



Full length article

## Follow me and like my beautiful selfies: Singapore teenage girls' engagement in self-presentation and peer comparison on social media



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores teenage girls' narrations of the relationship between self-presentation and peer comparison on social media in the context of beauty. Social media provide new platforms that manifest media and peer influences on teenage girls' understanding of beauty towards an idealized notion. Through 24 in-depth interviews, this study examines secondary school girls' self-presentation and peer comparison behaviors on social network sites where the girls posted self-portrait photographs or "selfies" and collected peer feedback in the forms of "likes," "followers," and comments. Results of thematic analysis reveal a gap between teenage girls' self-beliefs and perceived peer standards of beauty. Feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity underpinned their efforts in edited self-presentation and quest for peer recognition. Peers played multiple roles that included imaginary audiences, judges, vicarious learning sources, and comparison targets in shaping teenage girls' perceptions and presentation of beauty. Findings from this study reveal the struggles that teenage girls face today and provide insights for future investigations and interventions pertinent to teenage girls' presentation and evaluation of self on social media.

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### 1. Introduction

During the transition to adulthood, teenage girls aged 12–16 years old experience emotional changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal development as well as physical changes such as gaining weight suddenly and transitioning from a girl's body to a grown woman's body (Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003; Vandenberg & Eggermont, 2012). With acute self-consciousness, teenage girls seek to present a good image of themselves but are also anxious about how other people perceive them (Rosenbaum, 1993). In these transitory years the girls' self-presentation of beauty and concern about other people's perceptions of them play critical roles in developing their identities and self-esteem (Caspi, 2000; Martin & Kennedy, 1993).

Social media present new interactive platforms in which self-presentation and peer influences interact to co-construct the standards of beauty (Meier & Gray, 2014). Social network sites (SNSs) such as Instagram and Facebook have facilitated peer comparison about looks and image among teenagers (Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015). More teenage girls nowadays engage

in online self-presentation such as posting self-portrait photographs or "selfies" of themselves and sharing "outfit-of-the-day" photos to observe and compare themselves against their peers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). At the same time, media images of ideal beauty permeate veins of social media through information sharing and through teenage girls' projection of idealized beauty standards onto the content they post (boyd, 2014). The ideal of thinness as beauty impacts and interacts with peer influences as teenage girls socialize on SNSs, present themselves, and have access to a plethora of peer opinions.

While SNSs provide new spaces that allow media depictions of idealized beauty and peer portrayals of beauty standards to interact, their impact on teenage girls' understanding and reproduction of the meanings of beauty has not been studied extensively. Much extant research on online self-presentation has focused on young adults' thought expression and image management through the presentation of written information (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Stern, 2007; Toma, 2013). There has been little research on photo-based self-presentation on SNSs and its interplay with peer judgments and the negotiation of beauty (Mascheroni et al., 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014). Hence, this study seeks to address this important gap in the extant literature. Through in-depth interviews, this study aims to uncover the meanings embedded in teenage girls' use of selfies to present and compare themselves

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against others on SNSs and how the online interactions with peers reinforce their understanding and presentation of beauty.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Self-presentation

With the advent of the Internet and users' ability to construct their own profiles and personas online, Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation has been widely used to guide studies about online self-presentation (Bortree, 2005; Dominick, 1999; Stern, 2007). Using dramaturgical vocabulary, Goffman (1959) held that each person adopts front stage behavior, i.e., the performance in front of others, and backstage behavior, i.e., the preparation work invisible to others, to display a good image. In today's social media context, SNS users do not merely perform on stage but create "artifacts" in "exhibition spaces" to show one another (Hogan, 2010, p. 377). Unlike an actor who performs in real time to the audience, an artifact is an outcome of past performance and remains for others to look at in their own time. In this sense, social media contents such as profile pages, photographs, and comments and feedback are artifacts even while they also function as ways for actors to perform.

Baumeister and Hutton (1987) posited that people engage in self-presentation to communicate information and images about themselves to others. Motivations for self-presentation are derived from the "evaluative presence of other people and by others' (even potential) knowledge of one's behavior" (p. 71). Through self-presentation, a person pleases the audience by matching her performance to audience expectations and preferences. Additionally, self-presentation allows a person to project her performance to the ideal self. As such, self-presentation is never constructed in a vacuum and could be highly selective (Tufekci, 2008). Scholars like Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) noted that when people use SNSs as a channel to articulate their identities, they tend to present a "highly selective version of themselves" (p. 4). When teenage users create online profiles, they are individuals as well as part of a larger community (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Livingstone, 2008). Self-presentation conveys what teenagers feel is best in themselves and declares in-group identity through compliance with peer standards. Hence, online self-presentation could be selective or even twisted based on teenage users' observations and expectations of peer reaction to their performance on SNSs (boyd, 2014).

In the digital age photographs become an outright way of self-presentation. Photographs are building blocks for a person's identity and they demonstrate the image that a person chooses to display (Mascheroni et al., 2015). While photographs traditionally functioned as keepsakes and memories, the younger generation today appears to progressively use digital photos for live communication. The ease of sharing images over the Internet or through mobile devices makes photographs the "preferred idiom in mediated communication practices" (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 3). In view of the increasing use of photographs on SNSs among the younger generation, the importance of photographs in self-presentation, and the lack of scholarly attention on this aspect, this study focuses on self-presentation in the form of selfies on SNSs. Photographs are a tangible way for teenage girls to communicate and interpret the idea of beauty, making them an appropriate aspect to focus on.

### 2.2. Peer comparison

As this study explores peer comparison on social media platforms, social comparison theory is a fitting framework to guide the research. The theory holds that individuals engage in self-

evaluation by comparing themselves with similar others, such as those in their peer groups (Festinger, 1954). Through social comparison, individuals collect information to evaluate their capacities and characteristics such that they can maintain a stable and accurate understanding of themselves. Festinger (1954) posited that social comparison is linked with a person's upward drive for abilities. When engaging in social comparison, individuals may not only seek to evaluate themselves but experience pressure for continual advancement. The upward drive together with the desire to compare oneself to similar others motivate individuals to progress to the point where they slightly exceed their peers (Wood, 1989).

Corcoran, Crusius, and Mussweiler (2011) argued that social comparison is not unidirectionally upward and both self-enhancement and self-improvement can be motives for social comparison. Individuals may engage in downward comparison, i.e., comparison with those who they believe are worse off, to create and maintain a positive image. Alternatively, they may engage in upward comparison, i.e., comparison with those who they believe to be better, to acquire information on how to advance. In the studied context, teenage girls interact with peers who share common cultural grounds but are diverse in characteristics and abilities. Thus, both upward and downward comparison may take place in the process of peer comparison.

Relevant literature suggests that peers are important in shaping teenage girls' standards of beauty and their internalization of media images of ideal beauty (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Because of the need to belong and be accepted by the peer groups, friends are significant reference points and comparison targets for adolescents (Kramer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008). In teenage years peers are the most powerful influencers apart from mothers in affecting young girls' body satisfaction and appearance contentment (Etkoff, Orbach, Scott, & D'Agostino, 2006; Goodman, 2005). Peers are able to reinforce the ideal of thinness and increase its chances of being accepted as reality (Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008). Female peers have been perceived to encourage dieting behaviors and compel girls to pursue ideal beauty standards (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Mueller, Pearson, Muller, Frank, & Turner, 2010). Peers have also been identified as an important source of influence affecting young girls' interpretations of media messages and social information (Kramer et al., 2008).

The proliferation of social media opens up new ways and possibilities for teenage girls to socialize and practice peer comparison. Social media, especially SNSs, have become important channels for teenagers to be in contact with schoolmates, keep up with happenings among friends, follow norms among peers, and build up a sense of community (Boudreau, 2007; Clark, 2005). A significant feature of SNSs is the encouragement of non-anonymity (boyd, 2014). Most SNSs allow users to create profile pages with personal information and photos, which make anonymity less prevalent. Additionally, unlike Web home pages and online forums that allow teenage users to escape the real world, take on fictitious identities, and portray themselves as who they want to be, SNSs are mostly the extension of teenagers' offline lives (Denner & Martinez, 2010; Stern, 2007). On SNSs teenage users post texts, photographs, and videos, forward content found on the Internet, and interact with others through comments, "likes," and chats. When offline networks converge with social media platforms, the non-fictitious online environment enables self-presentation and peer comparison to occur concurrently. SNSs give users the chance to express themselves and view how others present themselves in their networks. At the same time, SNSs allow users to collect informative feedback through likes and comments. The accessibility to content shared by peers and the ease of acquiring feedback from others increase teenage users' likelihood of engaging in comparison.

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