



Body image 2.0: Associations between social grooming on Facebook and body image concerns



Ji Won Kim*, T. Makana Chock

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, 215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13244, United States

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ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional survey ($N = 186$) was conducted to examine the relationships between young women's and men's social media use and body image attitudes—the drive for thinness and the drive for muscularity. Prior research has found relationships between exposure to traditional mass media and body image concerns. Drawing on social comparison theory, this study attempted to determine if similar relationships could be found for social media use. Results of this study indicated that simple exposure (time spent on social media) was not related to body image concerns. Online social grooming behaviors, such as viewing and commenting on peer's profiles, however, were significantly correlated with the drive for thinness for both female and male participants. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that appearance comparison mediated the relationship between social grooming behaviors and the drive for thinness.

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1. Introduction

A substantial number of studies have found that media exposure is related to body image concerns among young adults (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Tiggemann, 2005). Media sources tend to depict idealized images of men and women. Many of these images tend to represent specific beauty ideals. Thinness is emphasized for females and lean muscularity is emphasized for males (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Studies suggest that audiences compare their appearance to media images (Grabe et al., 2008). This appearance-related social comparison process can contribute to body discontent and related behavioral motivators such as the drive for thinness (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983) and the drive for muscularity (McCreary & Sasse, 2000).

Most of the research in this area has focused on exposure to mass media formats such as television shows, magazines, and advertisements. Given the extensive use of social media by young adults (Duggan & Smith, 2013), however, it has become increasingly important to study potential relationships between young men's and women's social media use and body image concerns. Although social media networks may be less likely to depict idealized images of models and celebrities, "idealized" images can also appear on social media sites. Studies suggest that people tend to edit and

enhance their images and appearance on social media profiles (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). The images and information on Facebook profiles may therefore convey idealized images of social peers.

In addition, social media use differs from consumption of more traditional media formats. The process is more interactive, allowing users to actively search for the content and engage in certain activities. Young adults are particularly likely to use social media sites to forge social ties and seek out information about others (Tufekci, 2008). This process of maintaining relationships and seeking social information is a form of "social grooming" (Dunbar, 1996; Tufekci, 2008). In social media environments, social grooming is characterized by the social engagement behaviors of checking friends' profiles, leaving messages, and commenting on them (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). These types of social engagement behaviors may increase opportunities for users to view the enhanced images that social media friends post on their profiles, in turn, leading to a greater tendency to compare their appearance to others. Hence, it is possible to assume that engaging in this specific process of social grooming may be more strongly related to body image concerns than simple exposure time.

This study examines the relationship between young women's and men's Facebook use and body image concerns—specifically the drives for thinness and muscularity. We will be focusing on the ways in which appearance comparison influences or mediates these relationships. We will also attempt to determine if social engagement behaviors on Facebook are more likely to be related to body image concerns than more generalized Facebook use.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 213 407 4799.

E-mail addresses: jkim173@syr.edu (J.W. Kim), tmchock@syr.edu (T.M. Chock).

2. Literature review

2.1. Media use and body image concerns

Media content has been found to be a major socio-cultural influence on the development of individuals' body image (Levine & Harrison, 2009). Scholars and researchers have argued that the media play a central role in communicating and reinforcing the social desirability of idealized body images. For example, magazines, television programs, and advertisements are saturated with thin-ideal body images. These idealized images have been praised and rewarded as highly desirable examples of physical beauty (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Wasylkiw, Emms, Meuse, & Poirer, 2009). The thin ideal is portrayed as normative, desirable, and even achievable. However, since it is realistically difficult to attain this ideal body, the internalization of this standard may lead to bodily discontent and related negative outcomes (Harrison, 2009).

Extensive empirical research, including cross-sectional surveys and experimental studies have found links between mass media exposure and body image concerns (Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). A recent meta-analysis of 77 correlational and experimental studies conducted by Grabe et al. (2008) revealed fairly consistent connections between the consumption of mass media and body image disturbance and eating disorder behaviors among women.

Only a limited number of studies, however, have examined the relationships between the use of web-based media and body image. A few of these studies have examined overall exposure across various Internet sites (Rodgers, Melioli, Laconi, Bui, & Chabrol, 2013; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). For example, Tiggemann and Miller (2010) investigated correlations between overall Internet exposure and body image concerns among adolescent girls. The authors found that Internet exposure was significantly correlated with increased body image concerns, such as weight dissatisfaction and the drive for thinness. Other studies have examined the impact of use of Internet sites that focus on body image—specifically pro-ana (pro-anorexia) sites (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; Rouleau & von Ranson, 2011). These found that use of pro-ana websites led users to experience undesirable psychological and affective consequences, including lowered self-esteem, negative emotions, perceptions of being overweight, and increased eating disorder symptoms. To some extent, these relationships may be enhanced by social interactions among site users.

The relationship between the use of more common forms of social media and body image concerns, however, has not yet been examined in greater detail. Previous studies mainly assessed exposure to social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) as a part of overall Internet exposure (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that time spent on Facebook was more significantly related to heightened levels of body image concerns, involving the internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and the drive for thinness, compared to other types of Internet sites. While these studies focused on exploring associations between overall exposure of social media and body image concerns, a more recent study also proposed findings related to the nature of the influence of social media (Meier & Gray, 2014). Meier and Gray (2014) suggested that the extent to which users engage in photo activities (i.e., posting and sharing photos of oneself and friends) on Facebook, rather than the total time spent on this site, was significantly linked to body image disturbance. This finding suggests that the underlying processes that shape social media use and body image may function differently from those of mass media exposure and body image.

Because of the interactive and peer-generated characteristics of social media, engaging in specific types of social media activities may be a more important factor in predicting body image-related consequences than exposure time.

2.2. Appearance comparison in social media

A key factor in determining people's discontent with their own bodies is their perceptions of how their appearance compares to those of others. Many studies have applied Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory to the examination of the media and body image relationship. As Festinger (1954) pointed out, individuals are inclined to compare themselves to other people who are perceived to be better off (i.e., upward social comparison). Prior research has found that making comparisons with media images can be significantly linked to upward social comparison processes because such media images (e.g., thin or muscular models) tend to portray "the idealized versions of physical attractiveness" (Jones, 2001, p. 646). If people compare themselves to these "ideals," they are less likely to be satisfied with their own appearance. A number of studies have found that people with a propensity to engage in this process of appearance comparison are more likely to be affected by media images (e.g. Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Appearance comparison therefore mediates the relationship between exposure to media images and body image issues.

In social media contexts, however, comparison targets may also include online peers as well as media models or celebrities. As Jones (2001) stated, "comparison targets can be selected not only from the distal world of the media, but also from everyday life" (p. 647). Although there has been little research so far on social comparison processes in social media contexts, some studies have found that social comparison processes on Facebook are related to negative feelings (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Lee, 2014). More specifically, the results of one experimental study (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011) suggest that social media profiles could be used as a basis for upward social comparison. Both male and female participants who viewed physically attractive users' profile photographs reported less positive emotional states and less satisfaction with their own bodies than those who viewed unattractive users' profile photos.

Although the results of that study suggest that people may respond to attractive social media users' images and profiles in the same way that they do to idealized media images, the profiles used in the study were carefully pre-selected for attractiveness and ideal characteristics. If participants viewed profiles designed by the researchers to be "unattractive," body image satisfaction was not negatively affected. Given that people's social media networking sites tend to be populated by "real people," it could be argued that social media profiles are more likely to be realistic depictions of peers rather than idealistic images constructed by media producers. A number of studies, however, suggest that social media users tend to present somewhat idealized images of themselves.

2.3. Self-presentation in social media

The interactive online social media environment facilitates the self-presentation among users. This may be particularly evident in "common bond" communities like those on Facebook where interpersonal relationships are key to the formation of social networks. Profiles containing detailed personal information have been found to be of importance to members of those types of communities (Cress, Schwämmlein, Wodzicki, & Kimmerle, 2014).

Particularly, Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication suggests that the asynchronous online environment enables users to present themselves more

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