.092*
WSO	.301**	.161**	.212**	-.038	.268**	.060

Appendix A continued

	SNS Total	Tumblr	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Boys	3.30	2.39	3.55	2.93	3.95	3.65
Girls	3.22	1.81	3.21	2.56	4.29	4.14

Appendix B

	ATWS	MRAS	WSO
Boys	2.91	3.87	3.49
Girls	2.38	3.36	3.01