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Highly-visual social media and internalizing symptoms in adolescence: The mediating role of body image concerns

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ABSTRACT

Highly-visual social media (HVSM), such as Instagram and Snapchat, have experienced a significant increase in popularity among adolescents in recent years. Findings indicate use of social media is related to body image concerns and poorer mental health in adolescence. However, previous research on HVSM is scant and mainly focus on female samples. In this view, the present study investigated the association between time spent on HVSM, body image concerns and internalizing symptoms, in sample of adolescents attending grades 6–11 in Northern Italy. Data for this study were based on 523 students, 54.2% female; Mean age (SD) = 14.82 (1.52). Multiple linear regression was used to examine the associations between time spent using social media, body image concerns, and internalizing symptoms. Overall, students reporting using Facebook and HVSM for more than 2 h were 7.1% and 28.9% of the sample. Students reporting frequent use of HVSM (>2 h/day) reported significantly higher body image concerns and internalizing symptoms than peers reporting no use of HVSM. Further, we found the positive link between use of HVSM and internalizing symptoms to be mediated by participants' body image concerns problems. These findings suggest that adolescents reporting high use of HVSM might be at risk for increased body image concerns, which in turn might lead to poorer psychological adjustment.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Body image concerns and internalizing symptoms in adolescence

Probably due to socio-cultural influences and socialization processes, body image is a central feature in adolescent self-concept. Adolescents can develop negative feelings about their body and may be dissatisfied with their body image. Girls tend to seek a thin figure, in line with the socio-cultural model of aesthetic perfection in force in western society; boys are divided between those that perceive themselves as overweight and those that feel they are too thin and may therefore feel dissatisfied with their body and decide to lose weight in order to achieve a lean, muscular body shape (i.e, drive for muscularity) (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Longobardi, Prino, Fabris, & Settanni, 2017).

Various studies have found a correlation between body dissatisfaction and internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and

depression, in adolescents, among whom girls appear more at risk than boys (Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Rawana & Morgan, 2014; Stice & Bearman, 2001). Further, findings from longitudinal studies indicate that body image act as a prospective predictor of internalizing symptoms in adolescence: Over time, persistently negative body image perceptions can favor the development of depressed mood in both adolescent boys and girls (e.g., Holsen, Kraft, & Røysamb, 2001; Morin, Maïano, Scalas, Janosz, & Litalien, 2017; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006). The explanation for the relation between the two aspects is not straightforward. Comparisons with the models presented by the mass media and with their peers are likely to increase body image concerns in the young who perceive a gap between their own body image and the aesthetic ideal internalized. Internalizing symptoms may correlate with body dissatisfaction due to the sense of inadequacy experienced by adolescents with negative body image and because of the difficulty in social interaction and concerns about peer acceptance often experienced by adolescents (Colunga-Rodríguez et al., 2016). As a result, adolescents trying to cope with these negative feelings are more at risk of being involved in unhealthy behaviors such as restrictive diet, excessive exercise, steroid or illicit drug consumption, excessive tanning etc.

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1.2. Use of social media, internalizing symptoms and body image concerns

Due to the increasing popularity of social media among young people, many studies have investigated its role as factor in their psychological adjustment. Findings indicate that heavy use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, is associated with poor mental health and increased internalizing symptoms in adolescence (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015) and young adulthood (Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013; Moreno et al., 2011; Rosenthal, Buka, Marshall, Carey, & Clark, 2016; Simoncic, Kuhlman, Vargas, Houchins, & Lopez-Duran, 2014). A recent survey conducted in the UK among young people aged 14–24 found social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, to have a detrimental effect on many health-related psychological outcomes including sleep problems, anxiety, and depression (RSPH, 2017).

One of the key aspects of social media that has been under the scrutiny of researchers is that of their role in promoting negative social comparison, and its link with subjective well-being and unhealthy behaviors (Gerson, Plagnol, & Corr, 2016; Walker et al., 2015; Yang, 2016). This link is theoretically based on the notion that upward social comparison decreases happiness. Findings indicate that social media users are prone to impression management practices (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Settanni & Marengo, 2015; Vogel & Rose, 2016; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). For example, they may underreport negative experiences (Settanni & Marengo, 2015; Zhao et al., 2008), or digitally edit or limit publication of unflattering images on their online profiles (Lang & Barton, 2015; Manago et al., 2008; Toma & Hancock, 2010). This manipulation of their social media presentation may increase the possibility that posted content reflect a highly idealized image (Manago et al., 2008), facilitating upward appearance comparisons among users browsing their social media profiles, and ultimately undermining their emotional wellbeing (Liu et al., 2017). This process might be partially interpreted in light of changes in body image perception. Regular exposure to the vast amount of visual content (image, videos) posted on social media platforms provides users with many situations in which they are led to compare their appearance with that of other users, which in turn can have negative effects on their personal body image, in particular during adolescence (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Indeed, an ever-growing number of findings exist indicating a positive link between social media usage and body image concerns among adolescents and young adults (Kim & Chock, 2015; Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015), in particular among female users (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015a, 2015b; Meier & Gray, 2014; Smith, Hames, & Joiner, 2013; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, 2014; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). The majority of these researches focus on Facebook, mostly due its great popularity compared with other social media platforms (Facebook has more than 2 billion active users, rendering it the most used social media in the world, Statista, 2017a). However, highly visual social media (HVSM) platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, have recently experienced a rise in popularity, particularly among young people (RSPH, 2017). These social media platforms mainly focus on sharing user-generated visual content, such images and short videos, and allow the use of filters to modify and improve users' looks before upload. Findings concerning the impact of these image-focused platforms on body image concerns and internalizing symptoms are scant, and mostly focus on female samples. Recent studies on young women have shown that exposure to other users' Instagram profiles and photos can result in an increase in negative mood (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016) and body dissatisfaction (Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, &

Ridgway, 2017). Consistent with these findings, usage of two popular HVSM, Instagram and Snapchat, has been linked with worsened body image and mental health by a recent UK-wide survey conducted among adolescents and young adults of both genders (RSPH, 2017). Still, as noted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), there is a need for research on more diverse samples to clarify the impact these social media platforms have on users' body image concerns, and ultimately on their psychological well-being.

1.3. The present study

Guided by previous findings, the present study aims to evaluate the association between social media use, and in particular that of HVSM, with body image concerns and internalizing symptoms in a sample of adolescents attending grades 6–11. In particular, in light of the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), we hypothesize that frequent use of HVSM could favor the development of internalizing symptoms as a consequence of increased opportunities for upward comparisons with idealized body images posted by other users. Furthermore, we expect that the negative impact of HVSM usage on internalizing symptoms is partially explained by a worsening body image perception. Guided by findings of longitudinal studies (e.g., Holsen et al., 2001; Morin et al., 2017; Paxton et al., 2006), in the analyses we treat body image concerns as a predictor of internalizing symptoms. Specifically, we evaluate the role of body image concerns as mediator of the relationship between time spent on HVSM and internalizing symptoms, controlling for age, gender, and time spent on Facebook. We control for gender and age differences due to their expected impact on key study variables in adolescence as recognized by previous studies (i.e., use of social media, e.g., Lenhart, 2015; body image concerns, e.g., O'Dea & Caputi, 2001; and internalizing symptoms, e.g., Natsuaki, Biehl, M & Ge, 2009). Next, the rationale for controlling time spent on Facebook relates to the need to evaluate whether a negative effect of HVSM over body image concerns and internalizing symptoms exists, and if this effect is distinct from the effect of Facebook use.

Based on previous findings, our hypotheses are the following: h1) Adolescents' HVSM use is linked to an increase in both body image concerns and internalizing symptoms; h2) The effect of HVSM use on internalizing symptoms is mediated by body image concerns.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Initial sample consisted of 598 adolescents - 54.2% female, mean age (SD) = 14.82 (1.52) - attending grades 6–11 in two large secondary schools in Northern Italy. After removal of participants with missing data on study measures ($n = 75$), our final sample consisted of 523 participants - 53.5% female, mean age (SD) = 14.82 (1.52).

2.2. Materials and procedure

Data used in this study were collected from schools in May of 2017. Participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire using paper and pencil. Participation in the study required informed consent from both parents and students. Ethical approval to conduct research was obtained from the University of Turin IRB (protocol no. 256071).

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Use of social media

We asked participants to report about daily use (hours per day)

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