



Social media literacy protects against the negative impact of exposure to appearance ideal social media images in young adult women but not men



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ABSTRACT

Frequent exposure to appearance ideal social media is associated with body dissatisfaction. We hypothesised that commercial and peer social media literacy would protect against the negative impact of exposure to social media appearance ideal images on young adults' body image. The study was presented as an investigation of alcohol promotion on social media. Participants were 187 women ($M_{age} = 24.6$, $SD = 3.7$) and 187 men ($M_{age} = 22.8$, $SD = 3.9$) who viewed gender-matched alcohol-related appearance ideal social media images or control images containing alcohol only. Social media literacy was assessed prior to image exposure and body satisfaction measured before and after exposure. A negative effect of ideal image exposure on body satisfaction was observed in both women and men. In women only, commercial-social media literacy moderated the negative effect of exposure, independent of internalization or body comparison. Inclusion of social media literacy skills in prevention interventions is supported.

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1. Introduction

Body dissatisfaction in female and male adolescents and young adults has been shown to be frequently occurring and to have serious negative consequences. A recent Australian survey of over 18,000 15- to 19-year-olds found that 41.4% of females and 17.0% of males reported being extremely or very concerned about their body image (Mission Australia, 2016). These high levels are particularly concerning as body dissatisfaction increases risk for low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Goldschmidt, Wall, Choo, Becker, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2016; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006), dieting in women and anabolic steroid use amongst men (Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006; Pope, Khalsa, & Bhasin, 2017), reduced quality of life (Griffiths et al., 2016), and clinical eating disorders (Allen, Byrne, & Crosby, 2015). With these negative consequences in mind, research has focused on identifying socioenvironmental factors that increase risk of body dissatisfaction, and, more recently, on identifying protective factors to inform prevention efforts. We extend this research by examining the influence of exposure to idealised social media appearance

images on state body image in young adult men and women in the presence of factors that potentially increase risk of negative impact - high internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparison tendencies. Importantly, we also examine the influence of a factor that potentially protects against the negative impact of exposure, social media literacy.

The impact on body image of exposure to idealized appearance images, i.e., thin in the case of women and lean and muscular in men, presented in traditional media such as magazines and television, has been examined in depth. Exposure to idealized images has a small but generally negative impact on body image in both genders (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Slater & Tiggemann, 2014; Want, 2009). However, adverse effects are more likely when participants have high internalization of appearance ideals (e.g., Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Krawczyk & Thompson, 2015) and high levels of appearance comparisons (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2016; Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Galioto & Crowther, 2013). These findings are consistent with theoretical models which propose that individuals who place a high value on meeting appearance ideals and engage in frequent appearance comparisons to evaluate themselves on this dimension are likely to conclude they do not meet the unrealistic appearance ideal and are consequently dissatisfied (Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007; Muris, Meesters, van de Blom, & Mayer, 2005; Rodgers, Paxton,

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& McLean, 2014; Rodgers, McLean, & Paxton, 2015; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

Exposure to appearance focused social media might be expected to have similar, if not more intense, effects than traditional media. Social media are distinct from traditional media as people are not primarily passive consumers but construct profiles, create and share content, including text and images (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Perloff, 2014). Importantly, the most frequently used sites offer a highly visual environment (e.g., Instagram), and the primary activity is sharing images (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012). Thus, there are frequent opportunities to make appearance comparisons (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016), and, in contrast to traditional media, these comparisons are often with socially relevant peers and similar others, who tend to present themselves, their lives, and their appearance, in the most positive light (de Vries & Kühne, 2015; Chou & Edge, 2012). These characteristics potentially intensify the impact of comparison (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Recent research supports the negative impact of social media use on body image. Correlational studies consistently show that social media use is associated with body dissatisfaction in young women and men (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Longitudinal data suggest that this association increases over time (de Vries, Peter, de Graaf, & Nikken, 2016). Cross-sectional studies of college women also indicate that the negative impact on body image outcomes of greater appearance focused social media use is mediated by body comparison (Eckler, Kalyango, & Paasch, 2016; Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, & Ridgway, 2017). Experimental studies in samples of women show that exposure to idealized social media appearance images has a negative impact on body image (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015); however, the impact of exposure to equivalent images on men has seldom been examined. In the present study, we aimed to examine the impact on body image of viewing idealized social media appearance images in both young adult women and men.

In light of parallels with traditional media, it might be expected that young people who have internalized appearance ideals and make frequent appearance comparisons will be at elevated risk of negative impact on body image following exposure to idealized social media images. Correlational research has shown that higher levels of social media use are associated with elevated internalization of appearance ideals (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017). Further, in a prospective study of adolescents, internalization at baseline predicted monitoring attractive peers on social media six months later, which predicted self-objectification and body surveillance a further six months later (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016). In relation to appearance comparison, Cohen and Blaszczynski (2015) found that appearance comparison predicted body dissatisfaction change (pre-to-post) for women exposed to Facebook, but not conventional media. These relationships suggest that levels of internalization and appearance comparison may moderate the impact of social media exposure.

To date, few studies have explored factors that protect against the negative impact of exposure to appearance ideals in traditional media. However, one recent study has identified media literacy as a protective factor in early adolescent girls (McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2016a). Media literacy in the context of traditional media refers to the ability to think critically about media (Silverblatt, 2001) and more specifically in relation to media images, the ability to critique images and to make an assessment about how realistic or otherwise images are (realism scepticism; Berel & Irving, 1998). Thus, when exposed to thin-ideal images, individuals with high media literacy skills may be more likely to evaluate these images as unrealistic and therefore unsuitable targets for comparison, leading to better outcomes for body image. Using an experimental design, McLean et al. (2016a) found that adolescent girls with high media literacy had greater body satis-

faction after viewing thin-ideal images than girls with low media literacy. This effect was pronounced in girls more vulnerable to media effects, i.e., those with higher levels of internalization and greater tendency to compare their appearance with others.

Extending these findings, we propose that “social media literacy” may protect against the negative impact of social media exposure on body image. We define social media literacy as critical thinking about social media which includes being empowered with the knowledge and skills to analyze, evaluate, produce, and participate in social media (adapted from Thoman and Jolls (2003)). In relation to appearance-focused social network sites, social media literacy includes understanding motivations for, and techniques of, commercial images and advertising (commercial social media literacy). It also includes understanding motivations for friend and celebrity postings and the selection and modification of images to present one’s “best self” (peer social media literacy; McLean, Wertheim, Masters, & Paxton, 2017).

We theorize that high levels of social media literacy skills will enable young people to recognize that social media appearance images are typically unrealistic, with commercial images being designed to sell products and peer images designed to present positive aspects of a person’s body and life, and thus be less likely to engage in comparisons with these images, resulting in a reduction in body dissatisfaction (McLean, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2016b). We propose that this protective influence will be particularly notable in individuals who are vulnerable to the negative impact of idealized image exposure due to high levels of internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparison tendencies. Thus, an additional aim of this study was to examine the protective role of social media literacy in the context of viewing idealized social media appearance images.

A recent review of experimental research on exposure to thin-ideal media images identified several important methodological issues (Want, 2014). It has been proposed that demand characteristics may influence experimental outcomes such that if participants are aware they were participating in body image research, they may expect the intervention to alter body satisfaction and respond accordingly (Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). One way to address this issue is to use a convincing cover story that distracts from the real purpose of the research, such as an examination of attitudes toward alcohol advertising in social media. In addition, Want (2014) has suggested that ecological validity is frequently sacrificed by using images that have been edited in some way such as by removing text, and research shows that visual attention to images is influenced by words (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2014). These methodological concerns were taken into account in the current research, which was presented as a study into young people’s perception of alcohol promotion on social media. The images used were accompanied by actual or only slightly edited text (for privacy purposes) as found on the popular social networking sites, Facebook and Instagram.

Within an experimental design in which we aimed to minimize demand characteristics and maximize ecological validity, our study had four specific aims. The first aim was to examine the impact of viewing gender-matched idealized social media appearance images (experimental condition) or not (control condition) on the body satisfaction of young adult women and men. To provide a convincing cover story, all images included depictions of alcohol, and participants were told that they were taking part in a survey about alcohol promotion on social media. We hypothesized that participants exposed to same gender appearance-ideal social media images (containing alcohol) would have lower post-exposure body satisfaction than participants exposed to control images (alcohol only).

Our second aim was to examine whether social media literacy would protect against the negative effect of exposure to same gen-

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