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# “The Impact of Social Media use and Social Comparison in Egyptian Youth”

*By*

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## **Abstract**

Communication ecologies are complex as they entail dynamic processes through which media texts are generated, circulated and consumed. Media content have a dual existence; they are configurations of symbolic elements, discourses whose meaning is constituted in the acts of interpretation by consumers. Once brought into being by some commonality of virtual experiences, audiences show a remarkable capacity to turn visual into genuine socialites. Visual use of photography found on social media and social networking sites- SNS- have enhanced our understanding of how users interpret existing visual representations. Audience have an active and powerful role in interpreting media content in part because they come to media in a context, a situation that frames such interpretations and perception they make out of symbols.

Given that dissemination of culture through media is already differentiated by age, gender, class, ethnicity, language, status, education, and other distinctions; An understanding of the variables that impact social networking users is needed. Mass communication scholars alongside anthropologists- as students of culture- are currently employing cultural context to the technologies, messages, content and most importantly impact on those who produce and/or consume media. The purpose of this study is to investigate youth’s experiences of social media use and possible outcomes from such consumption process. Granted that social media have positive effects, this study, however, is more concerned with one negative side effect that may arise from social media consumption: social comparison. Social comparison allows users to compare themselves based on content found on social media platforms. This study will explore the relationship between social media use and social comparison. Directing visual content as the main element that trigger the comparison process based on what the individuals’ network share on SNS platforms, especially social networking sites (SNS).

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## Introduction

As means of communication, as rudiments for civilizations, and as resources for cultural action; media have become vital element in daily life rhythm. Media as a form of expressive culture, relates to the public display of symbols or enactment of symbolic action. Also explained by William Beeman as 'expressive culture', elaborating on the consumption and practices through which people enact, display, and manipulate symbolic materials "with the implicit [or explicit] expectations that other individuals will be directly affected by such presentations" (Beeman, 1982). However, such presentations maybe altered as it is processed and/or consumed based on the medium's technology. Media content is highly-connected to social life patterns in various and complex ways. Any media content is vital in revealing the intentions of senders, expectations of receivers, as well as a manifestation of implicit and explicit social relations. Although the reader may be treated as a relatively passive decoder of information, the exposure and contact with visual content will shape his or her values, norms, and actions. Mass communication messages encode a deep structure of ideological or psychological meanings (Peterson, 2003).

Communication ecologies are complex and entail dynamic processes through which media texts are generated, circulated and consumed. Media content have a dual existence. They are, on one hand, configurations of symbolic elements, and discourses whose meaning is constituted in the acts of interpretation by consumers. Once brought into being by some commonality of virtual experiences, audiences show a remarkable capacity to turn visual into genuine socialites (Peterson, 2003). Nevertheless, audience have an active and powerful role in interpreting media content in part because they come to media in a context, a situation that frames such interpretations and perception they make out of symbols. Visual use of photography found on social media and social networking sites- SNS- have enhanced our

understanding of how users interpret existing visual representations. Better understanding needs to be applied to visual content considering how today's electronic technologies are consumed and appropriated in the practices and discourses of contemporary culture and society.

In today's digital environment, social media and SNS had tremendous impact on our culture ecosystem. These networking tools have revolutionized the means through which people are able to communicate and socialize, moreover, it is important to better understand the means through which this virtual social phenomenon is impacting how we think and feel about others and ourselves. Despite the plethora of research on social media usage in general, there is a scarcity of research that examines the complex relationships between social media consumption and corresponding impact on individual characteristics like psychological well-being on online social networking sites (SNS) in Arab World.

#### **Research Aim and Statement of Significance**

In a world marked by vast diasporas of people, by global flows of symbols, ideologies and cultural frameworks, new metaphors and understanding of various ecosystems are needed. In trial to fulfill such enquiry, anthropology and media scholars alike, are being forced to abandon the comfort of retro and conventional assumptions about the congruence of people and culture, and move beyond the sustained variables to better examine the advancing context, and present interpretation of the novel socio-cultural environment using objective eye and unique parameters to evolving identities.

The notion that culture and personality are fundamentally similar is common in the field of Anthropology, and probably has its clearest expression by Edward Sapir, who treats culture as the 'personality' of the society and personality as the "culture" of the individual (1985).

Hence, there is an increasing and acute need to analyze the culturally patterned human behavior in the world which reflects diverse, tailored and highly-visual expressions of basic human code of conduct (Hockings, 1995).

Given that dissemination of culture through media is already differentiated by age, gender, class, ethnicity, language, status, education, and other distinctions. Future understanding of the variables that impact social networking users is needed. Mass communication scholars alongside anthropologists- as students of culture- are currently employing cultural context to the technologies, messages, content and most importantly impact on those who produce and/or consume media. Contextual models are needed, that allow a better examination to the interplay between technologies, social formations and cultural diffusion of content through media (old or new).

The purpose of this study is to investigate youth's experiences of social media use and possible outcomes from such consumption process. Granted that social media have positive effects, this study, however, is more concerned with one negative side effect that may arise from social media consumption which is: social comparison. Social comparison allows users to compare themselves based on content found on social media platforms. This study will explore the relationship between social media consumption and social comparison. Directing visual content as the main element that trigger the comparison process based on what the individuals' network share on SNS platforms, especially social networking sites.

This investigation aims to yield greater insight into how Egyptian youth subjectively experience and assign meaning to their online social and cultural comparison. While the existing literature has discussed some aspects of the negative impact caused by social media use on overall effect on psychological well-being and body dissatisfaction, these studies have not addressed the effect of social comparison through social media platforms in particular

social networking sites with high visual content utilization, which revolves around sharing personal visual content to enhance identity appeal among users' networks.

### **Social Media**

Social media, also referred to as New Media or Web 2.0, is used to describe digitally-based communication technologies. Social media is relentlessly changing, has several facets, and applies to many practices. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) opine that the term "web 2.0" is used to describe novel methods through which technical administrators and internet users utilize the internet. The internet in new media context is a platform whereby content and applications are not only created but modified by users in an interactive approach. The definition of what constitute social media may vary, but the result remains the same: social media innovative tools have reinvented the performance of countless social activities. Social media comes in various forms: such as: blogs, microblogging, Audio form, Video, photo, social bookmarking, news-oriented sites and finally Social Networks Sites Social (Solis, 2007). Which are websites that allows you to create a personal profile, chat, discuss and share information with others such as MySpace and Facebook.

Renowned Media scholars Boyd and Ellison (2007) have provided a thorough understanding of what constitutes SNSs. Social network sites (SNS) as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature of these connections may vary from one site to another. Some sites are created with specific and unique purpose either religious, political, entertainment, among many others. Since their introduction, SNSs have attracted millions of users; many of whom have integrated SNS' usage into their daily life

actions. Most sites support pre-existing social networks, while others aid like-minded individuals or total strangers to connect (Mackenzie, 2008).

Although SNS reached their stride in the late 2000s, they have been in existence since the late 1990s (Medoff, &Kaye, 2011). According to Boyd and Ellison, SixDegrees launched in 1997-disappeared in 2000- was chronologically the first social network. SixDegrees is categorized as the first SNS as it was the first to allow users to create personal profiles and link to friends. Between 1997 and 2001: AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and LiveJournal were launched, allowing users to create professional, personal and dating profiles (Magolnick, 2010). The early 2000s brought a huge development in social media in particular social networking. Friendster (2002) operated by allowing people to discover their friends and then friends-of-friend. Friendster was meant to compete with a similar website, -Match.com- another famous online dating site (Cohen, 2003).

### **Facebook**

Due to its design, Facebook is considered the most influential SNS. It is the third biggest "country" on Earth, in terms of population, and if things keep going as they are, it will soon have more users than India has people (Naughton, 2011). Facebook started in 2004, when -at the time- student Mark Zuckerberg commenced a platform which renovated the traditional method of informing freshman about universities, presenting one of the most popular SNS: Facebook, which in 2010 had more than 500 million active users.

Facebook provides both an interesting and unique venue to study social comparison, the process of developing subjective assessments of one's opinion and ability by making comparisons to other persons (Festinger, 1954 as cited in Solomon 2016). Utilizing a computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment, Facebook as a SNS tool diverges from

traditional face-to-face contexts examined in past social comparison research; the affordances of the social media site may thereby impact social comparison activity and consequences. Considering the breadth of self-centered multimedia content that can be both displayed and accessed on Facebook, the site may enable abundant opportunities for social comparison.

### **Consuming Media and New Social Context**

One of media's diverse functions, is to expression social and cultural information as part of expressive culture presentation. Clifford Geertz's impeccably described public and expressive aspects of culture as: "we show ourselves to ourselves" (1973). Such depiction of culture's expressive nature has been revisited in the contemporary world of social media where content is technologically-designed, consumed, re-contextualized and subjectively interpreted. Consumption of social media's content involves a different form of integration than the collective social rituals of the community. Accordingly, it is suggested that interpretation of media's content has two distinct features: first is that new images and concepts are interpreted in terms of older concepts and images, second is that the process of interpretation itself is socially mediated.

In 1995, Thompson argued that symbolic content carried by computer-mediated technologies and the 'mediated co-presence' it facilitates interact intimately with human emotions and body. Thompson also posits that the internet -through mediated engagement- has become a common place for creating cultural experiences, relationships, and communities (Lull, 2001). With the absence of face-to-face and non-verbal features of computer-mediated communication, such as tone of voice and facial expressions, there is an increase in physical features emphasis found in visual content such as attractiveness and gender (Bargh & Mckenna, 2000). While browsing social media platforms, users are likely to see highly curated, filtered pictures strategically posted. With an emphasis on physical and visual appearance, there is a





growing interest in online social-identity representation and relation to socio-cultural comparison (Sorenson as cited in Hocking, 1995).

As declared earlier, mass media content affects our daily experience either in implicit or explicit ways, but to what extent might our media consumption affect our behavior conduct through the way we “see” others? Although social media may aid individuals to stay updated with what is going on with their friends’ life events, exposing too much content will inevitably trigger individuals to compare themselves with these visual cues they are seeing and interacting with. Broadly speaking there are diverse ways of ‘seeing’ within different cultural context that are shaped by the ideas, interests, social institutions and technologies of the era (Berger, 1972 cited in Lister et.al 2003). Peterson asks whether media content induce momentary shifts in perceptions, or do they have a long-lasting effect of our thoughts and actions. Theories that suppose a strong, overwhelming, power of the text over its consumers have always been countered by theories that see textual interpretation as shaped by the consumer’s social position, cultural knowledge, and personal mindset. It seems that regardless of which school of thought is adapted, effect of visual content will implicitly or explicitly affect users’ perception and behaviors, in particular, with regards to social comparison.

### **Online Social Comparison**

According to social comparison theory, a core component of the development of self-identity involves comparing oneself to others (Festinger, 1954 as cited in Solomon, 2016). Before the advent of social media, this form of comparison occurred with those of closest proximity, such as immediate family and friends. The phenomenon of social media has drastically enlarged the possibility for social comparison as today’s social media users can present and view digitally enhanced photos that adhere to the unrealistic beauty standard. Pictures are critical to the examination of visual communication. They provide another layer

of ethnographic data for the audience to mine and to interpret (Pink, 2007). Results from numerous studies indicate that exposure to controlled media images of beautiful, female models has a detrimental effect on women's self-concept, specifically body image (Blanchard & Mask, 2010 as cited in Solomon, 2016).

Festinger in 1954 posited 'The social comparison theory' used to explain why individuals who use social media more intensively tend to be susceptible to this behavior (Chou and Edge 2012; Johnson and Knobloch-Westerwick 2014). Generally, the theory suggests that individuals are motivated to compare themselves with others who are similar to them, in order to assess their own ability and performance. Although social comparison normally occurs in daily life, the likelihood to engage in this behavior tends to be more intense in online social media community. According to Johnson and Knobloch-Westerwick (2014), "As existing knowledge of friends' qualities and characteristics could facilitate the ease of making the desirable comparisons, social media are well situated for social comparison phenomena." In developing a sense of one's self-identity, one may engage in a process of self- evaluation through social comparison.

There are two major types of social comparison: downward social comparison and upward social comparison. Downward social comparison refers to being compared to other people who are perceived to be less fortunate in some domain, so as to enhance mood and feelings of self-worth (Suls et al., 2002). Conversely, upward social comparison serves to enhance the self by eliciting behaviors to improve oneself. In upward social comparison people are motivated to change the self to be meet the comparison standard. Researchers have identified several underlying mechanisms of social comparison including self-enhancement, maintenance of a positive self-evaluation and competition. Where all have various application and manifestations on social media platforms.

Applying the two types of social comparison to social media context; studies have shown that when up-ward comparison happens, and social media users want to improve themselves; upward comparison will lead to selfie-editing to compensate for one's weaknesses. If downward comparison arises and individuals feel satisfied with their appearance, they might be less interested in selfie-editing. In addition to that, recently, social comparison theory has been applied to the context of social media. Research indicated social media nurtured negative social comparison among individuals bring in negative effects to one's psychological well-being (de Vries and Kühne, 2015).

### **Scope of the Study**

The research supporting the notion that internet use leads to social comparison of positively enhanced images fails to discuss the long-term implications of constantly comparing oneself to others. While the existing literature has examined the negative impact of social media use on overall affect and body dissatisfaction, these studies have not addressed the effect of social comparison through social media platforms. Constant media exposure has been linked to low self-esteem, as well as, anxiety and depression, but studies have failed to find clear-cut correlations of media exposure and self-perception.

Visual images advocate virtual reality, it creates causal relationships and foster interaction (cited in Lull, 2001). Today's social media platforms are becoming more multi-model as they now host pictures, videos, hashtags, and emotions with less important given to text. In addition to that, social media platforms also allow visual images to be framed, filtered and edited before being distributed. Hence, not only do online visuals add additional information and context of a message, they also afford highly strategic and reflexive communication in order to give a particular impression of the sender.

Emerging adulthood is a developmentally significant time during which individuals develop and shape identity. If users are comparing themselves to positively altered versions of their peers and unknown online friends, it is important to examine how the experience of viewing the online profiles of others affects one's self-evaluation. Further, social media may reinforce negative social comparison by posts, "likes," and comments of idealized images (Mabe, Forney & Keel, 2014).

Youth are among the most prolific users of social network sites (SNS). Emerging studies find that youth spend a considerable portion of their daily life interacting through social media. Subsequently, questions and controversies emerge about the effects SNS have on adolescent development. This review outlines the theoretical frameworks researchers have used to understand adolescents and SNS. It brings together work from disparate fields that examine the relationship between SNS and social capital, identity, youth safety, and psychological well-being.

### **Conclusion**

According to social comparison theory, we base our self-perceptions at least partly on how we think we are doing in comparison to others (Festinger, 1954). Perceiving the self as doing worse than others leads to less favorable self-perceptions (Festinger, 1954). Importantly, evidence has emerged that among emerging adults more intense Facebook use is related to more frequent social comparison (Lee, 2014). This social comparison is predominantly negative, that is, it is associated with the feeling that other Facebook users are better off (Lee, 2014).

Furthermore, people who use Facebook more intensely are more inclined to believe that others are having better lives than they are (Chou & Edge, 2012). These findings are not surprising given the idealized self-presentation that occurs on Facebook (Manago et al., 2008).

According to social comparison theory, negative social comparison, that is, the feeling that others are better off, will specifically impact self-perceptions in the domains in which the individual sees other people doing better than he or she is doing (Festinger, 1954).

In line with this notion, experimental research has shown that viewing the Facebook profile of a peer who is physically attractive or has a successful career can have a negative impact on self-perceived attractiveness and self-perceived career success (Krämer & Winter 2008). Because emerging adults' Facebook posts and pictures frequently display the user as popular (Zhao et al., 2008) and physically attractive (Manago et al., 2008), negative social comparison on Facebook likely influences self-perceptions in the domains of social competence and physical appearance.

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