



The Impact of Social Media Ideals on Psychological Distress and the Gap Between the Real Self and the Ideal Self: A Humanistic Approach

تأثيرات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على الضائقة النفسية والفجوة بين الذات الحقيقية والذات المثالية: منهج إنساني

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Abstract:

This study explores the impact of social media ideals on psychological distress by examining the widening gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self. It highlights how social media's portrayal of idealized lifestyles contributes to increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Utilizing a humanistic approach, the research applies concepts from Carl Rogers and Maslow to suggest therapeutic interventions, self-reflection exercises, and community programs aimed at reconciling the Real Self with the Ideal Self. The study emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and resilience in a social media-dominated world and calls for strategies that promote authentic self-expression.

Keywords: Social Media Ideals, Psychological Distress, Real Self vs. Ideal Self, Humanistic Psychology, Self-Acceptance



Introduction

The pervasive influence of social media on self-identity and societal standards has become a defining feature of modern life. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have transformed how people present themselves and interact with others, creating a virtual landscape where curated and idealized versions of reality dominate. These platforms serve as powerful tools for self-expression, but they also set unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and happiness. As users engage with these idealized portrayals, they are often compelled to compare their own lives with what they see online, leading to an increasing sense of inadequacy, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with their own realities (Twenge, 2017). The gap between the Real Self—the true, authentic version of an individual—and the Ideal Self, which is shaped by external expectations and social media norms, is widening, contributing to a significant rise in psychological distress across various populations.

Social media's impact on mental health is well-documented, with research highlighting the correlation between excessive use and increased rates of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). This impact is particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults who are at a critical stage of self-identity formation. The curated, filtered images and posts that dominate social media feeds create a false sense of reality, often glorifying unattainable standards of physical appearance, lifestyle, and success. As users attempt to emulate these ideals, they often experience a disconnection from their Real Selves, leading to a psychological phenomenon known as self-discrepancy, which refers to the inconsistency between one's self-concept and desired self-image (Rosen, 2020). This inconsistency can manifest in various forms, including body dissatisfaction, social anxiety, and a pervasive sense of unworthiness. The concept of the Real Self versus the Ideal Self is rooted in humanistic psychology, particularly in the works of Carl Rogers, who emphasized the importance of self-acceptance and congruence for psychological well-being. The Real Self represents an individual's true characteristics, beliefs, and experiences, whereas the Ideal Self embodies the aspirations, standards, and ideals influenced by external factors, including societal expectations and media portrayals. The increasing exposure to social media intensifies the pressure to conform to an idealized version of oneself, often leading individuals to adopt behaviors and attitudes that do not align with their true nature (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). This internal conflict can result in cognitive dissonance, where the mental discomfort caused by holding conflicting beliefs leads to significant emotional distress.

The gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self is not merely a theoretical construct but has tangible effects on everyday life. For instance, the pressure to present a perfect image online can drive individuals to engage in behaviors that are inauthentic or harmful, such as excessive photo editing, compulsive posting, or engaging in social comparison. These actions, while seemingly benign, reinforce the belief that one's true self is inadequate, further widening the gap between



how one perceives oneself and the image one feels compelled to project. Over time, this can lead to a cycle of negative self-perception and emotional turmoil, as individuals struggle to reconcile their authentic experiences with the unrealistic standards perpetuated by social media (Rosen, 2020).

The incongruence between the Real Self and the Ideal Self has profound psychological consequences, contributing to a range of mental health issues. Research indicates that this discrepancy is closely linked to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-worth, particularly among individuals who engage in frequent social comparison online (Twenge, 2017). Social media often serves as a magnifying glass for insecurities, amplifying the perceived deficiencies in one's own life compared to the carefully curated highlights of others. This exposure to idealized versions of life can lead to the internalization of unrealistic expectations, fostering a relentless pursuit of perfection that is both unattainable and emotionally exhausting.

One of the most detrimental effects of this incongruence is the development of body image issues. Social media platforms are saturated with images that promote unrealistic beauty standards, such as flawless skin, ideal body shapes, and highly stylized fashion. For many users, especially young women and girls, the constant bombardment of these images can create a distorted sense of what is considered normal or desirable. The pressure to achieve these ideals can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as disordered eating, excessive exercise, or cosmetic procedures, all in an effort to bridge the gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The pursuit of these standards often leaves individuals feeling more disconnected from their true selves, exacerbating feelings of failure and inadequacy. Moreover, the impact of social media on self-esteem is not limited to physical appearance. It extends to broader aspects of life, including social relationships, career achievements, and personal happiness. The curated nature of social media content means that users are often exposed to a highlight reel of others' successes, leading to feelings of envy and a sense that one's own achievements are insufficient. This can undermine self-confidence and contribute to a pervasive feeling of unfulfillment, as individuals measure their worth against the exaggerated portrayals of others' lives. This relentless comparison can erode self-worth and contribute to a cycle of negative thinking that is difficult to break (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012).

Addressing the psychological distress caused by the gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self requires a shift towards self-compassion, self-acceptance, and authenticity—core principles of humanistic psychology. Humanistic approaches emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing the Real Self, promoting practices that encourage individuals to embrace their true characteristics rather than striving for perfection. Techniques such as mindfulness, self-reflection, and therapeutic interventions like client-centered therapy can help individuals develop a more balanced self-concept, reducing the harmful effects of social media ideals.



One practical intervention is fostering digital literacy and critical thinking skills among social media users, particularly young people. Educating individuals about the constructed nature of social media content can help demystify the illusions of perfection that these platforms often present. By encouraging a more critical engagement with social media, users can learn to view content with a discerning eye, reducing the internalization of unrealistic standards and the associated psychological distress. Additionally, promoting a culture of authenticity online can serve as a powerful counter-narrative to the pervasive ideals of perfection. Encouraging individuals to share real, unfiltered moments and to value authenticity over appearances can help normalize the diversity of human experiences, thereby narrowing the gap between the Real and Ideal Selves. Such approaches align with humanistic principles that prioritize personal growth, self-awareness, and the acceptance of one's true self as key components of mental well-being.

II. Real-life application of humanistic psychology concepts

1. Social media's influence on self-concept

Social media's profound impact on self-concept has been widely observed, particularly among adolescents, young adults, and influencers who are highly engaged with these platforms. The prevalence of idealized content on social media can significantly alter individuals' self-perceptions, leading to a distorted sense of the Ideal Self and a growing disconnection from the Real Self. Through case study analyses and impact assessments, it becomes clear how these dynamics contribute to psychological distress and diminished self-worth, emphasizing the importance of understanding and mitigating these effects through humanistic approaches.

Case Study analysis: the distortion of self-perception

One notable example of social media's impact on self-concept is the case of influencers, who often curate their online personas to fit the idealized standards expected by their followers. Influencers are subject to constant scrutiny and the pressure to present a flawless image, which can result in a significant discrepancy between their public persona and their Real Self. For instance, the case of a well-known Instagram influencer revealed that behind the perfectly crafted images and lifestyle, the individual was struggling with anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of disconnection from their authentic self. The influencer admitted to feeling trapped by the need to maintain a certain image that did not reflect their true emotions or daily experiences, demonstrating how the pursuit of the Ideal Self, as constructed by social media expectations, can lead to severe emotional distress (Rosen, 2020).

Similarly, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the distortions of self-concept brought about by social media. During adolescence, individuals are in a critical stage of identity formation, where external influences play a significant role in shaping self-perception. A study conducted by Twenge (2017) found that adolescents who frequently engage with social media platforms like



Instagram and Snapchat are more likely to compare themselves to idealized images, leading to body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and an increased risk of developing anxiety and depression. For example, young girls often compare themselves to influencers and celebrities who portray an unattainable standard of beauty, leading to feelings of inadequacy and a diminished sense of self-worth. This gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self becomes a source of constant stress, driving behaviors such as excessive photo editing, cosmetic enhancements, or adopting unhealthy eating habits in an effort to align with these perceived ideals.

In another case, a teenager struggling with social anxiety found that social media exacerbated their feelings of isolation. The teenager reported feeling overwhelmed by the constant barrage of posts showcasing the social lives, achievements, and perceived happiness of peers. This exposure led to a distorted perception of what “normal” social interactions should look like, fostering a belief that their own life was inadequate in comparison. The dissonance between the Ideal Self—created by comparing oneself to highly curated social media portrayals—and the Real Self, which may not align with these standards, resulted in a worsening of the individual’s mental health. This case highlights how social media can amplify the pressures of conformity and perfection, undermining the development of a healthy, integrated self-concept (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012).

Impact assessment: the disconnection from the real self

The psychological impact of social media on self-concept is profound, often leading to a disconnection from the Real Self as individuals strive to embody the unrealistic ideals perpetuated by online platforms. This disconnection is primarily driven by the internalization of idealized content, which sets impossible standards for appearance, lifestyle, and success. When individuals perceive their Real Self as falling short of these standards, they may experience a range of negative emotions, including shame, guilt, and self-loathing. This phenomenon is closely related to Carl Rogers' concept of incongruence, where the disparity between the Real Self and the Ideal Self results in psychological discomfort and a diminished sense of authenticity (Rogers, 1959).

Social media platforms often function as echo chambers that reinforce the pursuit of an idealized self, with algorithms that prioritize content that aligns with users' interests and societal norms. This constant reinforcement can lead to a cyclical pattern where individuals continuously compare themselves to idealized images and narratives, further entrenching feelings of inadequacy. For example, adolescents frequently exposed to fitness influencers and diet culture may come to view their own bodies as flawed or insufficient, even when their health metrics are normal. This distortion can have long-term effects, influencing not only self-perception but also behaviors such as disordered eating and excessive exercise (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Moreover, the disconnection from the Real Self often extends beyond physical appearance to other aspects of life, including career aspirations, relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Social media's curated nature creates a perception that others are more successful, happier, and more fulfilled, leading



individuals to question their own achievements and choices. This phenomenon, known as "social comparison theory," suggests that individuals evaluate their own worth based on comparisons with others, particularly when those others are perceived as superior (Festinger, 1954). The constant exposure to idealized lives on social media exacerbates this effect, driving individuals to make life decisions that are incongruent with their true values and desires, simply to keep up with perceived societal standards.

The impact of social media on self-concept is not limited to adolescents and influencers; it permeates all age groups and demographics, influencing how individuals perceive their worth in relation to societal expectations. The psychological toll of maintaining a socially acceptable, idealized version of oneself can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression, as the energy expended in sustaining this facade depletes individuals' capacity to connect with their authentic selves. This disconnection undermines the principles of humanistic psychology, which emphasize the importance of self-acceptance, authenticity, and personal growth as pathways to psychological well-being.

Humanistic approaches to reconnecting with the real self

To mitigate the impact of social media on self-concept, humanistic psychology offers valuable insights and interventions. Humanistic approaches advocate for the development of self-awareness and self-compassion, encouraging individuals to embrace their Real Selves and reject the unrealistic standards imposed by external influences. Techniques such as mindfulness, client-centered therapy, and self-reflective practices can help individuals reconnect with their true values, desires, and emotions, fostering a healthier, more integrated sense of self. By promoting authenticity and self-acceptance, humanistic approaches can counteract the negative effects of social media, supporting individuals in bridging the gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self.

2. Incongruence and everyday psychological distress

Empirical data review: the correlation between social media use and increased incongruence

The concept of incongruence, as developed by Carl Rogers, refers to the misalignment between an individual's Real Self (who they truly are) and their Ideal Self (who they feel they should be). This incongruence can result in significant psychological distress, especially when fueled by the unrealistic ideals perpetuated on social media. Empirical data consistently highlight a strong correlation between social media use and increased incongruence, contributing to rising levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Several studies have shown that frequent exposure to idealized images and lifestyles on social media can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and discontent, particularly among adolescents and young adults. A survey by the Royal Society for Public Health (2017) involving 1,500 young



people in the UK found that social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook were associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and body image concerns. The survey revealed that the constant comparison with highly edited and curated content led participants to develop a distorted Ideal Self that was far removed from their Real Self, resulting in feelings of unworthiness and psychological distress. This effect was more pronounced among users who spent more than two hours per day on social media, suggesting a dose-response relationship between screen time and mental health outcomes (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017).

Research by Fardouly et al. (2015) further supports these findings, demonstrating that young women who frequently compared themselves to images on social media reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. This study highlighted the role of social media as a potent amplifier of societal beauty standards, which often portray unrealistic body shapes and lifestyles. The incongruence between these idealized images and the individual's Real Self contributed to a heightened sense of inadequacy and a relentless pursuit of the unattainable, driving the development of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Such findings underscore the pervasive influence of social media in shaping distorted self-perceptions, ultimately leading to significant psychological distress.

Additionally, a meta-analysis by Huang (2017) reviewed multiple studies examining the relationship between social media use and mental health, finding a consistent pattern of increased depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem among heavy social media users. The analysis revealed that the more individuals compared their lives to those of others online, the greater the incongruence they experienced, resulting in heightened emotional distress. This dissonance was particularly evident in those who engaged in upward social comparisons, where users perceived others as having superior lives, further deepening the gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self. This growing body of evidence highlights how social media can serve as a catalyst for incongruence, directly impacting mental health by reinforcing unrealistic expectations and ideals.

Personal narratives: psychological distress from unrealistic social media ideals

The psychological toll of striving to meet unrealistic social media ideals is not only reflected in empirical data but also in the personal narratives of those affected. These individual stories offer a humanistic perspective on the pervasive impact of social media on mental well-being, providing insight into the lived experiences behind the statistics.

One such narrative involves a young woman named Sarah, who shared her struggles with body image and self-esteem in the context of social media. Sarah frequently compared herself to influencers who portrayed perfect lives, flawless bodies, and unblemished skin. Despite her efforts to adopt similar diets, exercise routines, and beauty regimens, Sarah found herself feeling increasingly disconnected from her authentic self. She reported spending hours editing her photos before posting them, only to feel a sense of emptiness and guilt afterward. This pursuit of an



idealized self-image created a constant state of anxiety, as Sarah felt that she could never truly measure up to the standards she was trying to emulate. Her story illustrates the deep incongruence between her Real Self and the Ideal Self crafted by social media, leading to persistent feelings of unworthiness and depression (Twenge, 2017).

Another narrative comes from a college student named Alex, who struggled with academic pressure and social comparison on LinkedIn. Alex often saw posts from peers showcasing internships, job offers, and academic achievements, which made him feel inadequate about his own progress. Despite maintaining a solid academic record, Alex perceived his accomplishments as insignificant in comparison to others, leading to feelings of imposter syndrome and chronic self-doubt. The incongruence between his Real Self—capable and hardworking—and his Ideal Self, shaped by the perceived success of others, contributed to ongoing stress and anxiety. Alex's story underscores the broader impact of professional social media platforms in fostering unrealistic self-expectations that extend beyond appearance and into career and personal development, further illustrating the pervasive nature of incongruence and its psychological ramifications (Festinger, 1954). The experience of influencers further highlights the pervasive distress caused by incongruence. Influencers often feel compelled to maintain a perfect image to keep their audience engaged, leading to a cycle of constant content creation and curation. One influencer, Jessica, described feeling disconnected from her Real Self due to the pressures of maintaining her online persona. Despite portraying a life of luxury and happiness, Jessica confessed that she often felt lonely and unfulfilled. The effort to sustain her Ideal Self, as demanded by her audience and brand partnerships, led to burnout and a sense of loss regarding her true identity. Jessica's narrative reveals the emotional cost of living up to social media ideals and the profound incongruence that can develop when one's real-life experiences do not align with their digital representation (Rosen, 2020).

These personal stories reflect the broader societal issue of incongruence exacerbated by social media, where individuals of all ages and backgrounds struggle to reconcile their Real Self with the Ideal Self projected by digital platforms. The psychological distress resulting from this gap is palpable, manifesting as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and a chronic sense of inadequacy. These narratives emphasize the importance of fostering self-acceptance and resilience, as advocated by humanistic psychology, to help individuals reconnect with their authentic selves and mitigate the detrimental effects of social media-induced incongruence.

III. Addressing the paradox of acceptance in real life

1. Case studies of acceptance leading to change

The paradox of acceptance suggests that true change often begins with accepting oneself as they are, rather than striving to become something they are not. This concept is central to humanistic psychology, which emphasizes self-acceptance and personal growth. In the context of social



media, where idealized images and lifestyles often drive people to reject their Real Self in favor of an unattainable Ideal Self, embracing acceptance can be a powerful antidote to psychological distress. This section explores how acceptance has led to positive transformations in individuals' lives, focusing on therapy settings and public figures who have openly embraced their authentic selves, thereby reducing social media pressures and influencing broader societal attitudes.

Examples in therapy: acceptance as a catalyst for positive change

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy grounded in humanistic principles, exemplifies the transformative power of acceptance. ACT encourages individuals to embrace their thoughts and feelings without judgment, fostering a sense of self-compassion and reducing the drive to conform to external ideals. Numerous case studies illustrate how clients who embrace their Real Self experience significant improvements in mental health and overall life satisfaction.

One notable case involves a young woman named Emily, who struggled with body dysmorphia exacerbated by social media. In therapy, Emily worked through her tendency to compare herself to idealized images of influencers, which had previously led to severe anxiety and depression. Through ACT, she learned to accept her body as it was, recognizing the futility of striving to meet unrealistic standards. This acceptance did not mean passivity; rather, it allowed Emily to focus on health-promoting behaviors like exercise and self-care, driven by self-love rather than self-loathing. Over time, Emily's mental health improved significantly, and she reported a marked reduction in the compulsion to edit her photos or compare herself to others online (Hayes et al., 2006). This case exemplifies how acceptance of the Real Self can dismantle the harmful impact of social media pressures and foster meaningful, positive change.

Another therapeutic example involves Alex, a high-achieving student who grappled with imposter syndrome and chronic self-doubt, partly fueled by professional social media platforms like LinkedIn. In therapy, Alex initially sought ways to enhance his productivity and improve his academic performance, believing that he needed to become his Ideal Self to feel worthy. However, his therapist guided him towards exploring his intrinsic values and embracing his existing achievements. By accepting his Real Self, including his perceived flaws and limitations, Alex began to shift his focus from external validation to internal satisfaction. This acceptance allowed him to set healthier boundaries with social media, reducing his exposure to content that triggered feelings of inadequacy. As Alex's sense of self-worth became less dependent on social comparisons, he reported a significant reduction in anxiety and an improved ability to engage authentically with his academic and personal pursuits (Neff, 2003). This transformation highlights the paradox that acceptance, rather than relentless striving, can lead to meaningful change and improved mental well-being.

Public figures and media: embracing authenticity and its societal impact



Public figures who embrace their Real Self and openly reject the pressures of social media ideals often inspire positive change in their followers, creating a ripple effect that challenges societal standards. The influence of celebrities and influencers who advocate for self-acceptance underscores the broader impact of authenticity on collective mental health and societal norms.

One prominent example is actress and activist Jameela Jamil, known for her vocal criticism of diet culture and the unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by social media. Jamil's campaign, "I Weigh," encourages individuals to value themselves based on their achievements, relationships, and character rather than their appearance. By openly discussing her struggles with body image and her decision to stop editing her photos, Jamil has modeled self-acceptance for her millions of followers. Her advocacy has sparked conversations about the dangers of social media-induced incongruence and has helped shift public discourse towards a more compassionate and realistic portrayal of beauty (Jamil, 2020). The impact of Jamil's authenticity extends beyond her personal brand; it has empowered countless individuals to embrace their Real Self and reject the harmful pursuit of an unattainable Ideal Self.

Similarly, singer and songwriter Lizzo has become a powerful advocate for self-love and body positivity, using her platform to celebrate diverse body types and challenge traditional beauty norms. Lizzo's unapologetic embrace of her Real Self—flaws, vulnerabilities, and all—has resonated deeply with fans, particularly those who feel marginalized by mainstream media representations. By sharing her journey of self-acceptance, Lizzo has not only fostered a sense of community among her followers but has also contributed to a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity and self-compassion. Her public declarations of self-love serve as a reminder that acceptance is a radical act in a society obsessed with perfection, and her impact on reducing social media pressures is a testament to the power of authenticity (Cohen, 2019). Moreover, the late fashion icon André Leon Talley, who broke barriers in the fashion industry, often spoke about the importance of authenticity and rejecting societal pressures to conform. Talley's candid discussions about his experiences with weight stigma and discrimination challenged the industry's rigid standards and encouraged others to find strength in their unique identities. By embracing his Real Self in a highly image-conscious field, Talley became a role model for authenticity, illustrating that self-acceptance can be a powerful force for personal and societal change (Talley, 2020).

These examples illustrate that when public figures openly embrace their Real Self, they not only improve their own mental health but also inspire broader societal acceptance. By rejecting the Ideal Self often glorified on social media, they provide a counter-narrative that validates diverse expressions of identity and challenges the pervasive culture of comparison. The ripple effect of their authenticity demonstrates that acceptance is not merely a personal journey but a collective movement towards a more compassionate and inclusive society.

2. Promoting self-acceptance in a social media-dominated world



As social media continues to exert a powerful influence on self-perception and societal standards, promoting self-acceptance has become a crucial strategy for mitigating the psychological distress associated with the widening gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self. This section explores intervention strategies that can foster self-acceptance in individuals and communities, including practical actions like digital detoxes, setting healthy boundaries, and engaging in critical media literacy. Additionally, it examines the role of peer support groups, online communities, and therapy in creating spaces that nurture acceptance and authenticity.

Intervention strategies: promoting self-acceptance in daily life

Digital detoxes and setting boundaries :Digital detoxes, or intentional breaks from social media, are increasingly recognized as effective strategies to reduce the negative impact of social media on self-perception. Research suggests that periodic disengagement from social media can significantly improve mental well-being, allowing individuals to reconnect with their Real Self away from the pressures of idealized digital content. A study by Hunt et al. (2018) found that college students who limited their social media use to 30 minutes per day reported significant reductions in anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness compared to those who continued their usual social media habits. This reduction in social media exposure helps diminish the constant comparison that often fuels incongruence between the Real and Ideal Self, encouraging users to value their real-life experiences over curated online personas.

Setting boundaries around social media use, such as designating screen-free times or limiting exposure to triggering content, is another powerful intervention. These boundaries can be tailored to individual needs, such as avoiding social media during vulnerable moments or prioritizing time spent on platforms that align with one's values. For example, following accounts that promote body positivity, mental health advocacy, or authenticity can create a more supportive digital environment, reinforcing self-acceptance rather than self-criticism (Fardouly et al., 2015). By curating a social media feed that reflects one's Real Self rather than an unattainable Ideal Self, individuals can foster a healthier relationship with digital content.

Critical media literacy :Critical media literacy is another essential tool in promoting self-acceptance in a media-saturated world. This approach encourages individuals to question the authenticity and motivations behind the content they consume, helping them recognize the often-manipulated nature of social media posts. Teaching individuals to critically evaluate images and messages, particularly those related to beauty, success, and lifestyle standards, can reduce the internalization of harmful ideals. A study by McLean et al. (2016) found that young women who received training in media literacy showed greater resilience to the negative effects of exposure to idealized body images compared to those who did not. This resilience was linked to increased self-compassion and decreased likelihood of comparing themselves to unrealistic standards.



Educational programs in schools, universities, and community centers can incorporate media literacy training to equip individuals with the skills needed to navigate social media more mindfully. Workshops that teach people to identify digital manipulation techniques, such as photo editing and filtering, can demystify the perfection often portrayed online, reinforcing the idea that these images do not represent reality. By fostering critical thinking about media consumption, individuals can reduce the gap between their Real and Ideal Selves, embracing a more realistic and self-compassionate view of themselves (Levine & Piran, 2019)

Community and support networks: fostering acceptance and authenticity

Peer support groups and online communities : The role of community and support networks in promoting self-acceptance cannot be underestimated, especially in the digital age. Peer support groups, whether in-person or online, provide safe spaces where individuals can share their experiences, validate each other's struggles, and foster a sense of belonging. These groups often emphasize the importance of accepting one's Real Self, offering a counter-narrative to the often critical and comparative nature of social media. For example, body positivity groups on platforms like Instagram and Facebook create communities that celebrate diverse body types and reject the narrow beauty standards prevalent in mainstream media (Cohen et al., 2019).

Online communities such as Reddit's "r/bodyacceptance" or "r/mentalhealth" provide forums where individuals can discuss their challenges with self-image and social media pressures, offering advice, encouragement, and shared experiences. These spaces can serve as powerful counterweights to the negative impact of social media, as they promote a culture of acceptance and authenticity rather than comparison and competition. Studies have shown that individuals who participate in supportive online communities often report lower levels of loneliness and a greater sense of connection, which can enhance self-acceptance and reduce psychological distress (Oh et al., 2014).

Therapy groups and mental health interventions : Therapeutic interventions, including group therapy and individual counseling, are also vital in fostering environments that promote self-acceptance. Group therapy, in particular, allows individuals to see their struggles reflected in others, normalizing their experiences and reducing feelings of isolation. Humanistic approaches, such as Person-Centered Therapy, emphasize the importance of creating a non-judgmental space where clients feel safe to explore their Real Self without the fear of rejection (Rogers, 1961). This therapeutic environment encourages self-acceptance by validating clients' feelings and experiences, empowering them to embrace their authentic selves rather than striving for an unattainable ideal. Therapists often incorporate digital literacy into their sessions, helping clients navigate their relationship with social media and develop strategies to mitigate its impact on their self-perception. For instance, clients might be encouraged to reflect on the emotional triggers associated with social media use and practice mindful consumption, focusing on content that aligns with their values and reinforces positive self-perceptions. This approach not only addresses the



symptoms of social media-induced distress but also empowers clients to actively shape their digital environments in ways that promote mental well-being and self-acceptance (Schneider et al., 2019).

Promoting self-acceptance in a social media-dominated world requires a multifaceted approach that combines individual strategies with supportive community networks. By integrating digital detoxes, setting boundaries, and fostering critical media literacy, individuals can cultivate a healthier relationship with social media that prioritizes their Real Self over unattainable ideals. Peer support groups, online communities, and therapy further reinforce this journey by providing spaces where acceptance and authenticity are celebrated, helping individuals resist the pervasive pressures of social media and embrace their true selves

IV. Real-World implications of maslow's hierarchy in the digital age

1. Impact of social media on unmet needs

Physiological and safety needs: Maslow's hierarchy of needs begins with the most fundamental requirements for human survival: physiological and safety needs. Physiological needs encompass essentials such as food, water, sleep, and shelter, while safety needs involve emotional and physical security, including personal safety and financial stability. In the context of social media, the excessive and compulsive use of these platforms can significantly disrupt the fulfillment of these basic needs.

Sleep deprivation: One of the most prominent impacts of social media on physiological needs is sleep deprivation. Studies have shown that excessive screen time, particularly before bedtime, can interfere with sleep patterns by stimulating the brain and delaying the onset of sleep. The blue light emitted by screens disrupts the production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep-wake cycles. Moreover, the endless scrolling, notifications, and the desire to stay connected often lead to prolonged use of social media into late hours, reducing sleep duration and quality. Chronic sleep deprivation, in turn, can lead to a host of health issues, including weakened immune function, cognitive impairments, and increased susceptibility to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression (Levenson et al., 2017).

Emotional insecurity : Safety needs, particularly emotional security, are also compromised by excessive social media use. The constant exposure to idealized portrayals of others' lives can foster feelings of inadequacy, leading to emotional insecurity. Social comparison theory explains that individuals often evaluate their own worth by comparing themselves to others. On social media, where users frequently present a curated version of their lives, this comparison is often unfavorable, exacerbating feelings of insecurity and vulnerability (Vogel et al., 2014). The fear of missing out (FOMO) is another phenomenon closely associated with emotional insecurity, where individuals feel anxious and insecure about not participating in social events or experiences that others are sharing online.



Esteem needs : Maslow posited that after physiological and safety needs are met, individuals seek to satisfy their esteem needs, which involve feelings of self-worth, accomplishment, and respect from others. Esteem needs are divided into two categories: self-esteem (confidence, independence, and achievement) and the esteem one receives from others (recognition, status, and appreciation). Social media, while providing platforms for self-expression and social interaction, often complicates the fulfillment of these needs by promoting external validation over intrinsic self-worth.

External validation and intrinsic self-worth : Social media platforms are structured around the pursuit of likes, comments, shares, and followers, which serve as markers of social approval and success. This structure encourages users to seek external validation rather than developing intrinsic self-worth. The frequent posting of content, often designed to attract positive feedback, shifts the focus from personal growth and self-acceptance to gaining recognition from others. Over time, this reliance on external validation can erode an individual's self-esteem, making them dependent on the fluctuating opinions of their online audience (Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

Impact on esteem needs : The struggle for online validation can lead to a fragile sense of self-esteem that is easily undermined by negative feedback or lack of engagement. When individuals do not receive the anticipated recognition, they may experience a drop in self-worth, leading to feelings of rejection, inadequacy, and even depression. This can create a vicious cycle where individuals continuously seek more validation, often by altering their online personas to fit perceived social standards, further distancing themselves from their true selves. Consequently, the fulfillment of esteem needs is impeded, as individuals become more focused on external approval rather than developing a stable, intrinsic sense of self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

2. Barriers to self-actualization

Case Studies: real-life examples of individuals struggling to achieve self-actualization due to social media pressures

Case Study 1: the overachieving student: Jane, a high-achieving college student, is active on multiple social media platforms where she follows several accounts that promote academic excellence and personal success. While these accounts initially motivated her, over time, Jane became increasingly anxious about her own achievements. The constant comparison with others' accomplishments led her to feel that she was not doing enough, despite her excellent academic record. This pressure to constantly excel hindered her ability to engage in self-reflection and personal growth, key components of self-actualization. Jane's focus shifted from her intrinsic goals and passions to meeting the expectations set by the idealized lives she saw online. This detachment from her true self left her feeling unfulfilled, despite her outward success (Arnett, 2015).



Case Study 2: the social media influencer :Mark, a fitness influencer, built a large following on social media by sharing his workout routines and lifestyle tips. However, as his audience grew, so did the pressure to maintain a certain image. Mark began to prioritize content that would generate likes and shares, often altering his routines and lifestyle choices to fit the expectations of his followers. Over time, Mark found himself feeling disconnected from his original motivations for pursuing fitness and well-being. The need to uphold his online persona became a barrier to his personal growth and self-actualization, as he spent more time curating content than engaging in activities that truly fulfilled him. Despite his outward success, Mark struggled with feelings of inadequacy and a loss of purpose, as his online identity overshadowed his real self (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Case Study 3: the young professional :Sarah, a young professional, uses social media to network and stay informed about industry trends. However, the constant exposure to peers who appear more successful, coupled with the curated images of success and wealth, led Sarah to doubt her own career trajectory. She began to equate her self-worth with her professional achievements, feeling inadequate whenever she compared herself to others. This external focus prevented Sarah from exploring her own interests and potential, as she became more concerned with how others perceived her than with her personal growth. The distraction of social media kept her from pursuing opportunities for self-discovery and self-actualization, leaving her stuck in a cycle of comparison and dissatisfaction (Maslow, 1943).

Practical solutions: strategies to facilitate self-actualization by overcoming social media pressures

Fostering personal growth through self-reflection :One of the most effective strategies to overcome the barriers to self-actualization posed by social media is to encourage regular self-reflection. Individuals can benefit from setting aside time each day to reflect on their true values, goals, and achievements, independent of social media influence. Journaling, mindfulness practices, and engaging in hobbies that bring personal satisfaction can help individuals reconnect with their intrinsic motivations. By focusing on self-reflection, individuals can develop a stronger sense of self that is less dependent on external validation and more aligned with their true potential (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Building offline connections for emotional support :Strengthening offline relationships is crucial for individuals seeking to achieve self-actualization in a social media-saturated world. Real-life connections provide emotional support and validation that are more genuine and meaningful than the transient feedback received online. Participating in community activities, volunteering, or simply spending more quality time with friends and family can help individuals build a supportive network that encourages personal growth. These offline interactions provide a space where individuals can explore their true selves without the pressure to perform or conform to social media standards (Arnett, 2015).



Promoting self-discovery through digital detoxes :Digital detoxes, or intentional breaks from social media, can be a powerful tool in reducing the distractions and pressures that hinder self-actualization. By temporarily disconnecting from social media, individuals can create space for self-discovery and personal exploration. During a digital detox, individuals can focus on activities that promote self-fulfillment, such as reading, spending time in nature, or pursuing creative endeavors. This break from social media allows individuals to recalibrate their priorities, reduce anxiety, and re-engage with their true interests and passions. Over time, regular digital detoxes can help individuals maintain a healthier relationship with social media, one that supports rather than detracts from their journey toward self-actualization (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Setting boundaries for healthier social media use :Establishing clear boundaries around social media use is another practical solution for overcoming barriers to self-actualization. This might include limiting time spent on social media each day, unfollowing accounts that promote unrealistic ideals, and consciously choosing content that aligns with one's values and goals. By taking control of their social media environment, individuals can reduce exposure to negative influences and create a more positive, supportive online experience. These boundaries help individuals stay focused on their personal growth and prevent social media from dominating their thoughts and behaviors (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Encouraging authenticity in online interactions :Finally, promoting authenticity in online interactions can help individuals bridge the gap between their Real Self and their Ideal Self. By being more authentic and transparent in what they share online, individuals can reduce the pressure to conform to social media norms. Encouraging others to do the same can create a more supportive and realistic online community. Authenticity allows individuals to express their true selves, fostering self-acceptance and reducing the incongruence that often leads to psychological distress (Maslow, 1943).

2. Empowering individuals for self-actualization

Workshops and programs: analysis of existing programs aimed at helping people disconnect from social media and focus on personal development

In response to the growing concerns about the negative impact of social media on psychological well-being, various workshops and programs have been developed to help individuals disconnect from digital platforms and focus on personal development. These programs typically emphasize mindfulness, self-reflection, and the cultivation of offline relationships, aiming to reduce dependency on social media and promote a deeper connection with one's true self.

Case example: digital detox retreats :Digital detox retreats have gained popularity as immersive experiences designed to help individuals disconnect from technology and reconnect with themselves. These retreats often take place in natural settings and include activities such as yoga,



meditation, and creative workshops. Participants are encouraged to leave their devices behind and engage in reflective practices that foster self-awareness and personal growth. For instance, one program based in California focuses on mindfulness and nature therapy, offering participants guided meditations and journaling exercises that help them explore their values and goals without the distraction of social media. Research has shown that participants of such retreats report reduced stress, improved mood, and a renewed sense of purpose, which are essential for self-actualization (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Case example: humanistic therapy workshops :Humanistic therapy workshops, grounded in the principles of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, offer another avenue for promoting self-actualization. These workshops typically provide a safe space for individuals to explore their thoughts, emotions, and aspirations in a non-judgmental environment. Through techniques such as active listening, group discussions, and experiential exercises, participants are guided to identify and challenge the incongruences between their real self and ideal self. A well-known program, for example, uses person-centered therapy approaches to help participants develop greater self-awareness, self-acceptance, and emotional resilience. By focusing on the individual's intrinsic worth rather than external validation, these workshops empower participants to pursue their true potential beyond the superficial influences of social media (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Case example: school-based Interventions :Some schools have integrated programs that encourage students to critically assess their social media use and its impact on their self-esteem and overall well-being. These programs often include workshops on digital literacy, where students learn to recognize and resist the manipulative aspects of social media algorithms that drive engagement and comparison. Additionally, schools may offer mindfulness training, peer support groups, and educational campaigns that emphasize the importance of offline relationships and activities. Such initiatives aim to help students develop a healthier relationship with technology and to promote values of self-compassion, authenticity, and personal growth (Arnett, 2015).

Role of Education: Integration of Humanistic Principles into Educational Settings to Empower Young People to Pursue Self-Actualization Beyond Social Media Influences

Education plays a crucial role in shaping young people's perceptions of themselves and their potential. By integrating humanistic principles into educational curricula, schools can empower students to pursue self-actualization and develop resilience against the pressures of social media. Humanistic education focuses on the whole person, emphasizing personal growth, emotional intelligence, and the development of self-awareness.

Incorporating self-reflection into the curriculum :Schools can incorporate regular self-reflection activities into the curriculum, allowing students to explore their thoughts, feelings, and goals in a structured environment. For example, educators can integrate journaling sessions into language arts classes, where students reflect on their personal experiences and aspirations. This



practice encourages students to develop a deeper understanding of their real self, independent of external influences. By fostering self-reflection, schools can help students build a strong sense of identity and purpose, which is essential for self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

Teaching digital literacy with a humanistic perspective :Digital literacy education should go beyond teaching technical skills to include a humanistic perspective on the impact of social media on mental health and well-being. Educators can guide students in critically evaluating the content they consume online, helping them to recognize how social media platforms often promote unrealistic ideals and encourage comparison. Lessons could focus on the importance of self-acceptance, the value of authentic relationships, and the dangers of seeking external validation through social media. By raising awareness of these issues, schools can empower students to make informed choices about their social media use and prioritize their well-being over digital engagement (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Promoting collaborative and experiential learning :Humanistic education emphasizes collaborative and experiential learning as means to promote personal growth and self-actualization. Schools can create opportunities for students to engage in group projects, community service, and experiential learning activities that encourage teamwork, empathy, and problem-solving. These experiences allow students to develop a sense of agency and purpose, as they see the impact of their actions in real-world settings. By fostering a learning environment that values personal development alongside academic achievement, schools can help students build the confidence and skills needed to navigate the challenges of the digital age (Arnett, 2015).

Creating a supportive school culture: Finally, the overall school culture plays a significant role in promoting self-actualization. Schools that prioritize emotional well-being, inclusivity, and personal growth create an environment where students feel valued and supported. This supportive culture can be reinforced through initiatives such as peer mentoring programs, mental health resources, and the celebration of diverse talents and achievements. When students feel that their unique strengths and potential are recognized and nurtured, they are more likely to pursue self-actualization and resist the negative influences of social media (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Conclusion

The exploration of the real-life impact of social media on the gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self reveals significant psychological distress for many individuals. Social media platforms often amplify this gap by promoting unrealistic ideals and fostering a culture of comparison. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and a deep sense of dissatisfaction as individuals struggle to align their real lives with the idealized versions they see online. The psychological toll of this incongruence is profound, contributing to a range of mental health issues, including depression, low self-esteem, and a pervasive sense of worthlessness. Humanistic approaches, with their emphasis on self-acceptance, personal growth, and authenticity, offer promising strategies



for addressing these issues. By encouraging individuals to engage in self-reflection, build genuine offline connections, and cultivate intrinsic self-worth, these approaches help bridge the gap between the Real Self and the Ideal Self. Moreover, by fostering environments that support personal development and emotional well-being, humanistic principles can empower individuals to resist the pressures of social media and pursue a more fulfilling, self-actualized life. Looking forward, there is a critical need for further research, particularly longitudinal studies, to track the long-term effects of social media on self-concept. Understanding how these dynamics evolve over time will be essential in developing effective interventions and support systems. Additionally, there is a strong case for the expansion of community-based initiatives and educational programs that are grounded in humanistic principles. These programs can play a pivotal role in equipping individuals, especially young people, with the tools they need to navigate the challenges of the digital age while staying true to their authentic selves. By fostering resilience, self-awareness, and genuine human connection, such initiatives could mitigate the negative impact of social media and promote healthier, more balanced lives.



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