

The Role of Emotional Stability in the Relationship between Social Media Use and Body Image

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Abstract

Introduction: *Body image and social media are key issues in today's society. In the technological era, it is easily observed that the use of social media increases among the population. Statistics from 2020 underline the fact that social platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube or Instagram independently own over 1,500 million users, Facebook alone owning in the previous year most users from the entire world (Statista, 2020). As a result, social media occupies an important role in the individuals' lives and consumes more and more time in their daily activities, thus influencing in a significant way their actions, their interactions and the way they perceive themselves and others.*

Objectives: *This paper investigates how emotional stability shapes the dynamics between the intensity of social network use and individuals' body image.*

Methods: *The sample consisted of 243 individuals ($M = 34.63$; $SD = 18.271$), both female and male. Data was collected via Google Forms and participation was voluntary. The instruments applied for research purposes were: The Body Appreciation Scale-2; The Social Networking Activity Intensity Scale – SNAIS; and Factor IV [Emotional Stability] 10-item.*

Results: *There were two categories of activities in the social media testing: social and entertainment. The results showed that emotional stability mediated both the relationship between social activities and body image ($B = .23$, $p < .001$) and the relationship between entertainment activities on social networks and body image ($B = .41$, $p < .001$). Significant correlations were found between the frequency of engaging in social activities and body image ($r = .197$; $p < .01$), frequency of entertainment activities and body image ($r = .151$; $p < .05$), between emotional stability and frequency of social activities ($r = -.220$; $p < .001$) and between emotional stability and frequency of entertainment activities ($r = -.193$; $p < .01$).*

Conclusions: *The present study found that engaging in various activities on social networks contributes to a positive self-image indirectly, as emotional instability decreases. Also, limitations and implications of the study are discussed.*

Keywords: *social activities, entertainment activities, Big Five Model, factors of personality, self-image, self-esteem, body positivity, body satisfaction, subjective well-being, life satisfaction*

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I. Introduction

As we well know, the social platforms enable users to create personal profiles through which they can post information, pictures, videos, and communicate with friends, these types of platforms having a socialization component, as well as an information sharing component (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), which makes their use more widespread and favors spending relatively more time on them throughout our daily activities.

However, we also need to think about the reasons why people use social media on a daily basis and why they continue to use it, even if it takes them a lot of the time they have available in a day. According to the gratification theory (Katz, Gurevitch & Hass, 1973, apud Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014), people spend time on social media to meet specific needs. Among these we can mention cognitive needs (accumulation of information), emotional needs (the feeling of pleasure), personal identity ones (integrity, social status), the needs of integration and social interaction, and, also, the need for daily escape (Katz, Gurevitch & Hass, 1973, apud Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014). There are also other reasons why people use social media, such as the passage of time, the desire to escape, amusement, relaxation, information and knowledge gathering, and social interaction (Rubin, 1981, apud Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014).

Over time, there has been a lot of discussion about the effect of social networks on people and how this effect is manifested. It has been found that there is a link between the intensity of social media use and loneliness, satisfaction with one's own life, self-esteem, depression, but a stronger link has been highlighted between social media and the internalization of an ideal body image (Appel, Maker & Gnambs, 2019).

Although many studies underline the negative effects that social media can have on people's mental health (Frison & Eggermont, 2017; Verduyn et al., 2015; Hogue & Mills, 2019), there are also studies in which results show that social media is not associated with the increase in the level of certain psychological problems (Coyne et al., 2020). The 8-year longitudinal study by Coyne and his collaborators consisted of a sample of 500 teenagers aged 13 to 20, and it examined the association of the time spend on social media and depression or anxiety, on an individual level, suggesting that such an association does not exist.

Even when the use of social networks correlates negatively with body image, it is important to study the phenomenon carefully to find out the conditions in which its presence is favorable. One such study by Hogue and Mills (2019) showed that when

people interact on social media with attractive people that they do not know, they tend to experience a decline in satisfaction with their body; however, an important aspect is that when people interact with the posts of family members or acquaintances, there is no decrease in satisfaction with body image.

Communication has a key role to play in forming and maintaining the body image, and social networks are often channels through which social beauty standards and social expectations are suggested and portrayed (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, studies on this topic have shown that social networks play an important role in how females relate to their body (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014), males being also influenced by this dynamic (Thornborrow et al., 2020).

If, in women's case, the ideal is a slim body (Dalley et al., 2009; Hogue & Mills, 2019; Jones & Buckingham, 2005), in men's case, the findings frequently point to social standards requiring a toned, muscular body (Thornborrow et al., 2020).

However, we also need to take into account the elements that might arise and influence the dynamic between social media activities and the body image, in order to have a clear view of this process. A particularly important factor that can influence this relationship is the personality, from which we remember the dimension of emotional stability as the most relevant in the context of this study.

Emotional stability, formerly referred to as "Neuroticism", is one of the five factors of personality in the Big Five Model, along with Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 2008), and it is an important predictor of happiness and satisfaction with life (DeNeve & Copper, 1998). Personality traits influence the way individuals choose to relate to the activities they do and, at the same time, to their own person (McCrae & Costa, 2008).

Thus, high levels of emotional stability are associated with high levels of well-being, emotional stability being also associated with happiness or depression (Hayes & Joseph, 2003). Emotional stability is the most important personality factor in terms of subjective well-being, and is a more important factor even than extraversion (Vittersø, 2001).

Looking from another perspective, McCrae and Costa (2008) demonstrate that low levels of emotional stability are associated with pessimism, perfectionist tendencies, and low self-esteem. At the same time, people with a low level of emotional stability tend to be irritable, unconfident, anxious, stressed and can often experience negative emotions (Gosling et al., 2003).

Another significant aspect to note is that various studies have shown that emotionally stable people live longer, and people with low emotional stability have a higher risk of death and illness, because it is well-known that they often tend to experience negative emotions, anxiety, depression and anger, which affect their mental health and the quality of life (Terracciano et al., 2008).

Taking into account the results of these studies, we also need to focus on the association between emotional stability and body image levels.

Various studies from literature have shown that low levels of emotional stability are negatively associated with body satisfaction (Allen & Walter, 2016; Dalley, Buunk & Umit, 2009), which may be an important starting point in studying how the body image is developed and maintained.

One of the most relevant studies that has highlighted the role that emotional stability has in the relationship between the use of social networks and the satisfaction with one's own body is the one conducted by Dalley et al. (2009), results showing that exposure to images with a slim body ideal on social networks is associated with dissatisfaction with one's own body, which is stronger for people with low emotional stability. It should be noted that this effect differs from person to person, due to individual differences (Dalley et al., 2009). An interesting aspect of this phenomenon is the fact that women can experience the assimilation effect and thus be more satisfied with their body and make a positive assessment. However, we cannot overlook the fact that self-esteem moderates this effect, and assimilation is more often manifested in people with high self-esteem (Jones & Buckingham, 2005).

II. Method

Objectives

The present study aims to investigate how the intensity of use of social media influences the body image, taking into account emotional stability. Also, this study aims to investigate how the active social media presence and the types of online activities affect the perception of one's body, in order to understand the phenomena behind this dynamic and how people can best manage the use of social networks so that it does not produce negative effects on the perception of one's own person and body.

Participants

The study was conducted on a sample of 243 people in the Romanian population, aged from 18 to 77

($M = 34.63$; $SD = 18.271$), both male (22.2%) and female (77.8%), with high-school (30.9%), post-secondary (0.4%), university (66.7%) and post-university (2.0%) studies. Participants were selected through a convenience sample method, by posting an ad on a social network and requesting voluntary participation. Participants signed the informed consent and were assured on the confidentiality of the information, bringing to their attention the purpose of the study, duration, methods used and, at the same time, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences, as well as the right to request additional details by e-mail.

Instruments

The instruments used in this research were represented by 3 scales for the following constructs: appreciation of the body image, intensity of the use of social networks and emotional stability.

The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2, Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015) consists in 10 items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, ranging from labels of never (scored as 1) and always (scored as 5). This scale aims to assess the way a person relates to his or her body ("I take a positive attitude towards my body"; "I am comfortable in my body"; "I respect my body"; "I feel like I am beautiful even if I am different from media images of attractive people"), and also the way a person appreciates the different characteristics of their body ("I feel that my body has at least some good qualities"; "I appreciate the different and unique characteristics of my body").

The Social Networking Activity Intensity Scale (SNAIS) (Li et al., 2016) was used to measure the intensity of the social networks use. It includes two subscales, the Social Function Use Intensity (SFUI) and Entertainment Function Use Intensity (EFUI). The questionnaire begins with the question "In the last month, how often have you done the following online social activities?", followed by 14 items rated on a Likert scale from 0 to 5, ranging from labels of never (scored as 0) to always (scored as 5).

To measure emotional stability within the five dimensions of personality, Factor IV [Emotional Stability] was used, a scale consisting of 10 items, scored with a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement (Gosling et al., 2003). The items target the way in which a person tends to relate to the events around them and their own experiences (for example: "I am easily disturbed"; "I am relaxed most of the time"; "I get upset easily"; "I have frequent mood swings"; "I often feel blue").

Procedure

Following the voluntary involvement in this research, the participants were provided training and the 3 scales were applied: on body image, social media activities and emotional stability. The participants were asked to respond honestly and choose the option that best fits their psychological reality. It is important to note that there was no time limit, any volunteer had to possibility to take as much time as they needed to fill in the scales.

III. Results

The relationship between the body image and the frequency of activities on social media

Between the body image and the frequency of social activities there is a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = .197$; $p < .01$). There is also a statistically significant positive correlation between the body image and the frequency of entertainment activities on social networks ($r = .151$; $p < .05$).

The relationship between the emotional stability and the frequency of activities on social media

Between the emotional stability and the frequency of social activities there is a statistically significant negative correlation ($r = -.220$; $p < .001$), which implies that emotionally stable people tend to carry out social networking activities more frequently on these platforms. There is also a negative correlation between emotional instability and frequency of entertainment activities ($r = -.193$; $p < .01$), which means that emotional stable people often perform entertainment activities online.

The mediating role of emotional stability in the relationship between the frequency of social activities and body image

In order to test the mediation effect of emotional stability it is important to initially see if the necessary conditions are met (significant statistical correlations between the variables of the mediation model). As shown, there is a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of social activities and emotional stability ($r = -.220$, $p < .001$); a significant correlation between the frequency of social activities and the body image ($r = .197$, $p < .01$).

As the necessary conditions are met, we can test the mediating role of emotional stability in the relationship between the frequency of social activities online and the body image. Table 1 shows the regression

equation coefficients for the relationship between social activities and emotional stability, the relationship between emotional stability and body image, and the relationship between social activities and body image.

For the relationship between social activities and emotional stability, the results indicate that the frequency of social activities is an important predictor of emotional stability ($B = -.182$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = -.220$, $t = -3.52$, $p < .001$). For the relationship between emotional stability and body image, results have shown that emotional stability is also an important predictor for body image ($B = .385$, $SE = .06$, $\beta = .395$, $t = 6.66$, $p < .001$).

Table 2 shows the regression equation coefficients for the direct, indirect and total effect.

The direct effect between the frequency of social activities and the body image, after controlling emotional stability, is statistically significant ($B = .23$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = .28$, $t = 4.80$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect is statistically significant ($B = -.07$, $p < .01$) and the total is also statistically significant ($B = .16$, $p < .01$). Because the direct effect is statistically significant, it is argued that emotional stability partly mediates the relationship between the frequency of social activities and the body image. Thus, it can be stated that the frequency of online social activities predicts the level of emotional stability, as well as the frequency of social activities and the level of emotional stability have an effect on the image of the body.

As the indirect effect of the mediation model is negative, it can be assumed that the high frequency of social activities contributes to a positive image of itself indirectly as emotional instability decreases.

The mediating role of emotional stability in the relationship between the frequency of entertainment activities and the body image

Table 3 shows the regression equation coefficients for the relationship between entertainment and emotional stability, the relationship between emotional stability and body image, and the relationship between entertainment and body image activities.

For the relationship between entertainment activities and emotional stability, the results indicated that the frequency of entertainment activities is an important predictor of emotional stability ($B = -.360$, $SE = .12$, $\beta = -.193$, $t = 3.07$, $p < .01$). For the relationship between emotional stability and body image, results have shown that emotional stability is also an important predictor for body image ($B = .366$, $SE = .059$, $\beta = .375$, $t = 6.25$, $p < .001$).

Table 4 shows the direct, indirect and total effect of the mediation model.

The direct effect between the frequency of entertainment activities and the body image, after controlling emotional stability is statistically significant ($B = .41$, $SE = .11$, $\beta = .22$, $t = 3.73$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect is statistically significant ($B = -.13$, $p < .01$) and the total is also statistically significant ($B = .27$, $p < .05$). Emotional stability partly mediates the relationship between the frequency

of social activities and the body image. The results also show that social media entertainment activities predict the level of emotional stability, and the frequency of social media entertainment and the level of emotional stability have an effect on the body image. The indirect effect of this mediation model is negative, which may translate into the fact that the high frequency of entertainment activities contributes to an indirect positive image of itself as emotional instability decreases.

		Estimate	SE	β	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
					Lower	Upper		
Social_media_S	→ Emotional_stability	-0.182	0.0518	-.220	-0.284	-0.0810	-3.52	< .001
Emotional_stability	→ Body_image	0.385	0.0579	0.395	0.272	0.4986	6.66	< .001
Social_media_S	→ Body_image	0.230	0.0479	0.284	0.136	0.3237	4.80	< .001

Table 1 – Relationships within the mediation model

Effect	Estimate	SE	β	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
				Lower	Upper		
Indirect	-0.0703	0.0226	-	-0.1145	-0.0260	-3.11	< .01
Direct	0.2298	0.0479	0.284	0.1359	0.3237	4.80	< .001
Total	0.1595	0.0508	0.197	0.0599	0.2591	3.14	< .01

Table 2 – Indirect, direct and total effects of the mediation model

		Estimate	SE	β	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
					Lower	Upper		
Social_media_E	→ Emotional_stability	-0.360	0.1170	-0.193	-0.589	-0.130	-3.07	< .01
Emotional_stability	→ Body_image	0.366	0.0585	0.375	0.251	0.481	6.25	< .001
Social_media_E	→ Body_image	0.406	0.1088	0.224	0.193	0.619	3.73	< .001

Table 3 – Relationships within the mediation model

Effect	Estimate	SE	β	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
				Lower	Upper		
Indirect	-0.132	0.0477	-	-0.2252	-0.0381	-2.76	< .01
Direct	0.406	0.1088	0.224	0.1926	0.6193	3.73	< .001
Total	0.274	0.1151	0.151	0.0488	0.4998	2.38	< .05

Table 4 – Indirect, direct and total effects of the mediation model

IV. Discussion

Although numerous studies have speculated that high levels of social network use are associated with low levels of body image and various difficulties in the area of well-being and life satisfaction (Appel, Marker & Gnams, 2019; Frison & Eggermont, 2017; Verduyn et al., 2015; Hogue & Mills, 2019), the results of this study showed that emotionally stable people tend to do more online activities, be they social networking or entertainment activities. Thus, the assumption that there is a negative association between the frequency with which people use social media and the body image, in terms of both social and entertainment activities, has been refuted.

This can be due to the fact that social networks can be important factors in facilitating communication, networking, comparison with others, but also in receiving and offering appreciation and validation from/to others. Thus, social networks ensure the fulfilment of many needs, such as social integration and personal identity (Katz, Gurevitch & Hass, 1973, apud Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014), and this can explain the possibility of social networks representing a benefit in a person's life. At the same time, one essential aspect that we should take into account when interpreting this result is the type of participation that the individual has online. According to literature, active use of networks has no negative impact on well-being and other psychological aspects, as opposed to passive use (Kross et al., 2013). Because of this, people can feel validated and valued as a result of online interactions, and in this way satisfaction with their own body can increase, but also trust in their own resources. It is worth noting that in recent years, the concept of "body positivity" has been brought to attention, and this concept has been discussed by several authors, some highlighting the effect of encouraging and accepting the body diversity that this current promotes (Dalessandro, 2016). Conversely, other research discourages the way in which the phenomenon of "body positivity" promotes images of persons with body indices close to obesity (Cohen et al., 2019).

It is worth noting the importance of this issue, the scale of this phenomenon, and the potential for this trend to have positive effects on the body image of people using social media, encouraging acceptance of their own physical characteristics and exploration of their own resources.

However, it is essential to be aware of and to highlight the limit between accepting one's body and pursuing an unhealthy lifestyle, which can have long-term consequences.

As we well know, social support can be an important protective factor when it comes to stressful events, ensuring some well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social networks can often encourage social support from other people, and in this way the negative effects of these platforms or the predisposition to certain problems can be improved.

The results of this study have shown that increased levels of emotional stability are associated with high levels of performance of social and entertainment activities on networks. Thus, in order to explain this result, we need to have an overview of this phenomenon, and we must therefore bear in mind that people who are emotionally unstable tend to experience different negative feelings (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003), often have low self-esteem, pessimistic and perfectionism traits (Costa & McCrae, 2008). Consequently, people with low levels of emotional stability may not perform multiple activities on social networks, due to their tendency to isolate and deprive themselves socially (de Lange et al., 2020) when they experience negative emotions, or to avoid their experiences, not to be in contact with them. They may therefore avoid accessing social media and not wish to engage in the activities of these platforms.

On the other hand, it is possible that the emotionally stable people, who often feel pleasant emotions, want to share their experiences with other people online, in order to fulfil certain social, membership, integration needs (Katz, Gurevitch & Hass, 1973, apud Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014).

Some research relevant to the subject is that carried out by Carver & Connor-Smith (2010), who noted that people with low levels of emotional stability tend to resort to a "disengagement coping", which involves avoiding, denying and trying to escape negative feelings. Thus, by trying to distract from stressful situations and the unpleasant emotions they experience, people can tend to isolate themselves socially and not get involved in activities with others.

In regards to the role of emotional stability, the results of the study confirmed that it mediates the relationship between social or entertainment activities online and the body image. It is important to note that emotional stability is a partial mediator of the two relations, namely the connection between social activities and body image, and the relation between entertainment activities and body image.

One of the relevant studies carried out on the importance of emotional stability in the dynamics between the use of social networks and body image is

that of Dalley, Buunk and Umit (2009), whose results have shown that people with low levels of emotional stability tend to experience dissatisfaction with their own body when exposed to social media images that portray people with a low body index, but also people with a high body index. An interesting aspect is that subjects with a high body index experienced dissatisfaction with their body even when viewing images of people with a body index similar to their, if they had a low level of emotional stability.

While the results of this research showed the negative impact social media has on a person's body image, this study found that as emotional instability decreases, conducting various online activities, such as chatting with friends, posting images or watching entertainment videos, can contribute to a positive body image.

Another relevant study highlighting the importance of emotional stability in this dynamic is the one carried out by McComb & Mills (2021), who noted that women with a high tendency toward perfection in their physical aspect tend to be less confident and unsatisfied with their own body when viewing images of ideal body-like images presented on social networks. The study also highlighted the role that the rumination and catastrophizing play in this dynamic.

Thus, because of the fact that perfection, the tendency to rumination and catastrophizing can often be characteristic of people with low emotional stability, we can accept that this dimension of personality influences the way people choose to relate to what is in the social media or to the people they interact with on these platforms. The mediating role of emotional stability was noted in this study, but the results showed that social media activities do not have a negative impact on individuals in terms of satisfaction with their own bodies.

Even though the results of this study have shown that the investigated persons carrying out various activities on social media have a positive body image and, also, that emotional stability mediates this dynamic, it is necessary to distinguish between the time spent on social media and activities carried out on these types of platforms. The increased time spent on social media can be associated with a low body image, and this is an important aspect in many studies (Hogue & Mills, 2019; Frison & Eggermont, 2017; Appel, Maker & Gnambs, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2015), but carrying out activities on these types of networks has not always been associated with difficulties in the psychological area (Kross et al., 2013), because, by participating in online activities, people can have a sense of involvement, of

belonging (Katz, Gurevitch & Hass, 1973, apud Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014), and can feel encouraged to accept the different features of their body.

It is necessary to mention that emotional stability mediates both relationships, between social activities and body image, and between entertainment and body image, even though there is a significantly weaker statistical relationship in the last-mentioned relationship.

Limits of the study and further directions

A limit to this study may be considered the small percentage of male individuals in the sample compared to the percentage of females, representing the majority of participants.

Another aspect that can be considered a limit is the fact that a large part of the study participants is between 20 and 21 years old and, also, there is a significant imbalance between young adults and other age groups. It is therefore important to note that results can hardly be generalized to the whole population, with a low capacity for representativeness.

One possible limit to this study lies in the resistance of participants to respond honestly to questions about emotional stability and body image. Some of them may not have a clear picture of how they perceive their own body and how they behave or experience emotions. It is also possible that some participants refuse to be honest in the items of the questionnaires for fear of being judged, even if they have been filled out anonymously.

As future directions, the use of experimental or longitudinal design can be proposed to apprehend the dynamics of these relationships over a longer period and also to include other variables, such as self-esteem and extraversion, as they can explain some of the variance of the results and the phenomenon itself. In future studies, other alternative measurement tools can be used to better capture the activity of individuals within social networks, the image of their own body and themselves, as well as the sphere of emotional stability.

V. Conclusions

The present research aimed to highlight the role of emotional stability in the dynamics between the frequency of activities on social networks and satisfaction with one's own body.

Exploring and effectively understanding this phenomenon can be an important step in terms of people's mental health and developing programs to prevent or improve the various negative effects that can

arise from the use of social media, but also in increasing access to certain benefits that social media offer, such as fast and easy communication with people close to them, sharing information in areas of interest, and access to entertainment content, which can increase overall well-being.

At the same time, an interesting aspect of this study is that the results have shown that those involved in social media activities tend to have a better body image, because they can secure certain social needs and be validated by others, which again highlights the social media benefits that people should explore when they are present online.

As shown, this research has found that emotional stability is a mediator in the relationship between the conduct of social activities online and body image, but also in the relationship between the use of the entertainment function and body image. Thus, we can

assume that people who focus on interacting with others and are emotionally stable tend to have a positive image of their body and be satisfied with it. People who actively participate on social media tend to be more emotional stable and feel positive feelings.

Therefore, by focusing on this field and studying this dynamic in detail, there is a possibility that the phenomenon of spreading false body image ideals can be stopped, and this way being encouraged acceptance, but also concern for a healthy and active lifestyle. By minimizing these impossible ideals, people can develop confidence in themselves and the resources they have, and can maximize a sense of belonging and personal worth. At the same time, it is important that attention is directed to the positive effects of social platforms, as they are an important means of communication and information, which today's society cannot lack.

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