



# The reciprocal and indirect relationships between passive Facebook use, comparison on Facebook, and adolescents' body dissatisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

Facebook has been found to provide a fertile ground for social comparison. Emerging evidence indicates that social comparison may mediate the relationship between Facebook use and young people's body dissatisfaction. Yet, little work has been done on how these relationships evolve over time in adolescence and no study has examined the reciprocal relationships between passive Facebook use, social comparison, and adolescents' body dissatisfaction. To examine these reciprocal relationships, two-wave panel data ( $N_{\text{Time1}} = 1840$ ) gathered among adolescents (ages 12–19) were analyzed. Cross-lagged structural equation models indicated that passive Facebook use at Time 1 predicted increases in boys' comparison on Facebook at Time 2. Comparison on Facebook at Time 2, in turn, was associated with more body dissatisfaction at Time 2. In addition, body dissatisfaction at Time 1 predicted increases in comparison on Facebook at Time 2. Comparison on Facebook at Time 2, in turn, was related to more passive Facebook use at Time 2, but less passive Facebook use over time. No gender differences were found for these opposite pathways. The discussion focuses on the explanation and understanding of these findings.

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## 1. Introduction

During the adolescent years, teens become more and more attentive to the changes that occur to their bodies (e.g., Steinberg, 2005). Due to these changes, the intensity of body dissatisfaction (i.e., the subjective negative evaluation of one's figure or body parts) increases throughout this developmental period (e.g., Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013). Given that body dissatisfaction is one of the most important risk factors for eating disorders and related health outcomes in adolescence (e.g., Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006), it is critical to understand factors that contribute to adolescents' body dissatisfaction.

Several studies suggest that the media are important risk factors for adolescents' body dissatisfaction (e.g., Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). While the majority of these studies focused on the impact of traditional media (e.g., television and magazines) on adolescents' body image, less is known about the impact of social networking

sites (SNSs). However, SNSs, such as Facebook, are relevant to consider, given their important role in adolescents' lives (Lenhart, 2015; Van Waeg, Van Hoecke, Demeulenaere, & D'hanens, 2016). Research indicates that on any given day, almost six in ten American teens use social media, spending an average of approximately 2 h doing so (Rideout, 2015), with Facebook being the most popular social networking site (SNS) among American (Lenhart, 2015) and Belgian (Van Waeg et al., 2016) adolescents.

Facebook not only allows users to easily share photos and videos with their network of friends, Facebook especially allows users to easily browse through others' profiles, without any interaction being required. Studies have shown that individuals engage more in such passive Facebook use or "the monitoring of other people's lives by viewing the content of others' profiles without direct exchanges between the users" (Frison & Eggermont, 2015, p. 4), than in active Facebook use (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2014; Verduyn et al., 2015).

The primary aim of the present study is to investigate whether passive Facebook use is reciprocally related to adolescents' body dissatisfaction, through comparison on Facebook. Although various studies assume that Facebook affords users various opportunities for social comparison (Cramer, Song, & Drent, 2016; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014), and suggest an important underlying role of comparison behaviors on Facebook

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in the relationship between Facebook usage and young people's body image concerns (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), important gaps remain.

First, no research to date has investigated the reciprocal relationships between passive Facebook use, comparison on Facebook, and adolescents' body dissatisfaction. To fill this gap in the literature, the present study applied a longitudinal design. This design not only allows for insights into the predictive influence of passive Facebook use on adolescents' body dissatisfaction six months later, but also increases understanding of the direction of these relationships. In addition, exploring these opposite indirect pathways is especially important as, based on previous cross-sectional studies (e.g., Blechert, Nickert, Caffier, & Tuschen-Caffier, 2009; Cramer et al., 2016), reciprocity is likely to occur.

Second, we currently know little about the indirect relationships between passive Facebook use, comparison on Facebook, and adolescents' body dissatisfaction, as the majority of prior research focused on college students. It is however critical to identify risk factors of body dissatisfaction in this developmental period, given adolescents' increased focus on changes in the body (Steinberg, 2005), and their presence on social media (e.g., Lenhart, 2015; Van Waeg et al., 2016). The current study therefore investigated these relationships among an adolescent sample.

### 1.1. Passive Facebook use, comparison on Facebook, and body dissatisfaction

First, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) was used as the theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between passive Facebook use and adolescents' comparison on Facebook. Social comparison theory argues that there is a drive within individuals to evaluate abilities and opinions. People gain such self-evaluations through comparison to similar others, i.e., individuals who are similar in ability or opinion. However, individuals may also choose a dissimilar other for comparison. Research has documented that one can assimilate or contrast oneself relative to superior or inferior others, referred to as upward and downward comparison respectively (see Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011; for a review). Both comparison directions have been related to different social comparison motives: Upward social comparisons are typically motivated by a desire for self-improvement, whereas downward social comparisons are generally motivated by a desire for self-enhancement (e.g., Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015).

In addition, several studies suggest that Facebook affords users various tools for social comparison (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Vogel et al., 2014). Cramer et al. (2016) confirms this suggestion by showing that almost 70% of American college students engage in social comparison on Facebook. Also, research showed that female high school Facebook users made more appearance comparisons than non-users (Meier & Gray, 2014). In line with these studies, cross-sectional research found support for a positive relationship between Facebook use and college students' social comparison behaviors (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Jang, Park, & Song, 2015; Lee, 2014). For example, Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) found that Facebook usage (i.e., number of logins and time spent on Facebook) positively predicted young women's Facebook appearance comparisons in general. Lee (2014) showed that Facebook use intensity was associated with college students' social comparison frequency on Facebook.

Although previous studies focused on general Facebook use (e.g., time spent on Facebook), we believe that passive Facebook use may particularly account for this impact of Facebook use on young people's social comparison tendency. Passive Facebook use refers to exposure to the content of others' profiles, such as status updates,

photos, and videos. Given that passive Facebook use requires no interaction with the profile owner, it is this type of Facebook use that allows easy access to elements that are ideal for social comparison. We therefore expect that passive Facebook use in particular may stimulate social comparison behaviors on Facebook. In line with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and based on prior cross-sectional research (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Lee, 2014), we hypothesize that:

**H1.** Passive Facebook use at Time 1 will positively predict adolescents' comparison on Facebook at Time 2.

Second, sociocultural models of body image, such as the tripartite influence model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), argue that when individuals frequently compare their own appearance to the appearance of others, body dissatisfaction can develop. The relationship between social appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction has been confirmed cross-sectionally (e.g., Myers & Crowther, 2009) and longitudinally (Rodgers, McLean, & Paxton, 2015). Studies, however, have shown that upward appearance comparisons (i.e., comparing oneself to someone whom they believe to be better off) in particular may result in negative body image (e.g., Myers, Ridolfi, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2012). In line with studies focusing on upward comparison, Eyal and Te'eni-Harari (2013) showed that self-improvement motivations were linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, through body shape discrepancy.

We expect that a similar impact might be at play in a Facebook context. With regard to Facebook, scholars suggest that comparison behaviors on this particular SNS are particularly likely to be upward (e.g., Frison & Eggermont, 2016b; Harrison & Hefner, 2014). This assumption is based on the fact that Facebook users have a tendency to edit their profile picture in accordance with societal ideals of attractiveness (Vogel et al., 2014). Scholars argue that visual content, such as profile pictures, can be easily edited and "selectively presented to feature the self in the most favorable manner" (e.g., untagging oneself in unflattering photos) (Cramer et al., 2016, p. 740). Hence, Facebook functions as a platform where everyone tend to present an ideal version of the self, which makes upward comparisons on Facebook especially likely.

Correlational studies examining the relationship between social comparison behaviors on Facebook and individuals' body image revealed that comparison on Facebook negatively affects one's body satisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Smith, Hames, & Joiner, 2013). For instance, Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) found that Facebook appearance comparisons positively predicted young women's body image concerns. In addition, Smith et al. (2013) reported that Facebook-related social comparisons predicted increases in female college students' body dissatisfaction. Therefore, building on the tripartite influence model (Thompson et al., 1999), and in line with previous correlational studies (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Smith et al., 2013), we expect that:

**H2.** Comparison on Facebook at Time 1 will positively predict adolescents' body dissatisfaction at Time 2.

### 1.2. Opposite relationship

Although we hypothesized that comparison on Facebook predicts body dissatisfaction, it is also possible that initial levels of body dissatisfaction might spur adolescents to alter their appearance, and to engage in comparison behaviors on Facebook. Adolescence is a time when body image awareness is at its peak (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007). Several factors, such as physical maturation and onset of dating and sexual interactions, contribute

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