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Attachment security and social comparisons as predictors of Pinterest users' body image concerns



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ABSTRACT

Although prior research has established associations between the mass media-related glamorization of unrealistic standards of female beauty and women's body image concerns, theory-driven research on the impact of social media use on women's body image concerns is scarce (Perloff, 2014). The present study addressed this gap by testing a dispositional model linking adult attachment security and tendencies to engage in social comparisons to each of two indicators of body image concerns within a sample of college women who acknowledged being active and psychologically-identified users of Pinterest[®], a highly popular and image-rich social networking site. Results indicated that, controlling for participants' age, body mass, and Pinterest use identification, adult attachment orientations and social comparisons each made significant and incremental contributions to each indicator of body image concerns. Further, women's social comparison levels partially mediated the relationship between attachment anxiety and body satisfaction. Implications of these findings to continued study of social media influences on body dissatisfaction are discussed.

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It has been well documented that media-related portrayals of unrealistic standards of female beauty contribute to women's body image dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann, 2011). When images of extremely thin women are glamorized by the media, they can lead women to internalize unrealistic standards of female beauty (Tiggemann, 2011), contributing to their body image dissatisfaction (Grabe et al., 2008). Body dissatisfaction is an increasingly common experience among college women (Berg, Frazier, & Sherr, 2009) that has also been strongly associated with disordered eating pathology (Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011).

Television, commercial advertisements, and magazines have historically served as primary cultural sources of "mass media" influences on women's body dissatisfaction. Today, however, women are exposed to images presented through online platforms like social networking sites (SNS). Although research in this domain is accumulating, much is still unknown about the impact of social

media use on women's body image concerns (Perloff, 2014). In particular, few theory-driven studies have specifically examined the body image concerns of users of Pinterest[®], a popular and image-based SNS wherein users browse, collect, categorize, and share internet images or "pins" on various "boards" to convey their personal interests, which frequently include body-specific pins related to fashion, beauty, exercise, and weight loss.

Importantly, Pinterest users are predominantly female, with a recent report indicating 67% of users in the United States are women ("Number of Pinterest users in the United States as of August 2017, by gender (in millions)," 2017). One investigation into the Pinterest platform revealed that Fashion is one of the four most common topics across users and pins, Hair and Beauty is one of the top three categories for board creation, and Health and Fitness boards have the third most followers by pin (Mittal, Gupta, Dewan, & Kumaraguru, 2013). Therefore, young women who are active Pinterest users are likely to be exposed to images of physically attractive and fit women, and they may be especially drawn to this SNS for the purpose of examining topics like Fashion and Fitness, which have implications for their own body satisfaction. Research has yet to examine whether the image-rich content on Pinterest fosters body comparisons that promote the

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internalization of the “thin ideal” (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) or to explore whether psychological identification with this particular social networking site (and its community of users) may in and of itself contribute to women's body image concerns.

While some prior studies have examined these concerns among users of other popular SNS such as Facebook[®] and Instagram[®] (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Smith, Hames, & Joiner, 2013; de Vries & Kühne, 2015), we believed that, given its image-driven and topic-focused nature, Pinterest could serve as an especially valuable platform for such an investigation. Therefore, we sought to examine college women's identification with the Pinterest SNS prior to evaluating the contributions of theoretically relevant dispositional tendencies that may enhance their sensitivity to and perception of unrealistic images of female beauty commonly displayed on this particular site. Toward this end, the present study drew upon both attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1982) and social comparisons theory (Festinger, 1954) to test a model that first assessed and controlled for Pinterest use identification prior to examining the respective contributions of adult attachment security and social comparisons to two indicators of body image concerns (i.e., body satisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal) among college women who were active Pinterest users. In the sections that follow, we first briefly review the limited literature on social media use and body image concerns. Following this, and prior to advancing our specific theory-driven model, we consider findings from the broader research literature respectively linking adult attachment security and social comparisons to women's body image concerns.

1. Social media and body image concerns

The few studies that have examined Pinterest using a theory-driven framework have drawn upon Social Cognitive Theory. Simpson and Mazzeo (2017) examined “fitspiration” (fitness and inspiration) messages on Pinterest, which are posts that advocate for a fit and healthy lifestyle (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Simpson and Mazzeo (2017) found that “fitspiration” messages encouraged weight management behavior and appearance-related body standards over health-related behaviors and standards. Another study found that Pinterest users who followed more fitness boards were more likely to report intentions to engage in extreme weight loss behaviors (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

While still limited, a somewhat larger research literature has examined relationships between Facebook (FB) © use and body image concerns. For example, time spent on FB has been negatively associated with users' self-esteem and positively related to their posting of more self-promotional photos (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Elsewhere, FB users who valued appearance as a source of their self-worth evidenced the highest levels of online photo sharing (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011). FB use has also been associated with higher levels of negative or “upward” social comparisons (i.e., comparing oneself to others considered as more attractive), which in turn were related to more negative self-perceptions of physical attractiveness (de Vries & Kühne, 2015).

Other studies have examined the relationship between FB use and appearance concerns. In one study of female college students, FB use was positively related to body image concerns, and this relationship was mediated by appearance comparisons (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Fardouly and Vartanian suggested that young women who spend more time on FB experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction because they compare their appearance to others on FB. Another study with adolescent females found that greater exposure to photographs of others on FB (rather than overall usage) contributed to greater body dissatisfaction (Meier & Gray, 2014). Similarly, Kim and Chock (2015) found a nonsignificant

relationship between time spent on FB with body image concerns, but rather observed that viewing and commenting on others' profiles was associated with a drive for thinness. These investigators speculated that “the interactive online social media environment facilitates the self-presentation among users ... in “common bond” communities like those on Facebook (p. 332).” To date, however, it is unknown whether such a relationship exists among individuals psychologically identified with the use of Pinterest.

Instagram[®] is another popular social media platform whose use has been linked to aspects of body image concerns (Ahadzadeh, Pahlevan Sharif, & Ong, 2017; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, & Ridgway, 2017; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Slater, Varsani, & Diedrichs, 2017). For example, Instagram use has been associated with drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017), and exposure to Instagram photos evidenced a negative relationship with body image (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Interestingly, increased Instagram “selfie” posting was associated with body image satisfaction (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016), suggesting that such posting may actually promote body satisfaction.

While FB, Instagram, and Pinterest share some similar features, they are distinctive SNSs in other respects, underscoring a parallel need for research on the body image concerns of Pinterest users. For instance, while FB allows for more personal self-disclosures through “status updates” and the posting of personal images, and Instagram relies heavily on posting personal images, Pinterest primarily facilitates the collecting and sharing of a wider range of images (i.e., “pins”) that are gathered from more general Internet sources. Therefore, unlike FB and Instagram, Pinterest is centered on the topics of “pins” (i.e. fashion, food, exercise), rather than around the lives and friendships of the users themselves. In short, the Pinterest website may be compared to a modern day magazine in that it allows users to collect images and focus on topics that may heighten their body image concerns. Given that the impact of social media on personal adjustment and well-being appears to be influenced by individuals' dispositional needs for belongingness and self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), we next consulted the research literature examining links between participants' body image concerns and their levels of adult attachment security and social comparisons.

2. Adult attachment orientations and body image concerns

Adult attachment orientations likely function as dispositional predictors of body image concerns that may enhance young women's sensitivity to social media-related social comparisons. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), posits that the nature of our earliest interactions with parental caregivers around our needs for care, protection, and distress-reduction shape our formation of a complex mental representation, known as *internal working models of self and other* (IWM). These IWMs integrate perceptions of our own love-worthiness and of the dependability and trustworthiness of others to provide necessary comfort and support, thus influencing our relational (i.e. attachment) orientations regarding care seeking. A *secure* attachment orientation characterized by favorable perceptions of both self and others is formed through a responsive and dependable early caregiver. An *insecure* attachment orientation, characterized by negative perceptions of self, of other, or of both, results from a caregiver who is inconsistently responsive or consistently rejecting. Once formed in childhood, our attachment orientation is relatively stable and impacts our adult capacities to regulate emotional distress in the context of close relationships with others.

In adulthood, attachment security is most often conceptualized

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