

The Cultural Influence of Social Media:

Social Media's Affects on Millennial's Self-Esteem & Behavior

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## Introduction

Social media is used by millions of people everyday and society is only becoming more reliant on it. It can be used for communicating, researching, and exploring plenty of topics. The majority of social media users take pictures, show off special and important moments in their lives, and simply network with their followers. While there are more positive things that come out of using social media, one thing that is affected are people's self-esteem. Millennials use social media more often than any other age group and they can be influenced by the content they see. Specifically on Instagram and Snapchat, there are images of people who come across as perfect, and that can make the younger generation compare themselves to people on social media. In this case, I have decided to research on how social media can affect millennial's self esteem. The purpose of this paper is to research on what content affects their self esteem, how social media influences their mindsets, and how they can overcome negative self esteem.

This topic is important to discuss because millennials are the next generation to take over the workforce and be in the world. The mindsets they have will shape or destroy the future generations after them. In every era, there are different fads, music, movies and other influential events that pave the way for history. Since social media is still a new networking tool, researching its purpose and pros and cons is very valuable. The true purpose of social media is to connect with your followers. Over time, social media has evolved and now people can view more content than before with millions of people around the world. This can be a blessing and a curse, because young minds are more influenced by social media than other media outlets. Instead of using credible news sources, millennials receive a lot of their information from social media. If young girls see more images of half-naked women versus educated self-respecting women, it will nega-

tively shape their minds and actions. Digging deeper into this topic will help discover why social media is more of an influencer for the younger generations.

Throughout this research paper, there will be comparisons of researchers that have conducted research on social media and millennials, the pros and cons of social media, and statistics behind social media influencing self esteem( both negative and positive). Along with the statistics, there will be an in depth focus group that will give the paper real opinions and data. The academic articles found are filled with facts and research from academic scholars who have researched this as well. I plan on finding out the facts behind this theory of the effects that social media has on millennials.

### **Literature Review**

Throughout the articles reviewed, scholars have tried to understand the correlation between self esteem and social media. Millennials use social media everyday to connect with their peers, but the question remains whether or not the content they view is beneficial for them. Self-expression values have increased in the last four decades, especially among millennials (Orehek&Human, 2017,p. 60). One way that millennials use social media in positive light is through self-expression. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook allow users to share their personal lives in various ways. Posting pictures, videos, and statements on these websites lets everybody express themselves freely. Orehek and Human both did studies to show that people are relying heavily on social media platforms to express themselves positively and accurately. During their study, they used “targets” to discover how people can be viewed more positively on social media accounts.

While women were viewed as less positive with their self esteem and provided more anxious content, men were the opposite. They portrayed themselves as more masculine and independent with their context. Specifically, Twitter is a platform that uses words to go back and forth with followers. The content that users say on their profiles gives others an insight into their personality and who they portray themselves to be. Millennials are viewed as generation “Y” (Faculty of Economics and Business Administration). This generation has been around digital technology for most of their lives and therefore have a need to be a part of it. When someone cannot be a part of social media, they feel isolated and overtime this can have an impact on their self esteem.

First, studies show that social relationships with other people are universal human needs, critical to the psychological well-being of individuals, and all of that is taken care of with social media (Faculty of Economics and Business Administration). Social media used to only be on websites, but overtime has migrated to being on people’s phones. This change has made it even more common for people to have since a lot of people use their phones all the time throughout the day. Receiving notifications is the equivalent to communicating with people, which is a human need. Orehek and Human support the idea that without communication, a person can become depressed and feel like they are less than other people who have more friends than they do. An exploratory study that had 25 in-depth interviews with college students showed the reason they were so active in social media was simply to maintain relationships (friendships, family, and romantic). Keeping in contact with loved ones is the essential reason for people participating in websites. In addition to that, millennials use social media to seek out news, to self-promote, and to express themselves, and because it’s convenient for them in this era. It’s very uncommon for a

millennial to not use a smart phone and be a part of this movement unless they choose to be private.

In addition, social media could be harming millennials' communication in reality. It is easier to connect with strangers when there is a screen in front of you, but that does not test a person's ability to interact face-to-face. The older generations are becoming more worrisome about millennials' obsessive use of technology and there seems to be no improvements in millennials' communication skills. College students primarily use Facebook to keep in touch with friends they do not see very often and to fill up time and not be bored. Ten percent or less use it to "voice . . . opinions on various topics" or "to share . . . favorite music/video clips"; about 30% say they use it "to meet new people and to make new friends"(Twenge, 2013, p.12). There are other ways to get in touch with friends and family, but millennials would rather choose social media as their main source. Remaining active on websites instead of being active outside of the internet could hurt the generation when they have to enter the real world.

In terms of self esteem, politics is a huge topic on social media, and there is more expression online than in person. There was a study conducted in October 2008 when college students who spent the most time and had the most friends on Facebook were more likely to engage in political activity on Facebook but significantly less likely to participate in politics outside of the site. Overall, students were most likely to engage in 'lightweight' political participation on Facebook rather than in reality. (Twenge, 2013, p.12). This study that was conducted proved that the students who were active on social media were mainly active on the site, but once they logged off, they were no longer expressing their concerns or interests. Millennials are more comfortable communicating through a device, and overtime it can hurt them develop people skills. The way

millennials interact is an important factor in their lives, but if they are not excelling in social media, it will affect their self esteem.

In connection with Twenge's studies, Weiner believes that technology and social media can actually be used to benefit millennials views on politics and career planning. Since technology has altered job seeker's way of thinking, the creation of social media helps identify new trends, offerings, and influences(Weiner, 2016,p.26). The age bracket of millennials ranges from 18-34 and technology impacts their lives and views daily. According to Weiner, the average millennial spends 18 hours a day using any type of digital media(Weiner, 2016,p.26). They use digital media to research information regarding politics and careers to benefit themselves in the future. Majority of this age group use social media to market themselves for future careers and use websites like LinkedIn to give them beneficial connections. Websites like this impact millennial for career professionals, business leaders, and job seekers. Once they receive jobs and start to network, their self esteem will increase due to their lifestyles.

Current undergraduate college students are a part of the generation Y. They haven't been around technology in their adolescent stage, but they were a part of the technology generation. "The growth rate of internet specifically social media networks has extensively become popular among young adults. The term social media/social network has different connotations in the literature"( Mahadi, Jamaludin, Johari, & Fuad, 2015, p.472). College students usage of social media is different from older adults and their younger peers. Majority of students use social media to connect with more people, get informed with news, and keep in touch with people they graduated with. Students have smart phones and use that to help them academically as well. They can take notes, have group discussions through apps, and become a part of organizations through

social media. While social media is considered an enhancing tool for students, it can also become a distraction as well. A researcher named Boyd did a study and mentioned that students can spend several hours a day attending different social media sites even during their formal classes and study hours, which created distractions and reduced quality time to focus on their studies( Mahadi, Jamaludin, Johari, & Fuad ,2015,p.474). His statement is definitely correct and that is the case among most students nowadays. The usage of social media among students has increased drastically since 2005 and will continue to grow over the decades. Theorists continue to research the pros and cons of technology among generation Y, and the next section will give a deeper insight of what they found.

In comparison to Mahadi and the corresponding theorists, Zhang, Omran, and Cobanoglu says that generation Y uses social media simply to impress their peers. An important component of social influence is the acceptance of peers(Zhang, Abound Omran, & Cobanoglu ,2017,p.738). When millennials receive multiple likes on their photos and posts, it enhances their self esteem. Social media outlets allow their users to make their profiles private if the user doesn't desire thousands of likes on their posts. Majority of users make their profiles open to the public to ensure that they get thousands of likes if not simply views. Communication and dissemination of knowledge are quicker and easier with advanced technologies, consumers are able to seek and share information with anyone in the world(Zhang, Abound Omran, & Cobanoglu, 2017,p.738). A term called “ Generation Like” is being used to strategically in marketing strategies and analysis data. Millennials are the target market for social media and they know the significance of likes to millennials self esteem. The amount of “likes” received on a picture is compared to a

persons identity over the internet. Zhang, Omran, and Cobanoglu examined millennials behaviors in three major service contexts using positive, negative and service recovery scenarios.

On another note, there was a study that showed more use of social media may lead adolescents to more negative behaviors. Cyberbullying is common in today's generations due to social media and adolescents lack of self expression. Cyberbullying, in which users harass and act aggressively toward a victim online, has become common (Hawi, & Samaha, 2017, p. 577). Most people think cyberbullying comes from lack of self esteem, but in reality an addiction to social media can lead millennials to irrational thoughts. Some users cannot go an hour without keeping up with their profiles and when they cannot access it, they become irritable. They act out because their self-esteem is being negatively affected. "Self-esteem was defined as an individual's positive or negative evaluation of himself or herself. Most studies that have examined the relation between self-esteem and the use of social media sites have shown that people with low self-esteem tend to use more social media sites to enhance their self-image and self-esteem" (Hawi, & Samaha, 2017, p. 577). Interactions people have on social media equate with a person's social status. When a person feels abandoned, they will revert to cyberbullying just to make conversation. Specifically among millennials, this is an ongoing issue that leads the younger generations to drastic decision making. If there were more guidelines on social media sites, it would help this problem.

The next article covers the topic about ethnic minority audiences. While this group is more segmented, they still consist of millennials that are active in social media. Media is a powerful social agents through which individuals from minority groups learn about themselves and their group identity, in comparison with that of the majority group (Ramasubramanian, Doshi, &

Saleem, 2017,p.1879). The difference between ethnic media and social media is ethnic targets a specific ethnic group. For example, Twitter is social media, but there is also a popular culture called Black Twitter. In Black Twitter, it consists of topics, issues, and trends that black people have in common. Within this media, millennials are effected by the content of racial issues and differences. Ethnic pride is an affective component of ethnic identification and it measures the feelings of pride and admiration that someone feels toward their race because of group affiliation(Ramasubramanian, Doshi, & Saleem,2017,p.1879). This section of social media is becoming more common for millennials to see because it's a trending topic. Racial discussion is seen as more open due to current events that have taken place in society today.

Amongst social media, studies show that millennial are adapting more quickly to it than other generations. Millennials ages range from 18-29, Generation X ranges from 30-45, and Baby Boomers range from 46-64(Belhadjali, Abbasi, & Whaley ,2016,p.104).Technology started to advance in the 2000's to smart phones and the effect between social media preferences and these different generations show that the older generations are having a harder time catching on. Social media platforms like Facebook are started to become more common for the older audiences to use, since it becoming outdated for millenials. Other platforms like Twitter and Instagram are more dominant for millennials to use and comprehend how to use it better than the others. Career websites like LinkedIn are relatable for all of the generations, considering jobs are important to have. Generation X and Baby Boomers rather adapt to using platforms for career purposes rather than social status. Also, women and men were studied in this article, and it shows more women use social media than men, in certain generations. Throughout all of the generations studied, females dominated social media use. Belhadjali,Abbasi, & Whaley,,2016,p.104). This conclusion

is possibly due to females liking to take pictures, receive likes, and therefore have high self-esteem.

In comparison to Belhadjali, Abbasi, & Whaley, Tiggemann & Zaccardo did studies on social media's effects on young women. Social media is one of the main platforms that women experience body shaming. The amount of time spent engaging in Facebook "photo activity" (e.g., posting photos, viewing friends' photos), is most related to body image concerns (Tiggemann, & Zaccardo, 2015, p.62). Millennials see importance in the amount of likes and comments they receive, which makes social media become an image-based thing. A common trait millennials do is when they are not satisfied with their appearance, they won't post photos often and will untag themselves in photos they dislike. Common platforms that make women body shame themselves are Instagram and Facebook. Instagram is even as the medium for body shaming because the website circulates around images, and posting and sharing photos on private and public profiles (Tiggemann, & Zaccardo, 2015, p.62).

### **Methods**

During the focus group conducted, there were 6 participants (n=6). The participants were selected based on the topic of social media and millennials. Since majority of millennials are in college, it was a good decision to choose the participants from a University. All of these participants attend Kennesaw State University. The focus group consisted of 3 young women and 3 young men. The participants are a combination of undergraduate and graduate students. The gender divide favored women more since studies show that women are on social media more than men. All of the participants are between the ages of 18-25 (25 being the oldest), they all are

active on social media, and are all college students. One of the males was caucasian, the other two were African American. Out of the women, two were caucasian and one was African American. Two of the participants were born and raised in Georgia and the other students were from another state. These participants were selected randomly around the campus. They were found in the commons, student center, and social science building. Once they were given the overview of the study and given brief details on the questions that would be asked, they consented. The group met collectively in the Kennesaw State University library on the 2nd floor. They were provided Krispy Kreme doughnuts to thank them for their participation, and they were told the survey conducted would be anonymous, they were also given consent forms prior to starting the focus group. While engaging in conversation, a list of questions were asked to compare their views on social media and the effects it has on their self esteem. The first question asked was if they were active on social media, majority said yes. Some examples of questions asked were which social media platforms they were on the most( Instagram and Snapchat were the top two), did social media affect their self esteem, how many hours did they spend using social media, and if they ever compared themselves to their followers.

This study was quantitative and was based on personal experience and beliefs. Using nominal measurement, they all came from different backgrounds but what they have in common is that they are millennials. First, they were all given different articles about the topic of social media and millennials. The articles are the same ones used throughout this study. After reading the material, they were provided open and close ended questions for a better understanding of the questions. They were given a multiple choice survey with yes and no questions and had an open discussion for other questions. While majority of the men said that social media did not have any

impact ( negative nor positive) on their self esteem, the women in the group disagreed. They agreed with the articles they read and expressed that they use social media to enhance their social status and have more friendships. A common purpose from all participants was that social media was their main way of communication with friends and family. Also, social media is second nature to them. They have been around since smart phones were invented and therefore have been a part of the evolution of social media. After conducting the focus group, the participants gave their opinions on social media and everyone came to the conclusion that they feel it is more beneficial than bad. There are some negative effects of social media, but the main purpose they use it for is to network and remain social. The data

## **Results**

The results for this research was that social media has effects on millennials in both positive and negative connotations. The positive factors include better communication through online sources, networking, keeping up with social status, and staying in the loop. Negative factors include lack of communication in reality, low self esteem due to comparing themselves to others, and lack of importance if their social media account isn't viewed as popular. Women had more negative views towards social media than men because they use social media more. They have expressed that they compare their bodies and lifestyles to other women and it can take a toll on their emotions. Men stated that they use social media to communicate with their friends and family, but they don't compare themselves to their followers or stress about their social status. Majority of generation Y respondents felt that social media is overall a great tool to use and will only get bigger overtime. " I use social media because everyone else is and it's easy to stay in touch

that way," said one of the female participants. While self esteem does tie into social media use, there is no initial data that proves whether the results are mainly positive or negative. Millennials have become accustomed to the pros and cons and outweigh the option of using it based on their personal preferences. The initial intent of this data was to show that social media effects millennials self esteem and that data was proven. The participants helped conclude these results by participating in a detailed quantitative study and giving their input. Overall, 80% of the participants said that they would not give up social media use and find it beneficial for them. 50% of them said that social media did not affect their self esteem.

### **Discussion**

The importance of this study is to research and find how social media is affecting millennials. Social media is used for personal use, businesses, and to stay updated with any current news on any topic. Majority of millennials have become accustomed to social media and the older generations are still catching on to the movement. The positive things that come out of social media is networking, staying up to date on the news, connecting with friends and family and expressing yourself. The negative things are the content millennials choose to put on their timelines, comparing themselves to others online, and lack of communication in reality. The content shown throughout all of the media platforms differs, but overall it molds the minds of the younger generations. For some people, social media is seen as a platform to show their social status. Updating their page with photos, captions, and other personal files is for attention and social pride. Based on the feedback they get will either leave them satisfied or dissatisfied. Since majority of

their followers are their friends and family, they would prefer to remain active on social media and ignore the negative connotations. While some people believe social media is distracting millennials from communicating, it's really another way for millennials to connect with each other. The importance of the data found is that it helps other generations get the viewpoint from millennials on how they feel about social media. Researching this issue helps other generations get a better understanding of how social media and the images on platforms makes millennials view themselves and act.

The issue with this study is that it could be more descriptive in terms of social media platforms. Targeting a specific platform could help better understand the content that is provided. If this research could be done again, Instagram would be the main platform of discussion. This platform is the most popular aside from Snapchat and Facebook. The participants were a good choice, but asking them more specific questions on what content they view would help this data as well. If the participants follow pages where there are bad messages, "perfect pictures," and fake news then their self esteem would be different from a person who only follows positive message pages. The research conducted did help support the claim about social media and millennials self esteem. The only thing that is missing are whether it is more positive or negative.

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