"You look great!": The effect of viewing appearance-related Instagram comments on women's body image

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ABSTRACT

Instagram is an increasingly popular social networking site where users post and share photos. The aim of the present study was to experimentally investigate the effect of viewing appearance-related comments accompanying Instagram images on women's body image. Participants were 128 female undergraduate students who viewed a set of attractive images paired with a brief positive comment. For half the participants, comments were related to appearance; the other half viewed the same images with place-related comments. As predicted, exposure to appearance comments led to greater body dissatisfaction than exposure to place comments. There was no significant effect on state self-objectification, but trait self-objectification predicted increase in body dissatisfaction regardless of experimental condition. It was concluded that comments form an important and integral part of Instagram imagery, one that has implications for body image in its own right.

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1. Introduction

Many women across a range of western countries experience dissatisfaction with their body shape and weight (Swami et al., 2010). Such widespread body dissatisfaction is generally attributed to sociocultural factors, in particular, family, peers, and the mass media (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011a). An extensive research literature has documented negative effects from exposure to idealised media images presented in fashion magazines or on television on women's body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (for meta-analyses, see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Want, 2009). More recently, research interest has shifted toward the Internet and social media. Approximately 79% of all Australian adults use social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with 89% of young adults (18- to 29-year-olds) doing so on an at least daily basis (Sensis, 2017). These sites allow users to create personal profiles, to share photos and information, and to form on-line relationships with like-minded others. A small but growing body of research has shown a positive link between social networking use, most commonly Facebook, and body image and eating concerns (for a systematic review, see Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). This research also identifies photo-activity, such as posting photos and viewing or making comments on others' photos, as particularly problematic (Meier & Gray, 2014).

One photo-based social networking site that has in recent years increased markedly in popularity, especially among 18- to 29-year-olds, is Instagram (Sensis, 2017). Instagram is a unique platform in that it is purely dedicated to the posting and sharing of photos. Women and girls report spending considerable time in taking and selecting their "best" photos, which can then be further enhanced with Instagram filtering and editing tools, in order to manage their self-presentation (Chua & Chang, 2016; Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis, & Giulietti, 2017). Accordingly, the Instagram environment presents somewhat unrealistic ideals for women. One recent correlational study showed that Instagram use was positively associated with young women's body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness through appearance comparison (Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, & Ridgway, 2017). Initial experimental research has also shown that acute exposure to idealised Instagram images (compared to control images) has a detrimental impact on the body image of young adult women (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

One theoretical framework often used to explain general media effects on body image is provided by objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This account holds that the female body in western societies is sexually objectified and construed primarily as an object to be inspected and evaluated in terms of appearance, a view strongly perpetuated in the visual mass media. It is argued that women and girls are gradually socialized to internalize this observer's perspective and thereby come to view themselves in objectified terms, a process known as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification

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is largely conceptualised as an individual difference or trait, and has been associated with a variety of negative body image outcomes, including body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (for a review, see Tiggemann, 2011b). Self-objectification can also be triggered or magnified in situations that accentuate an awareness of an observer's perspective of the body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). A number of experimental studies have now elicited such state self-objectification and demonstrated negative effects, especially for women high on trait self-objectification (see Tiggemann, 2011b). For example, Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, and Twenge (1998) manipulated state self-objectification by asking participants to try on a swimsuit and demonstrated increased body shame for women scoring relatively high on trait self-objectification. In terms of media effects, one study showed that the viewing of thin-ideal fashion magazine advertisements led to increased state self-objectification and body dissatisfaction in young women (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008).

Objectification theory may be particularly relevant in the context of a photographic social media site like Instagram. Indeed, it might be argued that Instagram is inherently objectifying, in that individuals post photographs of themselves (and others) precisely to be looked at and commented on. As yet, there has been no experimental research investigating the potential triggering of state self-objectification by Instagram or other social media. However, any such effects might be expected to cumulate with continuing exposure. In support, recent correlational studies have shown a positive association between young women's Instagram use and trait measures of self-objectification (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017; Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2017; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018).

In contrast to the content of traditional media, social media content is largely peer-generated and designed to facilitate communication between people (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). In particular, Instagram encourages users to make comments on others' photos, which then remain displayed below the photo for everyone to see. Thus, Instagram provides a unique platform from which to study the effects of peer appearance-related comments on women's body image. Research in other contexts shows that negative appearance commentary ("teasing") is strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and poor psychological functioning (see reviews by Thompson, Herbozo, Himes, & Yamamiya, 2005; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, positive appearance comments have also been shown to be associated with body dissatisfaction and (trait) self-objectification in adolescent and young adult women (Calogero, Herbozo, & Thompson, 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2015). In an experimental study, Tiggemann and Boundy (2008) found that appearance compliments improved mood in young women, but simultaneously led to an increase in body shame. Further, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) suggested that social networking may provide a pervasive and intense form of the "appearance conversations" among friends that have been shown in the off-line environment to be associated with the reinforcement of beauty ideals and poorer body image (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006; Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004), as well as self-objectification (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). Recently, Trekels, Ward, and Eggermont (2018) developed a specific measure of appearance conversations on Facebook and found the frequency of these conversations to be related to adolescents' self-objectification and self-sexualizing behaviours.

In the present study, we were interested in the effect of viewing comments about others' photographs on women's own body image. While women spend considerable time choosing, filtering, and editing their own photos on Instagram, they also spend considerable time looking at the photos (including their accompanying comments) posted by others. Thus, the present study represents an experimental analogue of "browsing," which is the most com-

mon activity on Instagram (Frison & Eggermont, 2017). The major aim was to investigate the impact of exposure to Instagram images accompanied by one common type of comment, namely, a positive comment about appearance. Based on the logic of objectification theory and existing research in the off-line environment, we predicted that viewing images with an appearance-related comment would focus attention on appearance and lead to greater body dissatisfaction and state self-objectification than viewing the same images with a control (place-related) comment. In accord with Fredrickson et al. (1998), we expected this effect might be amplified for women high on trait self-objectification.

2. Method

2.1. Design

A between-subjects design with two levels of the independent variable of comment type (appearance, place) was used. The dependent variables were body dissatisfaction (controlling for baseline scores) and state self-objectification. Trait self-objectification was tested as a potential moderating variable.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 128 female undergraduate students from Flinders University (South Australia) aged between 18 and 30 years. The majority identified as Caucasian/White (59.4%), with 32.0% Asian, 3.1% African, and 5.5% 'other'. They were randomly allocated to one of the two experimental conditions of the design (subject to equal n), resulting in 64 participants per condition. This sample size was determined on the basis of ability to detect a medium-sized effect with power .80 (Cohen, 1992).

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Stimulus materials

Participants viewed one set of 15 images. The images consisted of full body shots of women in various locations, including natural landscapes and recognisable travel destinations. Such images are common on Instagram and were located by searching for hashtags related to travel and nature (e.g., #travel, #backpacking, #beach) on public Instagram profiles.

The experimental images were selected from an initial pool of 40 images on the basis of ratings by three independent Caucasian female raters from the target age group ($M = 21.3$ years, $SD = 1.15$ years). They rated each image for the attractiveness of the woman and the attractiveness of the location displayed (1 = very unattractive, 5 = very attractive), as well as the relative focus of the image (1 = 100% person, 5 = 100% place). The final 15 images were selected to include moderately-attractive to attractive women ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.80$) in attractive places ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.59$) that were rated approximately equally on person vs place focus ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.76$). This was to ensure credibility of positive comments on either the person or the place.

Each image was presented within the Instagram frame with the Instagram logo, default profile picture icon, and a different profile name above the photo. There was a comment by a different mock user (e.g., Lozz_66, ChelseaW) under each image. The experimental manipulation consisted of two sets of 15 comments. One set contained appearance-related comments consisting of positive observations of the woman's appearance, e.g., "Great legs" or "You look amazing." The other set consisted of positive observations of the place or background, e.g., "Great beach" or "Venice looks amazing." All comments were positive in valence as is usually the case among peers on Instagram. Comments were similar in wording, style, and length across the two experimental conditions. All other