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The Underlying Consequences of Social Media

1. Abstract

Since childhood, we, as human beings, are taught to look to others for signals and indications about how to live our lives. It is an innate human desire to evaluate, assess, and improve our skills based on what everyone else leads us to perceive is right or ideal. Such comparison is a necessary facet to social order- we compare political leaders, stocks, investments, property, ect. in order to determine what choice will lead to the best outcome. However, leaping into the abyss of comparison is not always one worth taking. With the recent exponential growth of technology, social comparison is at an ultimate high- not only between rival companies, but also due to social media, between everyday people.

Although some may say that social media fosters healthy relationships between individuals, I am arguing that advertisement and the misrepresentation of oneself on social media affects both body image and mental health, suggesting that as a society we need to reassess the value we place on social networking sites (SNSs). Through examining multiple studies, observations, hypotheses, and analyses, I will demonstrate that social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, can quickly change a robust community of online interaction to a place of frustration and despair.

An essential prerequisite to my argument is grasping a two key terms: Social Comparison Tendency, also referred to as SCO, and para-social interaction, or PSI. Social Comparison

Tendency (SCO) is an individual difference variable referring to how we define our personal and social worth based on self-comparison to others.¹ Para-social interaction (PSI) can be defined as “the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a media performer.”²

Ultimately, in this paper, I will be taking an psychoanalysis and theoretical approach to describe the notion of social comparison in women through: (1) providing a framework for social media consumption patterns, (2) examining both the advertiser’s role and the individual’s role in social media, (3) exploring the adverse psychological outcomes of social media use, and (4) determining what that means for society.

2. Background: Social Media Consumption Patterns

Before understanding how social media affects individuals, it is important to look at who the users are and what their purpose is. Systematically compiling data since 2005 to 2015, the Pew Research Center determined that approximately two thirds of Americans use social networking sites (SNS) and, unsurprisingly, young adult women (ages 18-29) are the most popular amongst those users.³ Moreover, the socio-economic status of an individual often predicts a person’s social media use: those with higher earnings and education are more likely to exercise their access to SNS.⁴ Therefore, when reading the information I present, it is imperative to recall the portion of the population I am targeting: young adult women with a higher household income and education.

¹ Eirn A. Vogel et al., “Who Compares and Despairs? The Effect of Social Comparison Orientation on Social Media Use and Its Outcomes,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 86 (2015), 49, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2015.06.026.

² Jonas Colliander and Micael Dahmén, “Following the Fashionable Friend: The Power of Social Media,” *Journal of Advertising Research* 51, no. 1 (2011), 314, doi:10.2501/jar-51-1-313-320.

³ Andrew Perrin, “Social Media Usage: 2005-2015,” Pew Research Center, October 8, 2015, 1, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/>.

⁴ Perrin, “Social Media Usage,” 1.

Social Media can be used for a multitude of reasons, but according to a study which was conducted by Valerie Barker and analyzed by Daria Kuss and Mark Griffiths, the premier of reasons, 91% of the participants, is to stay connected.⁵ However, the motivation and purpose for using image focused networks goes beyond communication: it serves as a means of gratification, which I will address in my following arguments.

3. Social Media and Perception of Reality

Before elucidating on social media's relationship to body image and self-esteem, it is imperative to my argument that I point out and analyze the chief agents of these psychological disturbances: advertisers and selective user information control.

3.1 Social Media and Advertisement Manipulation

As cyberspace expands, so does the number of users, and with more eyes comes more advertisements. Motivated by the \$26 billion online advertising industry (2010), many companies initiated the use of Facebook (earning \$4.05 billion), Twitter (U.S. earning \$45 million), and other SNSs to reach out to consumers in a more intimate way.⁶ Social media allows and encourages advertisers to lurk in the captions, hashtags, and posts of consumers, blurring the line between the audience and the advertiser.

⁵ Daria J Kuss and Mark D Griffiths, "Online Social Networking and Addiction—A Review of the Psychological Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8, no. 9 (August 29, 2011), 3531, doi:10.3390/ijerph8093528.

⁶ Nicole Cohen, *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, ed. Matthew McAllister and Emily West, in *Commodifying free labor online: Social media, audiences, and advertising* (Abingdon: Routledge: Routledge Handbooks Online, 2013), 178, http://www.academia.edu/5973730/Commodifying_Free_Labor_Online_Social_Media_Audiences_and_Advertising

Jonas Colliander and Micael Dahlen's article "Following the Fashionable Friend: The Power of Social Media" analyzes "the effects of brand publicity in social and "traditional" digital media."⁷ Although this article compares blogs to online magazines, the findings can be extrapolated to social media: para-social interaction (PSI), or "the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a media performer," is a more effective marketing tool.⁸ In other words, when people have a higher PSI, they are more likely to consume that form of media over another. Therefore, countless brands, especially those affiliated with vanity and attire (like Benefit, Kate Spade, Triangl, ect.), use this idea to reach out to a more extensive market.

The burden of this business marketing shift, that now includes personal interaction with consumers via social media, makes it extremely easy to fall into the trap of manipulation. Such manipulation is achieved in terms of purchase, however another voluted outcome of this advertisement transposition is the false perception of reality. Instead of simply releasing statements or displaying commercials about product lines, advertisers that resort to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, ect., are forced to construct stories that promote the culture of their product.

For example, take a look at the celebrity endorsed diet-tea fad that dominates social media. Brands like SkinnyMeTea, LyfeTea, BootTea, ect. all promote what people often refer to as a "tea-tox," promising instant weight loss and a "kick-start your health goals today."⁹ It is tempting to see what all the hype is about and simply purchase that box of Lyfetea, especially when celebrities like Kylie Jenner, fitness inspirations like Bethany Hamilton, models like Kyra Santoro, and "every-day people" commend their lean, sculpted bodies to such a product. By way

⁷ Jonas Colliander and Micael Dahlén, "Following the Fashionable Friend: The Power of Social Media," *Journal of Advertising Research* 51, no. 1 (2011), 313, doi:10.2501/jar-51-1-313-320.

⁸ Colliander and Dahlén, "Following the Fashionable Friend," 314.

⁹ Greta Rose, "SkinnyMe Tea," 2016, <http://www.skinnymetea.com.au/pages/real-results>.

of illustration, Kylie Jenner writes: “Morning :) My flat tummy secret is my @lyfe_tea teatox! We need all the help we can get to keep off the holiday pounds. So keeping my @lyfe_tea with me keeps my waistline slim!#lyfetea #thanksgiving.”¹⁰ If that is not enough to compel someone to buy the product, just google “teatox” and a myriad of remarkable “before and after” images will appear, with apparently mere days or weeks in between the two photos. Manufacturers, like Lyfetea, successfully promote the culture of their product by increasing their level of PSI with their viewers not just through one platform, but through multiple. If the celebrity does not convince you, maybe the fitness star will, and if she does not, maybe the model will, and if that does not work, a “regular person” with a relatively average amount of followers (possibly paid by the company to promote the product) hopefully will. According to Nicole Cohen’s article “The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture,” this permits advertisements to reach to a new and more “personalized, targeted, interactive, and lucrative” level with consumers; it is becoming dependent on social media: users compile enormous amounts of information for advertisers to use to their advantage.¹¹

As demonstrated above, advertisers have the power over their audiences, and a new problem arises when the audience (us) becomes the advertiser. The stories that companies sell are not systematic anymore, they are told by every-day consumers. The more followers and likes a person receives, usually the more sponsorships and endorsements of products he or she will do. In the midst of hyper-social fabrication and advertisement manipulation, the division between reality and sham is obscured, and as a result, people attempt to obtain impractical lifestyles and looks.

¹⁰ Kylie Jenner, Instagram post, November 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/-eZ8efnGse/>.

¹¹ Nicole Cohen, *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, 179.

3.2 Social Media and User Disclosure

Keeping the advertisers role in social media in mind, I will proceed to elaborate on the power of disclosure and demonstrate how the every-day user can be just as deceiving as advertiser.

It is no secret that magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, or *Lucky* are criticized for portraying toothpick-like thin models as ideal. Although a majority of social media networks do not combat this idea, its platform lies in a completely different realm- it is a much more personal instrument, so it is difficult to single-out a particular person or movement as a misrepresentation of reality. Instead of featuring models, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, ect. mainly feature “real people”- or so we think. It is important to note that when I mention “real people,” I am not juxtaposing them to “fake people,” models, or celebrities, but rather the authentic, whole version of a person.

According to the Huffington Post author Kay Green, the “real self”- “what you are, your attributes, your characteristics, and your personality”- and the “ideal self”- “what you feel you should be, much of it due to societal and environmental influences”- intersect when using social media. As users, we have the power to disclose the information, whether it is our real selves or ideal selves.¹² Without doubt, people are going to display the best version of themselves. After all, who would not?

It is nothing out of the ordinary to scroll down my instagram feed and compare everyone else’s endless summer adventures to my own: Sarah is lounging in the Maldives, Zach is cliff diving in Big Sur, and Savannah is clubbing in Miami’s most exclusive clubs. While I sit at

¹² Kay R Green, “The Social Media Effect: Are You Really Who You Portray Online?,” *Huffington Post* (The Huffington Post), August 7, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/r-kay-green/the-social-media-effect-a_b_3721029.html.

home watching reruns of *Gossip Girl* on my couch, many of my friends and acquaintances appear to be doing something entertaining or life-fulfilling. It is nearly impossible to look at other people's accounts without some form of envy, but at the same time, it is also important to recognize that I do not see the full picture. Typically when using social media, it is easy to crop out the bad and highlight, touch up, edit, and filter the good. As much as I would like to think that my Facebook profile picture, where I am wearing copious amounts of makeup and sitting in flattering lighting, is an accurate representation of myself, it is not. Much like other social media users, I am essentially advertising a false self subconsciously to obtain feelings of self worth and internal satisfaction.

The point of this illustration is to show that the virtual world, where we tend to display our "ideal self," and the physical world, where we exhibit our "real self," are two separate entities, yet social media paves a path for the two to overlap. SNSs, like Facebook and Instagram, are places where people seek gratification in the form of "likes" and "comments" as substitutes for validation and reassurance. Society tends to compare visible digital identities because it is difficult to obtain internal approval from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, ect. Instead, people seek external validation in terms of "physical and social attractiveness... and try to escape from appearance-related personal distress."¹³ While this notion holds true, it is not fair to say that social media always gives us a false perception of reality, but rather it gives us a selective reality- everything in the online space is curated and it only offers us a microscopic piece of someone's life.

¹³ Richard M. Perloff, "Social Media Effects on Young Women's Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research," *Sex Roles* 71, no. 11-12 (May 29, 2014), 370, doi:10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6.

4. Social Media and Psychological Consequences

Now that I have explained the advertiser's and individual's role in social media, I will begin to explore the detrimental consequences of defining beauty and self-worth according to social media. It is a difficult task to remain detached from social media and since it has no expiration date, people can indefinitely examine, criticize, compare, and attempt to change themselves accordingly. Regardless of any anti-hate, anti-eating disorder, and anti-bullying movements that have been pushed by various groups and organizations, in the twenty-first century, social media assembles itself in a way where thin and flawless are synonymous with beautiful.

4.1 Social Media and Social Comparison Tendencies (SCO)

As previously described in section 3.2 (Social Media and User Disclosure), comparison, whether it is between lifestyles or looks, is almost inevitable when using social media. In the past, magazines, television, and physical interactions gave people room to scrutinize themselves and others, however with the advancement in technology and communication, people are now able to voice their opinions via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or other SNSs.

According to the peer-reviewed research article, "Social Comparisons on Social Media and Who Compares and Despairs?," appearance comparison tendency and social comparison tendency (SCO)-individual difference variables referring to how we define our personal and social worth based on self-comparison to others- can drastically increase with the use of

Facebook and other social media networks.¹⁴ Using Buunk, Groot Hof, and Sierro's 2007 study and Lee's 2014 study, Vogel and other contributing researchers took an experimental approach to determine how the intensity of social media can have an affect on SCO.¹⁵ To fully analyze the effects of SCO, the researchers provided two experiments. Study 1, which was cross sectionally designed, used a series of questionnaires in order to determine the the "frequency of [facebook] use" and the "psychological involvement."¹⁶ After comparing the individual differences in SCO to INCOM (another study regarding SCO), the study revealed that SCO is positively correlated to Facebook use. Once confirming the relationship between the two variables (SCO and Facebook use), study 2 demonstrated that the use of Facebook for self-evaluation differed amongst those with high versus low SCO: those with higher SCO used social media as an unhealthy platform to self-evaluate and self-improve their overall appearance.¹⁷ Altogether, the studies indicate that individuals with high SCO are more likely be impacted, in terms of self-esteem and happiness, by Facebook and SNSs that involve image comparison.

4.2 Social Media and Self-Esteem

To the extent that the research above is investigative, the results of Vogel's (and others) study demonstrates that the excessive use of social media tends to have strong negative psychological consequences on individuals with higher SCO. Notwithstanding, the results also indicated that those with lower SCO are still susceptible to the influence of social media, but on a

¹⁴ Erin A. Vogel et al., "Who Compares and Despairs? The Effect of Social Comparison Orientation on Social Media Use and Its Outcomes," *Personality and Individual Differences* 86 (2015), 254, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2015.06.026.

¹⁵ Vogel, et al., "Effect of Social Comparison Orientation," 254.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 255.

smaller scale. In my preceding argument, it is necessary to connect my earlier points regarding advertisement manipulation and selective information control to my novel point about self-esteem in order to fully understand my argument.

According to Vogel, one's self-esteem can greatly diminish when he or she is exposed to "high activ[e] social networks," or accounts with a lot of likes and comments, rather "than a low activ[e] social networks."¹⁸ In other words, when someone compares his or her life to that of others on social media, in particular to people or posts with a high active social network, his or her self-confidence will likely fragment. Using the collection of posts, photos, and comments that other people display as a basis for comparison is both unrealistic and ludicrous, yet so many of us are guilty of doing it. Offering further support, Kuss and Griffiths found that people "bridg[e] social capital" while using social media, meaning that connections are weakened because it (Facebook, Instagram, ect.) is a place "information-sharing rather than emotional support."¹⁹ While bridging social capital may be beneficial for establishing business networks and connections but at the same time, it is also a reason and motivation for users with low-esteem to access SNSs as well.²⁰

On the other hand, Jean Twenge's article "Does Online Social Media Lead to Social Connection or Social Disconnection?" argues that social media use leads to the exact opposite of low self-esteem: it generates narcissism in some.²¹ Users who have more friends on social

¹⁸ Erin Vogel et al., "Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem," *American Psychological Association* 3, no. 4 (April 14, 2014), 213, doi: 10.1037/ppm0000047.

¹⁹ Kuss and Griffiths, "Online Social Networking and Addiction," 3533.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jean Twenge, "Does Online Social Media Lead to Social Connection or Social Disconnection?," *Journal of College and Character* 14, no. 1 (February 2013), 3, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.scu.edu/socscicoll/docview/1703449385/3F4CC59521D54B71PQ/9?accountid=13679>.

networking sites tend to have a higher perception of themselves. To support his claim, Twenge referenced a study in which college students were asked to edit their MySpace page for 15 minutes and then were assessed (personality test) based on a routine test.²² The results of this study imply that narcissism increases with the use of the SNSs, and increased time on SNSs causes people to focus more on themselves and therefore less on others. Although Kuss and Twenge's studies offer conflicting ideas about whether self-esteem is elevated or deflated as a result of social media use, both researchers agree that obsessive fixation on oneself is what creates narcissistic or self-demeaning behavior in terms of social media.

As human beings, it is only natural to examine ourselves and others. Therefore, when engaging in social media is is easy to conclude what it means to achieve perfection, both physically and emotionally, and apply it to ourselves. On the physical level, trends like thigh gaps, hip bridges, plump lips, complete facial symmetry, ect. are what it takes to be considered beautiful and worthy. On the emotional level, likes, followers, and comments are supposedly an accurate representation of one's popularity and value. If someone does not fit that criteria, according to social media, that person is deemed unworthy.

For example, look at Summer Andrews (an ordinary, every-day person), an eighteen year old, who states: "I do feel insecure if I see girls who look prettier than me, or if they post really pretty pictures, and I know I won't look as good in any that I post. I do feel pressure to look good in the photos I put up. I don't feel anxious about not getting enough likes on a photo but if it doesn't get enough likes, I will take it down."²³ While Andrew's honesty is noteworthy, it is also

²² Twenge, "Does Online Social Media Lead to Social Connection or Social Disconnection?," 3.

²³ Mahita Gajanan, "Young Women on Instagram and Self-Esteem: 'I absolutely feel insecure,'" *The Guardian* (The Guardian), November 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/04/instagram-young-women-self-esteem-essena-oneill>.

a cold reality of social media. People go to absurd lengths to conceal their flaws, “pos[ing] specifically to hide their “big nose” or “chubby cheeks,” and some ask[ing] other friends to untag them because they don’t like the angle—or even ask[ing] to have a photo taken down because of the way that (they think) they look.”²⁴ The obscured depiction of reality that social media takes a toll on an individual’s self-esteem. All in all, women who base their self-worth on their appearance use social media to obtain validation, which unfortunately is not always achieved and in turn produces internal dissatisfaction.

4.3 Social Media and Body Image

Although high SCO is not always an outcome of an overconsumption of social media, there is still a heartbreaking cruelty of social comparison: it often leads to an increase in body image concerns. Richard M. Perloff’s article “Social Media Effects on Young Women’s Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research” claims that body dissatisfaction can arise from the exposure to “thin-ideal media images.”²⁵ When people begin to internalize distorted images of reality, feelings of discontent emerge.²⁶ Because the millennial generation has grown up with social media, ideal body size and shape are often rooted from “appearance-focused Facebook conversations, picture-sharing, and fashion-focused tweets.”²⁷ Through multiple cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys, Perloff found that media exposure can often predict body satisfaction. At as young as the age of three, young women (sometimes)

²⁴ Olivia Fleming, ““Why don’t I look like her?”: How Instagram Is Ruining Our Self Esteem,” *Elle*, November 18, 2014, <http://www.elle.com/beauty/tips/a2531/how-instagram-is-ruining-our-self-esteem/>.

²⁵ Perloff, “Social Media on Body Image,” 365.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

start identify their bodies as objects, which sequentially can create body image disturbances. This “body surveillance” is so widespread, the term has been coined as “normative discontent.”²⁸

Unsurprisingly, in Western societies, normative discontent is particularly influenced by social media, where body stereotypes and body perfection lie. Essena O’Neill, an Australian nineteen year old and former “instafamous” star fell into the trap of normative discontent and after serious distress she combated the notion, quitting social media all together.²⁹ O’Neill, signed by IMG models, an enormous international modeling firm, built up her instagram followers and youtube channel in order to market both assigned products and herself, which she said ultimately validated her self-worth.³⁰

A year after going through a roller-coaster of emotions and forfeiting all of her social media accounts, O’Neill reopened her youtube channel, but with a much different and more poignant message than before. Addressing her half-a million followers, O’Neill articulated that “social media is not real life” and if anything [her] social media addiction, perfectionist personality and low self esteem [is what] made [her] career.”³¹ O’Neill reflects back to her very first post on Instagram, obsessively examining the number of likes she received for an entire week after uploading it, which at the time had five likes and now has nearly 2,500 likes.³² She notes that this picture is where it began and until she created a mass social network, Essena O’Neill would not be content.³³ So, since that day, O’Neill devoted enormous amounts of time

²⁸ Ibid., 366.

²⁹ Megan McCluskey, "Instagram Star Essena O’Neill Breaks Her Silence on Quitting Social Media," *TIME*, January 5, 2016, [://time.com/4167856/essena-oneill-breaks-silence-on-quitting-social-media/](https://time.com/4167856/essena-oneill-breaks-silence-on-quitting-social-media/).

³⁰ McCluskey, “O’Neill on Quitting Social Media.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Essena O’Neill, "Essena O’Neill - Why I Really Am Quitting Social Media," YouTube, November 05, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmAbwTQvWX8>.

³³ O’Neill, “Why I Really Am Quitting Social Media.”

and effort into glamorizing her account, mimicking celebrities, until she “had it all” in terms of social media. She had the followers, the likes, the ideal photos, so what was lacking?³⁴ Value.

O’Neill recapitulates my argument that social media is a “business;” it is a hoax, and unless following clean and personal accounts, people (including herself) that are highly followed are paid to promote products, being told how to pose the photo, where to take it, and when to post it.³⁵ As a result, “criticism, comparison, praise, and hate” is how she defined herself because of the “numbers [she] saw on the screen.”³⁶ In other words, her high SCO, or obsessive tendency to look at other people’s lives on social media and compare it to her own, created an internal struggle so monumental that she walked away from it all. O’Neill combated the social pressure to manufacture beautiful images, and instead stopped hiding behind filters, photoshop, and monotonous inspirational captions in order to say that “real life is not through a screen” but through experience.³⁷ The un-edited version of life is not something that should disappoint people, in fact, it is something that should be valued and cherished.

Limitations

After examining data and scrutinizing the analyses of numerous studies I provided above, it is clear that the results have several implications, despite the research borders: social media has an affect on the psyche of people. However, it is also important to acknowledge that many environmental factors contribute to how someone is impacted by social networking sites.

Measuring the results of social media is ambiguous, and in all likelihood, there is no one way to

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

directly assess these constructs. On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that social media is not a monstrous, cruel tool that only generates negative outcomes. Undoubtedly, social media is this generation's means of communication. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, ect. have been created for a single reason: an online presence. Although I am arguing that there is more transparency and less authenticity between active users, one could also claim that it is just as accurate to state that social media promotes the exact opposite. The value of social media is only as substantial as people make it. Researchers like Perloff, Collandier and Dahlen are not trying to proclaim that the general use of social media leads to psychological issues, but rather with excessive use, issues have the potential to arise. There is no definitive prognosis. Just because someone uses Facebook for x amount of hours does not mean that they will have or develop x amount of SCO. No existing experimental research exists in regards to social media's effect on its users, but the research provided above demonstrates that there is a strong positive correlation between mental health and social media use.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us as a society? Surely social media was not the start of body-image distortion, poor self-perception, and false realities. Each of these issues are defined culturally and over time. Since the late 1950's, Barbie, a cultural icon of feminine beauty, has appeared in different outfits, held different careers, and changed physiques in order to fit the standard of the time. Social media is not the sole cause of this judgement- it is more of an agent. Internalization of beauty ideals for females, pressures them to conform to a certain standard and consequently the interpretation of what it means to beautiful. However, it is imperative that

people see through the series of filters, and view individuals less as an album of photos and more as three-dimensional beings. People's lives, stories, and experiences are so much more agonizing and chaotic, yet radiant and beautiful, than a photo, caption, video, or social media account can ever express.

Even though society is leaning towards surgically enhanced, blemish-free, and exceedingly thin as the ideal form of beauty, that does not mean that we have to. Due to the increased users and concerns about social media, social networking sites are getting the attention of more researchers to examine the consequences of overuse and abuse of digital platforms. However, the process by which culture and media overlap to influence body distress greatly exceeds the extent of this paper. More substantial and longitudinal research needs to be conducted in order to fully understand the damage that uncontrolled social media use can cause to an individual. Regardless of the limitations, because social media is such a powerful tool and is not going to disappear anytime soon, society ultimately needs to figure out how to use it to yet again redefine beauty in a way that is not self-demeaning or objectifying.

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