Full Length Article

'Selfie'-objectification: The role of selfies in self-objectification and disordered eating in young women

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A B S T R A C T

Existing research demonstrates a relationship between social networking site (SNS) use and body-related concerns and disordered eating amongst females. Preliminary evidence indicates that SNS photo activities (e.g., taking and sharing 'selfies') may play a particularly important role. The present study aimed to use self-objectification as a framework to examine the relationship between SNS photo activities and body-related and eating concerns in a population of young women. Participants were 259 young women (age 18–29; $M = 22.97$, $SD = 3.25$) who completed self-report questionnaires of SNS use and body-related and disordered eating concerns. Results showed that SNS 'selfie' activities, rather than general SNS usage, were associated with body-related and eating concerns. Specifically, greater investment in 'selfie' activities was associated with increased body dissatisfaction and bulimia symptomatology, even after accounting for known risk factors such as thin-ideal internalisation and body mass index (BMI). Moreover, self-objectification was found to moderate the relationship between photo investment and bulimia symptomatology. These findings indicate that active engagement with SNS photo activities, rather than general SNS use, shows an association with body-related and eating concerns. Interventions targeting specific SNS photo activities may be an effective avenue for the prevention and management of body-related concerns and disordered eating in young women.

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1. 'Selfie'-objectification: the role of selfies in self-objectification and eating disturbances in young women

Social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Instagram, are internet-based sites that enable users to create personal profiles and share, view, comment and 'like' peer-generated content (Perloff, 2014). Importantly, SNS have become more popular than traditional media formats (i.e., television, magazines) among young women (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012) with 90% of young adults (ages 18–29) reported to be active SNS users (Perrin et al., 2015). The unique combination of peer influences and media depictions of idealised female bodies inherent to the SNS environment provide ample opportunity for women to internalize the "thin-ideal" (i.e., thin-ideal internalisation) and scrutinise their own appearance based on these perceived norms. Such processes typically lead to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011). In support, recent research has

found a significant relationship between SNS use and thin-ideal internalisation, self-objectification, body dissatisfaction and eating disorder behaviours in teenage girls (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012) and undergraduate women (Cohen & Blaszczynski, 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015; Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014). However, most research to date has focused on SNS usage in general, operationalised by time spent using SNS. Unlike traditional media consumers, SNS users are both passive recipients of content as well as 'active' content creators (Perloff, 2014). Therefore, further research is needed to investigate the impacts of active user-generated engagement and the specific SNS activities that are most relevant for body image and eating concerns (Prieler & Choi, 2014).

Specifically, SNS 'selfie' behaviours may play an important role in body image issues and disordered eating. According to Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women's daily encounters with sexually objectifying experiences, for example exposure to media depictions of female bodies and interpersonal

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encounters, socialise women to internalize an observer's view of their own bodies as objects to be evaluated. This *self-objectification* manifests behaviourally as body surveillance (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), the habitual monitoring of the body's appearance, and contributes to women's risk for eating disorders (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Over one million selfies (self-images) are taken globally each day, with Australians reported to take the most selfies worldwide (Šuk, 2014). Moreover, two-thirds of Australian women aged 18–35 years report taking selfies (Šuk, 2014). Importantly, SNS users have been found to carefully pose for, select, and even edit selfies as per thin-ideal norms before posting them online to be evaluated by their peers (Chae, 2017; Chua & Chang, 2016; Fox & Vendemia, 2016; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011).

In accordance with Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), these selfie behaviours may foster self-objectification by positioning women to scrutinise their own image from an observers perspective, which is then further reinforced by instant feedback on their appearance through the form of comments and 'likes' (de Vries & Peter, 2013). Accordingly, SNS selfie activities may provide a novel medium through which women engage in self-objectification, thus contributing to body image and eating disturbances and indicating an important area for future research.

Lending preliminary support, Meier and Gray (2014) found that engagement in photo activities on Facebook, rather than general Facebook usage, was associated with body image disturbances and self-objectification in adolescent girls (age 12–18 years). McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, and Masters (2015) found that selfie sharing, and in particular photo investment and photo manipulation, was associated with higher body dissatisfaction, dietary restraint, and thin-ideal internalisation in a sample of 13-year-old girls. Photo investment refers to the effort involved in selecting selfies to post on SNS, whereas photo manipulation refers to the editing of the appearance of selfies prior to posting (McLean et al., 2015).

These preliminary studies in adolescent samples implicate the importance of SNS photo activities, rather than general SNS use, in the maintenance of body image and eating concerns (McLean et al., 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014). However, whilst Meier and Gray (2014) found an association between photo activities and self-objectification, they did not differentiate between active (i.e. posting) and passive (i.e. viewing) SNS photo activities. Similarly, although McLean et al. (2015) did investigate selfie behaviours more specifically in relation to body image, the authors did not include self-objectification as a variable of interest. Given that self-objectification may be theoretically intrinsic to selfie behaviours, research that investigates the relationship between selfie behaviour and self-objectification appears warranted.

Moreover, young adults (ages 18–29 years) are the highest SNS users (Perrin et al., 2015), yet research into the relationship between SNS selfie activities and body image and eating disturbances in this age group is lacking. Given the high rates of body dissatisfaction amongst young women (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007) and the known popularity of SNS use within this population (Perrin et al., 2015), research into user-generated photo activities on SNS in this population is needed.

1.1. The current study

The current study aims to extend upon McLean et al.'s (2015) preliminary findings by using an objectification theory framework to examine the relationship between SNS selfie activities and body-related and eating concerns in a population of young women (age 18–29 years). In particular, we investigate how photo investment and photo manipulation, as proposed by McLean et al. (2015),

are related to self-objectification, body satisfaction, drive for thinness, and bulimia. It is hypothesized that greater SNS selfie activity (selfie-taking, selfie-posting, photo investment, photo manipulation), rather than general SNS usage, will be related to lower body satisfaction and greater disordered eating. Further, given that self-objectification has been found to act as a moderator between sexual objectification experiences and disordered eating (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008), we hypothesized that self-objectification will moderate the relationship between SNS selfie activities and disordered eating.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 259 women aged 18–29 years ($M = 22.97$, $SD = 3.25$) from various locations in Australia with an average reported body mass index (BMI) of 22.45 ($SD = 4.20$), which is within the normal weight range (WHO, 2015). Participants were recruited via several Australian University psychology departments and various social media outlets promoting the study (e.g., the University's Facebook page). Participation was voluntary and participants received no reward for participation. Sixty-eight percent of participants were currently students and 61% had completed at least an undergraduate degree. The majority of participants (77.5%) identified as Caucasian, with others reporting to be Asian (15.1%), Middle Eastern (2.7%), African (0.8%), Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander (0.8%) and other (3.1%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

Participants reported age, ethnicity, level of education, height and weight. BMI (kg/m^2) was calculated using height and weight data.

2.2.2. SNS use

Participants indicated the average amount of time they spent on SNS a day on a 12-point scale: *0–15 min, 15–30 min, 1–2 h, 2–3 h, 3–4 h, 4–5 h, 5–6 h, 6–7 h, 7–8 h, 8–9 h, 9–10 h, 10 or more hours.*

2.2.3. Selfie activities

The Photo Activities measure (McLean et al., 2015) was used to assess practices of taking and sharing selfies online. Selfie-taking frequency was assessed with two items asking participants i) how frequently they take selfies with only themselves in the photo, and ii) how frequently they take selfies which include others, on an 8-point Likert scale ranging from "less than once a month" to "more than twice a day". In accordance with McLean et al. (2015), the mean of the two items was summed with higher scores indicating higher selfie-taking frequency. McLean et al. (2015), reported good internal consistency for this two-item scale ($r_s = 0.86$). For this study the scale showed good internal consistency ($r_s = 0.81$).

Selfie sharing behaviour was assessed with one item asking how often participants post photos of themselves on SNS like Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram. The item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "very often" with higher scores reflecting more frequent photo-posting activity.

The 8-item Photo Investment scale (McLean et al., 2015) was used to assess participants' investment, effort, and concern regarding posting selfies on SNS. Items were presented using visual analogue scales ranging from 0 to 100 and were anchored by contrasting statements such as "I take a long time to choose the photo" and "I choose the photo very quickly". In accordance with McLean et al. (2015), the mean for items was summed with higher