TELUS Wise®

Body image and social media: Escaping the comparison trap

Understanding the impact of social media

Created in partnership with **Media Smarts**

Grades: 9-12

Duration: 1 to 1.5 hours, plus time for the assessment activity

Overview

In this lesson, students consider the ways in which social media may prompt them to compare themselves with others, and the impacts that can have on body image and self-esteem. They analyze how the features, algorithms and culture of the social networks they use may affect them and will produce "paper prototypes" of redesigned social media apps that promote more healthful use. Finally, students reflect on how they can change how they use the existing apps to be more like their redesigned versions.

Learning outcomes

Students will understand the following key concepts:

Media are constructions

- Our media experiences influence how we see both our own and other people's lives and bodies

Digital media experiences are shaped by the tools we use

- Different social media platforms' features and designs influence how we use them and the impact they have on us
- The algorithms used by social media platforms serve us content, which also influences the impact they have on us

Students will learn the following essential subject knowledge:

Reading media

- What features of social media encourage us to compare ourselves to other people
- The different ways that social media algorithms are optimized can make us more or less likely to compare ourselves to other people

Media representation

- How social media represents our friends, peers and celebrities

Media health

- How media representation of peers and celebrities affects our body image and self-esteem
- How to manage the impact of social media on our well-being

Students will learn and demonstrate the following skills:

Use

- Redesign an app or an app's features to mitigate or improve its impact on body image and self-esteem

Understand

- Analyze either the design or the algorithm of a social media platform to identify its impact on body image and self-esteem

Engage

- Advocate for changes to make digital media tools more healthful

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Preparation and materials

- Prepare to distribute the handout **Analyzing Apps** (see page 6)
- Prepare to distribute the assignment sheet **Escaping the Comparison Trap** (see page 6)

Optional:

- Prepare to distribute the handout **App Analysis: Instagram** (see page 5)
- Prepare to project the Digital Literacy 101 video Digital Media Experiences Are Shaped by the Tools We Use

Procedure

Fame and friendship

- Start by asking students how many of them follow their friends or family members on social media
- Next, ask how many follow influencers or celebrities
- Now ask, how many ever find themselves comparing themselves to others they follow. Discuss social comparison in greater detail. Ask students:

  - How does it make you feel when you compare yourself to others?
  - What does it make you do?
  - Do you ever feel pressured to use a filter to make yourself look better, or to take a posed photo or video and pretend it was candid, or to take down a post that didn't get a lot of likes?

If necessary, point out that research shows boys are about as likely to compare themselves to others as girls are, though they may focus on different attributes.

The grass is always greener

- Tell students that when we compare ourselves to others, it doesn't typically feel good; we tend to see others as better looking and happier than we are. This is called the **comparison trap**.
- Now ask students: Of the people we follow on social, who do you think has a stronger impact when we compare ourselves – our friends or celebrities? Encourage students to give their reasoning, but not to debate it.
- Tell students that the online contacts who have the biggest impact are not our close friends and families **or** celebrities. That doesn't mean we **don't** compare ourselves to these individuals, or that seeing their social media posts doesn't have an impact on us. However, **research has found that the strongest impact comes from people in the middle: "middle rung" people who we know in person, but not well**.

  - Explain that in the case of close friends, we know what they look like and many details about their lives, so even if they present an idealized version of themselves online, we know it isn't true
  - With celebrities, we're aware that every image and video has been carefully posed, professionally shot and edited, and we know that they were all carefully selected
  - With "middle rung" friends or contacts, however, we assume that everything they post online is basically real (unlike celebrities). We don't know them well enough to compare it to their actual reality (unlike close friends) so we're more likely to fall into the comparison trap

The comparison machine

- Point out that the combination of **curated self-presentation** (being able to control how we present ourselves) and **apparent reality** are reasons why we are more likely to compare ourselves to others on social media than we are to the people we see in person or in traditional media like movies or advertising. (Again, we **do** compare ourselves to others in both those cases, just not as much.)

- Now ask: Are there other reasons why social media makes us more likely to fall into the comparison trap?

  - After a few students have shared their opinions, share that Instagram did research on how people use the app and found that three things had an effect: the app's **design features**, the **algorithm** that determines what you see (and whether other people see your posts) and the **culture** that developed among users as a result.

> **Optional:**
> If your students need a better understanding of how the design of an app or website can influence how we use it, show them the Digital Literacy 101 video
> Digital Media Experiences Are Shaped by the Tools We Use.

Exploring the features, algorithms and culture of Instagram

Draw a three-column chart on the board with the headings **Features, Algorithm and Culture**. Start by asking students to name features of Instagram:

- What can you do there?
- Which things are easy to do and which are more complicated? (e.g. which features or options are always available, and which do you have to tap twice or more to do?)
- What kinds of feedback does it give you?

For now, make sure students focus on the **technical features** of the app, not how they and their peers use it. Capture their input in the Features column.

Next, ask students what they know about the algorithms that Instagram uses to target you with ads, or recommend people to follow or content to consume, and fill the app's Explore page:

- What do they think the algorithm is optimized for? (e.g. how does it get you to stay on the app longer? To come back every day? To engage with content there by liking, sharing or commenting?)
- For those students who use Instagram, how often do they see content that makes them feel worse about themselves, their body or appearance?
- How often do they see content that makes them feel better about themselves, their body or appearance?
- Why might the algorithm be intentionally optimized to show you content that makes you feel worse as opposed to content that makes you feel better about yourself?

Capture their thoughts in the Algorithm column.

Then ask students to describe the **culture** of Instagram:

- Who do you connect with on Instagram? Who are you expected to follow? What are you expected to do if somebody follows you?
- What content will get you lots of likes or followers? What content will make people unfollow you or think you're weird if you post/follow it?
- Are there particular types or genres of photos or videos that are more common?
- Are you expected to look or act in a particular way?

Record their ideas in the Culture column.

Now ask students to suggest how the combination of the app's features, algorithm and culture might make users more or less likely to fall into the comparison trap, or might make it have a bigger impact.

Make sure that the findings from the Instagram research are mentioned. See the summary in the Handout: **Instagram Analysis** (page 5).

If you prefer, you can project or distribute the handout **App Analysis: Instagram** (see page 5) instead of the classroom discussion. If you choose this option, simply talk with students about the items rather than discussing them in depth.

Point out to students that while social media companies design them to make money, sometimes the combination of features, algorithm and culture can actually be bad for business. For example, because of the pressure to look "perfect", many users would only post one or two photos each day, which meant the app made less money because users saw fewer ads. (This is why Instagram introduced "Stories," which were designed to feel more casual than the main feed.)

Analyzing apps

Now divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. Have each group choose another social network that they are familiar with. More than one group can analyze each social network, but it is best if at least four social networks are analyzed.

This list of popular social networks from MediaSmarts' recent Young Canadians in a Wireless World research may provide some inspiration:

• Discord	• Twitch
• Facebook	• Twitter
• Pinterest	• VSCO
• Reddit	• WeChat
• Snapchat	• Weibo
• TikTok	• WhatsApp
• Tumblr	• YouTube

Distribute the handout **Analyzing Apps** (see page 6) and have each group first describe their app's features, algorithm and culture (as you did with Instagram in the previous exercise) and then analyze how those might affect whether and how using the app makes you more likely to fall into the comparison trap.

When students have completed their analysis, have them share their analysis with the class.

If students identified some elements of their apps that they thought made you less likely to fall into the comparison trap, discuss how those might be applied to other apps to make them more healthful.

Assessment

Distribute the assignment sheet **Escaping the Comparison Trap** (see page 6) and go through it with the class. Have students choose a social network (it does not have to be the one their group analyzed, or even one that was discussed in class) and then suggest three changes to its design that would make users less likely to fall into the comparison trap.

They should then explain why they think each design change would have that effect. They can do their redesign on paper (like the example on the assignment sheet) or using a prototyping program like Figma or Penpot.

Reflection

Have students spend five minutes writing down ways in which they can change how they use the app in its current form, so that it is more like their redesign. For example, if their redesign removed notifications, they could turn notifications off when using it; if it involved tuning algorithms to deliver more body-positive content, they might seek out and interact with that content to "train" the algorithm to show them more of it. Then have students hand in their reflections and collate the suggestions into a master list and display or distribute it.

Handout: Instagram analysis

Features	Algorithm	Culture
• Likes make you acutely aware of the popularity of a post or video, and by extension how popular you are relative to other people you know • Share button instantly spreads content to other people • Comments give people a way to praise or criticize each photo or video • Hashtags can help you find unhealthy content, but also send a false sense of authenticity with hashtags like #nofilter • Filters mostly focus on improving photos rather than transforming them (e.g. no cat face filters), so filtered photos are seen as more "real"	• Shows you content and ads connected to posts you've interacted with. For instance, if you look at and engage with content about losing weight, the algorithm will show you things connected to that – like ads for diets and diet products – and it will keep showing you those for a long time even, after you've stopped engaging with weight loss related content. • There's no limit on the recommendation "spiral", so over time a small number of topics (which may be unhealthy) take over your feed • The Explore page features almost all images of ideal bodies	• You connect with both friends and celebrities/influencers, so everyone feels they have to live up to "celebrity standards" • "Highlight reel" norm: Pressure to look your best and present a positive view of yourself and your life all the time

Handout: analyzing apps

With your group, choose a social network that most of you are familiar with. Confirm your choice with me before you start work.

App analysis

Start by analyzing the app you've chosen using the same three categories we used in analyzing Instagram. Record your thoughts.

Features:

- What can you do with the app?
- What is easy to do?
- What is more difficult to do?
- What kind of feedback does it give you?

Algorithm:

- What do you think the algorithm is **optimized** to do? (e.g. some are optimized to keep you there longer, or to make you come back every day, or to get you to engage with content)
- How do you think it decides what to show or recommend to you?
- How does that work differently for different app features? (e.g. on Instagram, the Explore page is almost all chosen by the algorithm, while in your own feed the algorithm mostly determines what ads you see and who you might want to follow)

Culture:

- How do you and people you know use the app?
- Which features do you use the most?
- Which features could you use but don't, or rarely do? Who do you connect with on it?
- How do people respond to different things you might do on it?
- Are you expected to look or act a particular way?

Impact on body image and self-esteem

Now, look at three lists (Features, Algorithm, Culture) and think about how using the app might affect how you feel about your body or yourself. In particular, **think about how the different elements of the app might make you more or less likely to fall into the comparison trap**. Make sure to draw a connection between the feature and the impact you think it has (e.g. seeing likes on Instagram makes you more likely to compare yourself to other people because you can compare how many likes you got on a post compared to how many likes other people got)

Make sure to consider possible positive impacts as well as negative ones!

Assignment: Escaping the Comparison Trap

"Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door."
Attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson

So far, we have looked at how the features, algorithms and cultures of different apps can make us fall into the comparison trap.

Now you are going to choose a social network and re-design at least three things about it ,so that it will make you less likely to fall into the comparison trap.

You can start with the analysis of one of the apps that was done in class, or you can choose a different app.

Your redesign will have three parts:

1) A written explanation outlining the three features you suggest changing and how specifically you would change them

2) A paper prototype of the redesigned app.

   Paper prototypes are simple design sketches that show you one "screenshot" of an app. The purpose is to show how that part of an app works, so they don't necessarily have to look good or have a lot of detail. You can use post-its, stickers, markers, construction paper or anything else you want to draw attention to key information (see example prototype below).

3) An explanation of how each modified feature will make it easier for users to avoid the comparison trap.