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Shawn Davis
Pacific University

Casey Davis

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Does this avatar make me look fat? The Internet and Body Image

Posted on March 1, 2009 by Editor

By Shawn Davis, Ph.D. davissh@pacificu.edu and Casey F. Davis caseyfox@verizon.net

The Internet is considered by many to be the next untamed frontier; an uncharted territory rich in opportunity and potential. While this may be true, we travelers often bring to this ever-expanding wilderness many of the beliefs, feelings and attitudes that we hold in our settled lives. This, coupled with the oft anonymous nature of the web, serves to create an online environment wherein individuals can establish online persona that are in contrast to how they view their offline selves. They can create an online image of themselves that can compensate for perceived flaws or other characteristics they consider lacking; essentially perpetuating a disparity between their “ideal” and perceived “actual” selves. Unfortunately, one’s perception of this disparity has been linked with a host of potentially negative outcomes.

Body Image

An individual’s body image is their perception of their own physical appearance [1]. While we all have an internal representation of our physical self, a marked discrepancy between our body image and an internalized “ideal” body shape can lead to significant dissatisfaction with one’s appearance. In an examination of the outcome of such discrepancy, Monteath and McCabe found that nearly 44 percent of women express negative feelings about their bodies (as a whole and in terms of individual body parts) [2]. Also, in a 1997 survey, 56 percent of female and 40 percent of male respondents reported being dissatisfied with their overall appearance [3].

But how does one gain an internalization of an ideal body image? While a variety of factors have been identified including peer evaluation and parental influence, the media has been long considered a primary source for individuals to learn cultural ideals of how one should look. Unfortunately, both male and female representations across a variety of visual media are, for the most part, unattainable. As detailed on the Peel Public Health website [4],
- Body features in the media are enhanced with props, lighting angles, and computer techniques.
- Shapes and sizes are altered.
- Blemishes, freckles, lines, wrinkles, skin folds and any other unwanted features are edited out.
- Body features from photos of different people are combined to create the “perfect” image.
- “Body doubles” are common in films when body parts of lead actors don’t measure up to the “perfect” image.
- Photo images can be completely computer generated to fit the look of the day.

A growing body of research indicates that exposure to depictions of enhanced and often unattainable body images has been linked to loss of self-esteem, depression and the development of unhealthy eating habits [5]. According to media activist Jean Kilbourne, “Women are sold to the diet industry by the magazines we read and the television programs we watch, almost all of which make us feel anxious about our weight” [6]. The potential negative effects of unattainable perfection perpetuated through a variety of media outlets are not, however, restricted to females. Boys and men are provided similar unrealistic images of the “ideal” male as often being unrealistically (or at the least, uncharacteristically) tall, handsome and highly muscular [7].

Static Representation

The Internet has proven itself a profitable arena for advertisers [8]. This is no doubt due to the generally low cost of advertising online and the rapidly increasing rates of Internet usage around the world. In North America, approximately 74 percent of the population are reported Internet users (a 130 percent increase from 2000) and approximately 22 percent of the world’s population uses the Internet (a 305 percent increase from 2000) [9]. As individuals spend a larger proportion of their daily lives online, they are exposed to an increasing number of images promoting an ideal image of one’s physical appearance.

While this is not functionally different from imagery seen in other media, it serves to provide an additional outlet for idealized versions of physical appearance and a larger percentage of our time is spent receiving such messages. Unlike other forms of visual media, however, a particular strength of the Internet is its active and interactive nature. Active advertisement embedded within sites visited is becoming more commonplace and the line between content and advertising is often blurred.

Presentations of idealized body images, however, are not restricted to online advertising. The presentation of a body image that is largely unattainable is commonplace in online gaming and through a host of highly interactive sites such as Second Life [10] wherein the user creates their own representation to the online world.

Active Representation and Identification
Online Gaming

In an online gaming situation, when one controls the activity of a character online, one develops identification with that character, thus enhancing the internalization of characteristics that are represented. In that heroes and heroines, whose activity is controlled by the user, are, for the most part, exaggerated characterizations of idealized body representations, and thus the enhanced identification obtained through active control is potentially strengthened. As such, discrepancy between one’s perception of their own physical self and the idealized body image is made all the more clear. The message being that to be powerful, successful and desired one must look like the idealized character (and act like…but that’s a topic for another article).

This conclusion has been suggested in research comparing body satisfaction and identification with idealized others. Hofschire and Greenberg found that increased identification with models, athletes and television stars positively correlated with body dissatisfaction [11]. Also, Kansas State researchers found that gamers who viewed very muscular men or very thin women are more likely to feel self-conscious about their own physique. It was further found that simply observing the attractive game character for as little as 15 minutes could negatively impact the way the gamer viewed his or her own body [12].

Avatar Creation

The level of identification seen in manipulation of a character external to oneself is further enhanced in situations where an individual creates a representation of themselves that they control in a virtual environment. Such a representation is commonly called an avatar. The development and control of an avatar is a qualitatively more intimate activity than traditional online game play. Researchers investigating the nature of online representation have characterized an avatar as “a body that is as much a representation of self as the corporeal body” [13].

In that an individual actively creates the avatar representation, they are in control of how they want the world (albeit online) to view them. Sites such as Second Life offer an almost infinite number of possibilities of ways that one can create a representation of themselves. One is no longer bound by the limitations of physical representation. The ability to create an idealized version of oneself, however, has the potential for furthering the discrepancy between one’s ideal creation and one’s reality. For those that are subject to the negative impact of such an explicit distinction in the non-virtual world, the intimacy of identification with one’s avatar may very well be exceptionally problematic. What is an attempt to overcome one’s negative view of their physical self can easily become a reminder of perceived deficiency.

This is especially true when the line between the virtual world of Second Life and one’s physical world interact. There are times when a meeting in Second Life sparks a relationship that individuals carry over into their offline existence [14]. The pressure of revealing one’s true self to another met online can easily exacerbate negative feelings that one has regarding their physical self, especially when the creation of their avatar representation was an attempt to overcome perceptions of physical deficiency.
Conclusions

The purpose of this article is not to imply that all individuals who engage in online portrayal of an alternate self are likely to suffer from the negative outcomes detailed above. However, it is meant to demonstrate yet another way that individuals are open to a negative self-evaluation that may very well carry with it the impact seen in other forms of idealization, a method that is potentially more influential given the active creation and representation afforded by the Internet. As with many other influences on our conceptualization of self, this is an area that is in need of continued and detailed research.

The Internet remains a frontier rich in opportunity for self-expression. It is, however, a frontier within which we carry our dreams, desires and very human insecurities.

ENDNOTES


Editor
on March 1, 2009 at 6:19 PM said:

Poster Name: Cal Murray
Message: You raise some excellent points about body image and the media. I guess the questions to ponder are, does the media make most of us fat because we give up knowing we can’t live up to the standards seen in the media, or does the media keep most of us thinner than we’d be otherwise because of the higher standards we see out there? Cal @ informaroo

community
on February 4, 2014 at 10:15 AM said:

While you are driving a private jet, it is extremely essential wear shoes which are comfortable and just removable. It is possibly you’ll want to contemplate them off after under-going security checks. Sandals or flip-flops are footwear which is well suited for traveling.

Cheryle
on February 5, 2014 at 8:44 AM said:

hello there and thank you for your information – I’ve certainly picked up anything new from right here. I did however expertise some technical points using this site, since I experienced to reload the website lots of times previous to I could get it to load correctly.
I had been wondering if your hosting is OK? Not that I am complaining, but slow loading instances times will often affect your placement in google and can damage your high-quality score if advertising and marketing with Adwords. Well I am adding this RSS to my e-mail and could look out for a lot more of your respective exciting content.

Make sure you update this again soon.