

Leah

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Peer content

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Chapter overview

This chapter introduces, illustrates, and analyses the finding that peer content (such as selfies) has a powerful influence on young people's levels of body satisfaction. Some young people are critical of peer content. At the same time, other young people experience a level of peer pressure to modify their health-related behaviours to look a certain way. The chapter argues that social media is a powerful educational resource that can open up dialogue about the body. Resilience can be developed by supporting young people to engage with peer content and by encouraging peers to offer support and critical insights.

A digitally animated case study video of the evidence presented in this chapter can be accessed from: <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3061/>

Chapter structure and underpinning evidence

This chapter is organised into three main sections. In Section One a narrative of a young person – Leah – is presented to tell the story from young people's perspectives about the ways in which social media intensify the opportunities for peer comparison. The narrative was constructed from an extensive data set (as detailed in Chapter 1) and illustrates the voices and experiences of over 1,300 young people in the UK. Direct quotes from the data are shown in quotation marks. In Section Two – stakeholder response – an interpretation of the narrative and recommended actions for research, policy, and practice are provided. The profile of the stakeholder group was international, multi-sector, and multi-disciplinary and included teachers, international academics (UK, Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain, Australia, China), and trusts/organisations in the UK (such as NHS, Youth Sport Trust) that have a focus on youth health and wellbeing. The stakeholder group watched a digital animated video of the case study narrative¹ and collaborated to produce the response during a one-day workshop (as detailed in Chapter 1). In Section Three, the key messages that emerge from the narrative and the stakeholder response are summarised.

Section One: young person's narrative – Leah

Leah says she uses social media ‘every second’ of ‘everyday’. On Instagram she *follows* ‘meme accounts’, ‘football accounts’ and, as she is a big Aston Villa fan – she *follows* all the ‘Villa Players’. However, Leah says that the point of using Instagram is for ‘mainly just your friends’ and to follow your ‘friends’. By using social media Leah can always see what her friends are doing. Most of the things that she likes on Instagram are ‘friends’ posts’, and she is far more likely to regram (re-share) one of her friend’s posts than a post made by a celebrity. *Leah follows accounts outside her peer network, but the main purpose of using social media is to look at and share her friends’ posts.*

Leah’s engagement with social media for health

Leah’s friends post to Instagram all the time. They post about ‘everything’, literally ‘everything’. They post things like ‘I woke up today, this is my breakfast’ or just ‘if they are going out’. Because Leah’s friends post to social media all the time, she always knows what they are doing. Some of the boys post pictures of themselves ‘being in the gym’ with ‘#gymlad’ or ‘#gains’. Some of the girls post pictures in their ‘bikinis’. If they have a ‘good figure’ then they want to ‘show it off’. Leah doesn’t post Instagram pictures of herself though. She ‘feels very self-conscious about her body’ and ‘wonders how people will react’. She doesn’t think that her figure is ‘what people want to see’ and fears others might ‘mock it’. *Leah’s friends that she follows post images of themselves in the gym or of their bodies, to show off. Yet, Leah does not post images of her body because she feels too self-conscious and wants to avoid potential ridicule.*

Leah thinks that the ‘skinny girls’ are the worst. The ‘skinny girls’ aren’t girls that Leah is friends with, but she follows them on Instagram. The ‘skinny girls’ are a similar age, and she sometimes sees them at school. Leah says that the ‘skinny girls’ are the type of girls who post to social media to ‘find out what people think of them’. These girls know that their figures are ‘better than others’ and they just do it for ‘attention’. They often caption their images with ‘chunky monkey’ or ‘my thighs are big, damn it’. They say, ‘oh, I’m so fat, I’m so fat’ and ‘they’re literally like super skinny’. Leah says that the ‘skinny girls’ are always ‘saying bad stuff about their figures’ and they are constantly ‘sticking out their pelvis’ in photos, ‘pretending to be fat’. The thing is, ‘they clearly know their figure isn’t that bad, otherwise they wouldn’t have posted the picture in the first place’. *Leah sees posts made by other girls her age of their bodies, and these are often ‘skinny girls’ with good figures. Leah thinks these ‘skinny girls’ post to social media for attention and to find out what people think of them.*

Leah is ‘really pissed’ with the ‘skinny girls’. She says that they just think about themselves and they don’t realise how ‘posting one picture can make someone feel insecure about themselves’. Leah looks at the ‘skinny girls’ posts and thinks that her own figure ‘is 10 times worse’. It makes Leah feel that she is ‘not adequate’ or not ‘good enough’. She says that what the skinny girls post

puts ‘pressure on you’ to look a certain way. For some young people it can be really bad. They might feel ‘so pressured and obsessed to be that way that they might get unhealthy’, ‘maybe anorexic’. *The skinny girls Leah follows don’t think about the impact of their posts on others and how their posts could lead others to suffer emotional and physical harm.*

Leah sees ‘loads’ of posts on Instagram of celebrities who are ‘skinny’ or who have ‘perfect’ ‘hour glass figures’. But because the ‘skinny girls’ are ‘her age’ and ‘she knows them’, it makes her feel worse. It makes you feel like ‘oh, I want to look like that’. Leah knows it’s a form of ‘peer pressure’ and the images are wrong, but she can’t escape it. It’s different from being face-to-face at school; it’s ‘proper peer pressure’. It’s a ‘bigger problem than cyber bullying’, she says. ‘Cyber bullying is a lot more noticeable than peer pressure’. You can see cyber bullying, through the comments. But the images you see are a ‘bigger’ form of peer pressure. It can ‘make you think that you should do something’ in order to look a certain way. Leah feels as though *the images posted by the skinny girls are a powerful form of peer pressure and it makes her feel that she should do something to look a certain way.*

Leah Snapchatted her friend Chloe about the ‘skinny girls’ posts and how they ‘basically just want attention’. Chloe replied by telling Leah that her attacks on the skinny girls make Chloe ‘feel really uncomfortable’ because she is ‘naturally really slim’. Chloe tells Leah that people are always saying to her ‘oh, you’re too skinny, you need to eat more’. It makes Chloe feel that people ‘just don’t like her body’. Chloe says that this isn’t fair because ‘it’s not like skinny is the kind of body that she wants’. Chloe adds, your body shape ‘is not something that you can really help’. Chloe sympathises with the skinny girls and she tells Leah to think how ‘people read posts in different ways’. Chloe suggests that the ‘skinny girls’ might not be posting to social media for attention, as Leah thinks. *Leah’s friend Chloe responds to the skinny girls posts in a different way. Chloe sympathises with the skinny girls and she encourages Leah to look at the ‘skinny girls’ post in a different way and to think differently about how people making posts to social media may feel.*

Narrative summary

Leah uses social media to **look at and share her friends’ posts**. Leah’s friends that she follows post **images of themselves in the gym or of their bodies, to show off**. Leah **does not post images** of her body because she feels **too self-conscious** and wants to **avoid potential ridicule**. Skinny girls, that often have good figures, tend to post images of their bodies the most. Leah thinks that these girls post images of their bodies for attention and to **find out what people think of them**. The images posted by the skinny girls are a powerful form of **peer pressure** and it **makes Leah feel that she should do something to look a certain way**. Leah thinks that the skinny girls **don’t think about the impact of their posts on others**. Yet Leah’s friend – Chloe – sympathises with the skinny girls, and highlights that the girls might not be posting for attention. Chloe

encourages Leah to look at the ‘skinny girls’ post in a different way and to think differently about how people making posts to social media may feel.

Section Two: stakeholder response

Young people’s constant exposure to images of bodies shared by peers on social media encourages peer comparison and this can lead to heightened levels of body dissatisfaction. To address potentially negative impacts, young people need to be supported to develop their resilience to these forms of peer content. Resilience can be developed through supporting young people to be empathetic towards the material posted by peers and by celebrating diversity in different body shapes and sizes. In this sense, social media is a powerful educational resource and should be used to open up dialogue about health and the body. Peer-to-peer support is also vital for young people, and schools/teachers and parents/guardians should ensure that appropriate pathways for peer support are in place.

Peer comparison

Social comparison is a common and expected behaviour of young people of a similar age to Leah. Young people often seek out and use information from others as a way to learn about how they should be and act. In many respects, social comparison is an activity that should be encouraged and supported – rather than prevented – as it is key to young people’s development. Social comparison is a fundamental activity from which young people learn and find their place in society.

The narrative highlights the negative consequences of social comparison as a result of the information young people access and attend to on social media. For Leah, comparing her body to others who were of the same age but of a different shape and size led to feelings that are associated with body dissatisfaction. *Peer-to-peer body comparison* on social media can therefore be interpreted as a risky behaviour. As Leah suggested, peer-to-peer body comparison had a much more powerful influence on her levels of body dissatisfaction than celebrities or other individuals who were not of a similar age. Comparing oneself to others who are of the same age, gender, similar context or school, is extremely powerful. As a result, peer-to-peer comparison on social media is likely to be unhelpful for some young people in their efforts to construct nuanced understandings about how to be healthy.

The new understandings this narrative generates go beyond the issues of social or peer-to-peer body comparison, despite this being the strongest message. We know a lot about the negative consequences of social and peer comparison from a relatively large international evidence-base. The new message is that social media intensifies the experience of peer-to-peer body comparison. Through large peer networks and as a result of being constantly connected to social media (as evident in Chapter 2), young people are exposed to more

images, photos, and videos of their peers' bodies than has been previously possible in face-to-face environments. This increased exposure to peer content increases the levels of peer-to-peer comparison and, for some young people, this is likely to be a harmful consequence of engaging with social media.

Resilience

Young people are not going to abandon their phones or stop using social media; these activities are woven into the very fabric of contemporary youth culture. At the same time, it is impractical for adults to continuously monitor social media use in an effort to address risky behaviours. Both the pace of technological development and the fact that young people are in the vanguard of technology adoption make adult oversight difficult and even undesirable. In addition, it is unlikely that most adults will be able to provide support to young people to help them to deal with every negative piece of content that they experience on social media, given the huge volume of posts young people see and attend to. Instead, young people need to be equipped with the skills and qualities they require to engage with digital/online media safely.

A key quality that becomes evident from the narrative is resilience. Young people need to be able to 'bounce back' from the constant and unfettered exposure to images, photos, and videos of their peers' bodies and the impact these can have on levels of body dissatisfaction. To support the development of resilience, empathy is important. As identified in the dialogue between Chloe and Leah, some young people need a deeper understanding of the reasons why some people post 'perfect pictures' and why others may not. Equally, young people need to be supported to celebrate diversity and not reject it.

In the narrative, Chloe was empathetic to the skinny girls because she could relate to their body shape and size. Chloe had resilience in this context because she was able to understand that the skinny girls' posts were a potential reflection of their lower levels of self-esteem and that the skinny girls used social media as a resource to strengthen their positive feelings of self. On the other hand, Leah was critical of the skinny girls. She interpreted the skinny girls' posts as a somewhat selfish activity that was undertaken to make other young people her age feel bad about their bodies. Leah's critical actions exemplify the need to support young people to be more empathetic as a way of building resilience and to help young people to deal with the unfettered exposure to pictures, images, and videos of their peers' bodies.

Considerations

Social media is a powerful educational resource

Social media has the potential to be a *powerful educational resource* to support young people's development. With appropriate support, young people's exposure to the vast amounts of information available about health, and specifically

the body, can be used to build resilience and develop empathetic understanding. Schools/teachers and parents/guardians should use this material, given its relevance in young people's lives and its impact on some young people's behaviours, cognitions, and emotions. Social media material can be used to open up dialogue about health and the body and to support young people's understandings of the reasons underpinning people's actions on social media and in wider society. In this sense, social media material can be used as an educational resource to build resilience and empathy, and has the potential to impact offline and online behaviours.

Peer-to-peer support is an important mechanism to support young people's uses of social media material

Peer-to-peer support is vital. Peers are highly influential in young people's lives. Clearly, young people can learn from peers and listen and respond to each other's actions. In terms of social media, young people have a greater contextual understanding of social media environments than adults, as well as an appreciation of the ways in which social media is used and the meanings ascribed to different social media material. Adults should appreciate the power of peer support and accept that young people will often turn to their peers instead of their teachers and/or parents/guardians. Young people often regard adults as

Table 4.1 Key messages about peer content

Characteristics of Young People's Uses of Social Media for Health	Young people view content posted and shared by their peers on social media. Images of the body posted by peers can, for some young people, act as a form of peer pressure, and encourage young people to think that they should change their health-related behaviours to look a certain way. Some young people do not experience peer pressure, as they understand or are able to make judgements on the potential reasons why some of their peers or other young people their age post particular content to social media.
Stakeholder Response Focused on Young People's Uses of Social Media for Health	Young people's constant exposure to images shared by peers of their bodies encourages peer comparison and this can lead to heightened levels of body dissatisfaction. Comparing oneself to others who are of the same age, gender, and from a similar context or school is extremely powerful and may not be helpful for some young people in constructing nuanced understandings about how to be a healthy young person. Resilience to such risks should be developed through supporting young people to be empathetic of the material posted by peers and through the celebration of diversity.
Considerations for Research, Policy, and/or Practice	Social media is a powerful educational resource. Peer-to-peer support is an important mechanism to support young people's uses of health-related social media.

unapproachable for discussions about social media because they lack the knowledge and skills that young people would respect. As a way of better supporting young people to use social media safely and critically, adults need to provide pathways for young people to access peer support. In schools, vertical tutoring systems could be an option and/or the use of social media representatives. At home, dialogue between siblings about social media should be supported.

Section Three: key messages from the case

This case suggests that peer content (such as selfies) has a powerful influence on young people's levels of body satisfaction. It has also been suggested that social media is a powerful educational resource that can open up dialogue about the body. Resilience can be developed by supporting young people to engage with peer content and by encouraging peers to offer support and critical insights.

Note

1 The digital animated case study narrative video of Leah can be accessed here: <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3061/>