



Brief research report

Is use of social networking sites associated with young women's body dissatisfaction and disordered eating? A look at Black–White racial differences



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 December 2016

Received in revised form 25 August 2017

Accepted 30 August 2017

Keywords:

Social networking sites
Body dissatisfaction
Disordered eating
Race

ABSTRACT

Maladaptive patterns of social networking site (SNS) use, such as excessive reassurance seeking, are associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. However, it is unclear how these processes play out among different racial groups. This study examined racial differences in SNS use and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Black ($n = 445$) and White ($n = 477$) female undergraduates completed online measures of SNS use (frequency and reassurance seeking), body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating. Black women reported less body dissatisfaction, marginally less disordered eating, and less frequent Facebook use than White women; there were no race differences in SNS reassurance seeking. More frequent Facebook use was associated with more body dissatisfaction (but not disordered eating), and more SNS reassurance seeking predicted both more body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Associations were not moderated by race, suggesting maladaptive SNS use may have negative consequences for both Black and White women.

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1. Introduction

Research exploring differences in eating disorder symptomatology between Black and White women suggests Black women, on average, experience less body dissatisfaction and disordered eating than White women (Botta, 2000; Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004). Investigations into differences have largely focused on the ability of Black women to resist internalizing Western beauty standards by rejecting the “thin-ideal” (i.e., the acceptance of and adherence to sociocultural beauty ideals that focus on thinness; Crago & Shisslak, 2003; Wildes, Emery, & Simons, 2001). Black women may be well positioned to reject the thin-ideal for two reasons. First, social comparison theory states that comparisons are made to “like others” (Festinger, 1954); Black women may not see images of thin White women presented in the mainstream media as “like others”, thus

making it easier to reject the thin ideal (Milkie, 1999). Second, Black women may have a greater acceptance of a range of body types and a broader understanding of “beauty” that includes more than physical body size, such as attitude and style (Duke, 2000).

Most research examining the effects of media on women's body dissatisfaction and disordered eating has focused on television and magazine exposure (DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010; Duke, 2000; Milkie, 1999; Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014), with less known about social media exposure. However, research on the effects of social media exposure is warranted given data from a mid-western U.S. college suggest 97% of undergraduates use one or more social networking sites (SNS; Stollak, Vandenburg, Burkland, & Weiss, 2011). SNS differ from mainstream media in important ways. For example, SNS users typically interact with friends, family, and people they know on social media. Therefore, it is probable that their SNS contain images of “like others” regardless of race, and provide an accessible platform for engaging in social comparisons and receiving appearance-related feedback. Recent findings suggest using image-oriented SNS such as Facebook and Instagram is associated with more body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014;

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Smith, Hames, & Joiner, 2013). A burgeoning literature suggests the way SNS are used (e.g., engaging in social comparisons), not the amount of time spent on SNS, predicts body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Mabe et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2015). In a study of predominately White college women, reassurance seeking on SNS, or using SNS to seek feedback from others, was shown to be associated with eating disorder symptoms (Smith et al., 2013). Repeated demands for frequent reassurance (such as posting on SNS frequently) may result in rejection by others, which can lead to increases in disordered eating behaviors (Joiner, 1997). Given the potentially deleterious effects of maladaptive SNS use, research examining patterns of use in Black and White women is needed.

The present study examined racial differences in Black and White women on body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, frequency of SNS use — including both image-oriented (Facebook and Instagram) and non-image-oriented (Twitter) forms of SNS — and reassurance seeking on SNS, and whether SNS use was differentially associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating for Black and White women. Consistent with previous research, we hypothesized that Black women would report less body dissatisfaction and disordered eating than White women. Given limited previous research, we did not make specific hypotheses about race differences in SNS use or associations between SNS use, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating. Lastly, based on previous research with White samples, we hypothesized that reassurance seeking would predict more body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in our entire sample.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

As part of a larger study about college health and experiences, 1733 undergraduate women from three southeastern U.S. universities were recruited through class announcements, flyers, emails, and research pool postings. Of these, 512 were removed because they were duplicate entries, did not correctly answer at least 3 of 4 attention items (e.g., “select 2 for this question”), or completed the survey quickly (less than 1/3 of the median duration time). Given the focus on Black–White racial differences in young women, in the present study we only included women who reported being White or Black and ages 18–30 ($M = 21$ years, $SD = 2.8$); 477 respondents were White and 445 were Black for a total of 922 participants. The remaining 299 respondents identified as another race, more than one race, or were over age 30. The three universities included a diverse public research university (60% White), a historically Black university (8% White), and a primarily White liberal arts university (76% White). The sample was dispersed between first-year students (27%), sophomores (22%), juniors (25%), and seniors (25%). Black women reported significantly higher BMI ($M = 28.24$, $SD = 6.1$) than White women ($M = 25.00$, $SD = 5.8$; $p < .001$). Participants who took part in the online survey either received course credit or were entered into a raffle that included one \$50 gift card and 20 \$10 gift cards. Institutional Review Board approval was received from all universities and participants provided informed consent.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16; Evans & Dolan, 1993)

The BSQ-16 is a 16-item measure used to assess fears of weight gain, desires for weight loss, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem due to one's physical appearance. A sample item is, “Has seeing your reflection (e.g., in a mirror or shop window) made you feel bad about your shape?” Response options range from

1 (never) to 6 (always). Item responses are summed with higher scores suggesting more weight and shape concerns. This measure has adequate convergent validity ($r = .58-.81$) with other measures of body dissatisfaction (Rosen, Jones, Ramirez, & Waxman, 1996) and anxiety and depression ($r = .41-.53$; Evans & Dolan, 1993). Cronbach's alpha for the present sample was .97.

2.2.2. Eating disorder examination questionnaire (EDE-Q; Fairburn & Beglin, 1994)

The EDE-Q assesses the frequency of eating disordered thoughts and behaviors. A sample item is, “Have you been deliberately trying to limit the amount of food you eat to influence your shape or weight?” Response options range from 0 (no days) to 6 (everyday). Total scores are calculated by taking the mean of the 23 items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of disordered eating behaviors. The EDE-Q has good two-week test-retest reliability (.81–.94) and is positively associated with measures of eating ($r = .68$) and shape concern ($r = .78$; Mond, Hay, Rodgers, Owen, & Beaumont, 2004). Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .94.

2.2.3. Frequency of SNS use

Participants separately reported the frequency with which they use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram by selecting from the following options: *more than daily, about once a day, a few times a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, I never or rarely use*. For each SNS type, responses were skewed such that 70%, 43%, and 73% of respondents reported they used Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at least daily, respectively. Therefore, participant responses were recoded as “daily” (i.e., selected *more than daily* or *about once a day*) or “less than daily” (i.e., selected *a few times a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or never or rarely use*) for each SNS use.

2.2.4. SNS Reassurance Seeking Scale

This five-item questionnaire was adapted from the Facebook Reassurance Seeking Scale (Clerkin, Smith, & Hames, 2013), which measured the extent to which individuals place importance upon their Facebook to seek feedback or receive validation from others. In our adapted version, questions were revised to inquire about SNS generally instead of Facebook alone (e.g., “when I update my social media site(s), I expect others to comment on it”). Items were rated on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. The total score was the average of the 5 items, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency to seek reassurance on SNS. Previous research demonstrated adequate test-retest reliability ($r = .66$) and convergent validity with the Reassurance Seeking Scale using a female undergraduate sample (Clerkin et al., 2013). Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .76.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents participants' mean EDE-Q, BSQ and SNS use by race. Scores were normally distributed and Levene's tests indicated homogeneity of variance. Box plots revealed one outlier on the EDE-Q, and her score was removed from analyses. Missing data were imputed using multiple imputation.¹

¹ Given that data were collected from three different universities and that BMI has been shown to be a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction, we examined whether university moderated any of our primary effects and whether adding BMI as a covariate changed any of our findings. We found no significant effects; therefore, we reported the more parsimonious results.

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