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Instagram and college women's body image: Investigating the roles of appearance-related comparisons and intrasexual competition



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ABSTRACT

Similar to effects identified with traditional media forms, recent evidence indicates that body image concerns, such as body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, may also be associated with exposure to images on Social Networking Sites. Utilizing social comparison theory, the current study sought to examine the relationship between female university students' photo-based activities on Instagram, which is a relatively new Social Networking Site, appearance-related comparisons, and two outcome variables: drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction. Mediation analyses using bootstrapping methods indicated that Instagram photo-based activities positively predicted both drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction through the mediating variable of appearance-related comparisons. These results suggest that Instagram use could be potentially harmful to individuals who find themselves frequently engaging in comparisons with others. Additionally, utilizing the intrasexual competition framework, the second aim of this study was to determine whether individual differences in competitiveness for mates influenced individual tendencies to engage in appearance-related comparisons on Instagram. A significant positive relationship emerged between intrasexual competitiveness for mates and appearance-related comparisons on Instagram. Theoretical and applied implications from these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of Social Networking Sites [SNSs], such as Facebook and Instagram, people are now afforded with many more opportunities to compare their appearances with the appearance of others. Research has indicated that women who engage in appearance-related social comparisons on SNSs are at a higher risk of experiencing body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015), which is a major risk factor for development of eating disorders (Stice, 2002). The intrasexual competition model, derived from the Darwinian theory (Darwin, 1871) of sexual selection grounded in an evolutionary perspective, provides a theoretical model to better understand why users engage in social comparisons via SNSs. The theory posits that people, but women especially, engage in appearance-related comparisons to evaluate their own

attractiveness among members of the same sex, with the ultimate goal of attracting and retaining high quality mates (Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995). The current research utilizes both social comparison and intrasexual competition frameworks to predict appearance-related comparisons made on Instagram and the potential negative outcomes that might ensue from such comparisons.

1.1. Media's influence on body image

In today's society women are constantly surrounded by images of unrealistically thin-ideal bodies in media (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). The thin-ideal body is commonly perceived in Western societies as a slender, feminine physique with a small waist and little body fat (Low et al., 2003). Notably, as modern women's body sizes have increased over the last two decades, this thin ideal that is portrayed in media has become progressively thinner (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Several media scholars have examined the influence of exposure to media images depicting the thin-ideal body on body image. A meta-analysis of correlational studies

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demonstrated a consistent, positive relationship between media exposure to the thin-ideal and body image concerns (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). In experimental studies, researchers have typically presented female participants with images of thin body-sized women, average body-sized women and neutral stimuli, and measured the extent to which these participants felt dissatisfied with their bodies before and after image exposure. In general, these studies have revealed that body image concerns are typically highest after exposure to thin body-sized women (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Hendrickse, Secharan, & Clayton, 2016).

In more recent years, scholars have become interested in examining how body image concerns are influenced by exposure to thin-ideal images on SNSs (Perloff, 2014). Extant research shows that self-presentation may be a key motivator underlying activity on SNSs: users upload their most flattering images to SNSs in order to present themselves as they wish to be seen (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) analyzed the Facebook photo galleries of college students and found that female students tended to strike poses that were flirtatious and sexy in their photos, often with same-sex friends who are doing the same. Similar to Facebook, Instagram provides users with the ability to share photos with others online. Instagram has more than 400 million active users, with more than 80 million photos shared daily (Instagram, Inc, 2016). When users open Instagram on a computer or mobile device a feed of photos and videos appears of people they follow, which can be anyone from celebrities to their friends and family (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). The two most common types of photos shared on Instagram are “selfies” – photographs that one has taken of oneself and uploaded to a social media web site - and photos of friends (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). Users of Instagram can not only choose the most flattering images of themselves to upload to the site (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011), but also manipulate those images using filters to highlight their best features. This type of filter-manipulation makes it more likely that Instagram users will be exposed to the best representation of others on Instagram.

Just as body image concerns have been found to be associated with exposure to images in traditional media forms, recent evidence indicates that those concerns may be equally associated with exposure to images on SNSs (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). In a cross-sectional study, Stronge et al. (2015) found individuals who had a Facebook account reported experiencing greater body dissatisfaction than individuals who did not have a Facebook profile. This relationship was strongest for young adult women (Stronge et al., 2015). In addition, Meier and Gray (2014) investigated female high school students' photo-based activities on Facebook and found that engaging in these activities, such as posting a photo or liking someone else's photo, were positively associated with body image disturbance. Studies investigating the relationship between Instagram use and body image have revealed similar results. Ahadzadeh, Sharif, and Ong (2017) found that Instagram usage was negatively associated with body satisfaction for college students and that this association was strongest for users with lower levels of self-esteem. In an experimental study, Brown and Tiggemann (2016) showed participants attractive images of celebrities and unknown peers sourced from public Instagram profiles. Participants who were exposed to ideal (i.e. thin) images experienced significantly more body dissatisfaction than participants exposed to neutral travel photos.

Taken together, these studies indicate a well-established connection between traditional media exposure depicting the thin ideal and body image concerns, particularly for young females. With the emergence of photo-sharing SNSs, such as Facebook and Instagram, young women are now exposed to the most flattering

depictions of their friends, family, and celebrities and, indeed, early evidence indicates a similar negative influence of such depictions on young women's body image.

1.2. Theoretical framework: social comparison theory

Media scholars have applied several theories to explain the negative effects of media exposure on body image, but one of the most widely accepted theoretical frameworks is social comparison theory (Groesz et al., 2002; Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social comparison theory posits that individuals have a natural drive to compare their own attributes and abilities with the attributes and abilities of others (Festinger, 1954). An upward social comparison is made when individuals compare themselves to someone who is perceived to possess superior attributes or abilities to their own, whereas a downward comparison is made when individuals compare themselves to someone who is perceived to possess inferior attributes and abilities to their own. Appearance-related social comparisons are comparisons based on physical attractiveness (Groesz et al., 2002). For instance, when women compare themselves with a thinner target, a discrepancy between their body size and the target's body size becomes salient, which leads to negative evaluations of their own bodies (Bessenoff, 2006; Hendrickse et al., 2016). In order to reduce these discrepancies and associated negative evaluations, women may engage in risky health behaviors, such as restricting food intake or purging (Williamson et al., 1995). Research has clearly shown that engaging in appearance-related comparisons can have several additional negative consequences, including experiencing lower appearance-related self-esteem (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007), body dissatisfaction (Hendrickse et al., 2016; Myers & Crowther, 2009; Thompson, Covert, & Stormer, 1999), and development of an eating disorder (Cachelin & Regan, 2006; Polivy & Herman, 2002).

Common targets for appearance-related comparisons are the women portrayed in media. Tiggemann and McGill (2004) demonstrated that appearance-related comparisons mediated the relationship between body dissatisfaction and exposure to thin models in advertisements. That is, when women engaged in appearance-related comparisons with a thin model in an advertisement, they were more likely to experience greater levels of dissatisfaction with their own body size and shape. More recently, media scholars have turned their investigations to appearance-related comparisons made on SNSs. For instance, Haferkamp and Krämer (2011) exposed participants to either physically attractive or physically unattractive online profiles. Participants reported feeling more unattractive and experiencing a decline in mood when exposed to profiles of attractive users of the same sex. Furthermore, Tiggemann and Miller (2010) examined the relationship between exposure to other women on the Internet and drive for thinness, defined as having an excessive concern with dieting and pursuit of thinness (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). Greater exposure to images of other women on the Internet was found to be associated with a greater drive for thinness, and this relationship was mediated by appearance comparisons.

A more recent study (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015) investigated appearance-related comparisons on Facebook. Participants were randomly selected to browse their own Facebook account, magazine websites featuring female models, or a control website for 10 min. The authors verified via a pilot study that the magazine websites were equally as likely to trigger appearance-related comparisons as the Facebook accounts. Participants who were exposed to their Facebook accounts reported significantly more concerns over their faces, hair, and skin-related features than participants exposed to either the magazine or control websites (Fardouly et al., 2015). Furthermore, the tendency to compare one's

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