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Virtual makeover: Selfie-taking and social media use increase selfie-editing frequency through social comparison



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ABSTRACT

Studies have explored the predictors of selfie-posting, but rarely investigated selfie-editing, a virtual makeover for online self-presentation. This study, based on social comparison theory, examined a psychological pathway from individual characteristics to selfie-editing behavior through social comparison. It was hypothesized that selfie-taking, public self-consciousness, social media use, and satisfaction with facial appearance would indirectly influence selfie-editing through social comparison of appearance (with friends or social media influencers/celebrities). A two-wave longitudinal online survey was conducted in South Korea among female smartphone users aged 20 to 39 ($N = 1064$ at Wave 1 and 782 at Wave 2). The results revealed that frequent selfie-taking, higher levels of public self-consciousness, and more use of social media at Wave 1 were associated with social comparison with friends at Wave 1, which increased selfie-editing behavior at Wave 2. However, those three independent variables did not have indirect effects on selfie-editing at Wave 2 through social comparison with influencers/celebrities. Also, satisfaction with facial appearance had neither direct nor indirect effect on selfie-editing at Wave 2. The findings suggest that individuals engage in social comparison and resulting selfie-editing not because of their dissatisfaction with appearance, but because of the desire for more ideal online self-presentation.

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1. Introduction

Selfies have become a popular cultural phenomenon across the world. Selfie refers to a self-portrait that a person takes using a smartphone or webcam (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Recent years have witnessed a dramatic increase of selfie-taking and posting behaviors. On Instagram, an image-based social media platform, more than 288 million photos are hashtagged with #me and 255 million with #selfie (Websta, 2016). With the popularity of selfies, studies have investigated the relationship between personality and selfie-posting behavior. For example, those with higher level of narcissism are more likely to post their selfies (Kim, Lee, Sung, & Choi, 2016; Weiser, 2015). Narcissism and selfie-taking are mutually influencing each other over time, meaning that narcissism increases selfie-taking and selfie-taking increases the level of narcissism (Halpern, Valenzuela, & Katz, 2016). In addition, selfie-posting frequency is higher among individuals with exhibitionism and extraversion (Sorokowska et al., 2016).

However, studies to date have rarely examined the behavior that

often comes before posting: Selfie-editing. Selfie-editing in this paper refers to digital enhancement of selfies using computer programs or smartphone applications (e.g., using filters, enlarging eyes, removing blemishes or slimming faces). Easier than actual plastic surgery, it is a kind of virtual makeover for better online presentation of self. A survey among 1710 adults in the U.S. revealed that 50% of respondents edit their selfies (Renfrew Center Foundation, 2014). Studies have reported narcissism and self-objectification as predictors of selfie-editing (Fox & Rooney, 2015). Selfie-editing is also related to concerns over diet (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015). However, no previous study has theoretically and systematically examined the psychological mechanism leading to selfie-editing.

The current study investigates this issue by applying social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). The theory postulates that human beings have a basic instinct to compare ourselves with others to evaluate our own abilities and opinions. Selfie-editing entails social comparison because it is based on self-evaluation of appearance. Selfie-editing might be due to the dissatisfaction about one's appearance in selfies or due to the desire to look better than others; either is a result of self-evaluation. Then there must be individual characteristics that prompt social comparison behavior.

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In summary, the goal of the current study is to examine the process through which individual characteristics indirectly increase selfie-editing behavior through social comparison.

This study aims to fill the gap in existing literature in three ways. First, rather than simply identifying predictors of selfie-editing, this study will suggest a psychological pathway leading to editing behavior. Second, this study will be an extension of social comparison theory by demonstrating how the use of new media technology—selfies and social media—is related to social comparison behavior and what the outcomes of such comparison are. Third, by using two-wave longitudinal data, this study will provide stronger evidence about the relationship between individual characteristics, social comparison, and selfie-editing.

2. Predicting selfie-editing behavior

Human beings try to manage the impression that others have of them by packaging or changing their appearance or behavior, which is called self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). According to Walther (1992), computer-mediated communication has made selective self-presentation possible because messages can be edited and individuals have more time for better presentation of the self. Compared to face-to-face communication, individuals can more carefully calculate and organize their self-presentation (Walther, 1992). Based on Walther's proposition, Hancock and Toma (2009) extended the scope of selective self-presentation to photographs because photos can be selected and digitally altered for self-presentation in a computer-mediated environment. Thus, selfies are an effective way to construct ideal self-image (Halpern, Katz, & Carril, 2017), and selfie-editing is a means for selective self-presentation. Chua and Chang (2016) conducted in-depth interviews of Singaporean teenage girls and found that girls edit their selfies to get favorable attention from peers by meeting the standard of beauty defined by peer norms. Specifically, girls wanted quantitative evidence of popularity such as likes, followers, or comments. To construct a self-image that others like, one must evaluate their appearance.

To evaluate, improve, or enhance oneself, individuals engage in social comparison (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Festinger, 1954). Thus, selfie-editing is likely to be the result of social comparison of appearance. Social comparison can be either upward or downward (for details, see Corcoran, Crusius, & Musweiler, 2011). When upward comparison happens, individuals want to improve themselves; upward comparison will lead to selfie-editing to compensate for one's weaknesses. If downward comparison arises and individuals feel satisfied with their appearance, they might be less interested in selfie-editing. However, when it comes to appearance—a premium in the online world as well as real world—people satisfied with themselves want to look even better if possible; celebrities still edit their selfies online to keep their superiority and continue to draw attention. The effect of downward comparison may be smaller than upward comparison, but their relationship with selfie-editing will be similar.

Rather than the direction of comparison, this study considers the target of social comparison. Selfies are shared online, and friends on social media must be frequent targets of comparison. Peer comparison is prevalent on social media among young people and both downward and upward comparison can happen (Chua & Chang, 2016). However, although social comparison usually happens between similar individuals, people engage in social comparison with dissimilar others as well (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995). For example, females compare their bodies to thin models in the media and feel dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Thus, social media influencers or celebrities can be the target of comparison. Social media influencers are ordinary Internet users

who exhibit their personal lives online to a large number of followers, and make profits by such exhibition of their lives (Abidin, 2016). Although they are not celebrities, their popularity is called *micro-celebrity*, a newly emerged celebrity based on one's performance using new media technologies (Senft, 2008). Influencers' works are mainly dependent on their selfies (Abidin, 2016). Celebrities also post their selfies on social media platforms. Comparison with influencers or celebrities' is likely to be upward, but it is not clear whether such comparison leads to selfie-editing. Based on comparison with friends, individuals will edit their selfies in the desire to present the better self to others, but the comparison with influencers/celebrities might not be related to such desire because they are not the audience of ordinary people's online self-presentation.

Therefore, the following hypothesis and research question were advanced. In testing them, this study used two-wave longitudinal data and controlled for selfie-editing at W1. It was to see whether social comparison at Wave 1 (W1) increases selfie-editing at W2 over and above the effect of selfie-editing at W1 (Campbell & Kwak, 2011; Eveland & Thomson, 2006). Thus, when selfie-editing frequency at W1 is controlled for:

H1. *Social comparison with friends at Wave 1 will increase selfie-editing frequency at Wave 2.*

R1. *Will social comparison with influencers/celebrities increase selfie-editing frequency at Wave 2?*

3. Predicting social comparison behavior

Then the question becomes who engages in such social comparison of appearance. Engagement in the social comparison process is relatively automatic (Gilbert et al., 1995), but individual differences exist. Buunk and Gibbons (2007) reviewed previous studies and presented three features of individuals with high social comparison orientation: "(a) a high accessibility and awareness of the self, (b) an interest in what others feel and think, and (c) some degree of negative affectivity and self-uncertainty" (p. 14). Based on this categorization, this study theorizes the relationship between individual characteristics and social comparison.

3.1. High accessibility and awareness of the self

First, frequent selfie-takers are more likely to compare their appearance to that of others. Selfies provide more opportunity to take a closer look into one's appearance (i.e., high accessibility). A survey among plastic surgeons reported an increase of patients becoming more self-aware of their facial appearance due to their selfies (American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, 2014). Greater exposure to their own image might lead to more frequent social comparison. Moreover, the relationship between selfie-taking and social comparison also can be explained by narcissism. As stated earlier, several studies (Halpern et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2016) have confirmed the positive relationship between narcissism and selfie-taking. That is, frequent selfie-takers are likely to be narcissists who believe that they are unique and superior to others and need attention and admiration from others (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Narcissists might want to confirm their superiority by comparing themselves to others.

Second, similarly, individuals who are inherently conscious about themselves (i.e., high awareness of the self) will engage in social comparison. Both public self-consciousness and private self-consciousness are strong predictors of social comparison (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), and this study adopts public self-consciousness. Public self-consciousness refers to "an awareness of the self as a

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