



“Selfie” harm: Effects on mood and body image in young women

Jennifer S. Mills^{a,*}, Sarah Musto^a, Lindsay Williams^a, Marika Tiggemann^b

^a Department of Psychology, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3, Canada

^b School of Psychology, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia

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ABSTRACT

“Selfies” (self-taken photos) are a common self-presentation strategy on social media. This study experimentally tested whether taking and posting selfies, with and without photo-retouching, elicits changes to mood and body image among young women. Female undergraduate students ($N = 110$) were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: taking and uploading either an untouched selfie, taking and posting a preferred and retouched selfie to social media, or a control group. State mood and body image were measured pre- and post-manipulation. As predicted, there was a main effect of experimental condition on changes to mood and feelings of physical attractiveness. Women who took and posted selfies to social media reported feeling more anxious, less confident, and less physically attractive afterwards compared to those in the control group. Harmful effects of selfies were found even when participants could retake and retouch their selfies. This is the first experimental study showing that taking and posting selfies on social media causes adverse psychological effects for women.

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1. Introduction

Within the past decade, social networking has become a hugely popular form of online communication, especially among young people (Perloff, 2014). Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are among some of the most widely used social media platforms available and can be accessed via computer, smartphone, computer tablet, and through other forms of technology (Perloff, 2014). In comparison to conventional mass media, social media are interactive, allowing individuals to create their own personal profiles and share information and photos with users on their social network (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011). A national survey by the Pew Research Center found that in the U.S., 18- to 29-year-olds who access the Internet are the most likely of any demographic group to use a social networking (i.e., social media) site, and that women are more likely than men to use these sites (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Over 95% of college students regularly maintain and manage their social networking profiles (Perloff, 2014; Stefanone et al., 2011). Women, in particular, have been found to upload photos to social media more frequently than do men, and tend to spend more time updating, managing, and maintaining their personal profiles (Stefanone et al., 2011).

Emerging evidence provides insight into the effects that social media behaviours may have on users. On one hand, social media use may be beneficial as it allows greater connectedness with others, leading to an increased sense of well-being (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). On the other hand, social media use may lead to a preoccupation and focus on physical appearance, such as engagement in appearance-related photo activities (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017), which could cause appearance concerns and lowered body image and self-esteem (de Vries, Peter, Nikken, & de Graaf, 2014). As users are frequently exposed to a variety of other profiles, they can compare their own appearance to friends, relatives, and strangers (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011). Hancock and Toma (2009) found that people select their own online dating profile photos in an attempt to look as attractive as possible without being judged to be deceptive. Cross-sectional data have revealed that for both women and men, Facebook use is associated with greater (upward) social comparison and self-objectification, which are both related to lower self-esteem, poorer mental health, and body image concerns (Hanna et al., 2017).

1.1. Social media and body image

Various studies have documented widespread body and weight dissatisfaction among girls and women, and social media has been found to be a significant catalyst for these appearance concerns (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Given that social media provide the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jsmills@yorku.ca (J.S. Mills).

opportunity for social comparison, as well as exposure to unrealistic beauty expectations, body dissatisfaction is likely to result from frequent use (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Want & Saiphoo, 2017). Social media present innumerable idealized images of thin, lean/tone, beautiful, photo-shopped women, and the “thin ideal” and “athletic ideal” are displayed as a normal, desirable, and attainable body type for every woman (Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Robinson et al., 2017). Furthermore, the Internet and social media have been found to promote thinness, dieting behavior, and weight loss through idealized images of “perfect” women (Perloff, 2014). Women who use social media often internalize the “thin ideal,” causing them to strive for an unrealistic, unnatural standard of beauty and to feel ashamed when they are unable to achieve it (Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Studies have found that frequent exposure to the Internet and social networking websites results in high levels of weight dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and body surveillance in young women (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), regardless of race (Howard, Heron, MacIntyre, Myers, & Everhart, 2017). Additionally, Perloff (2014) suggests that women who have relatively higher levels of thin ideal internalization, perfectionism, and/or low self-esteem would be especially likely to spend time on appearance-focused online comparisons and that they probably do not use ‘self-protective’ downward appearance comparisons (i.e., comparing their appearance to less attractive friends). These predictions are concerning, since high body dissatisfaction among women is a primary risk factor for the development of eating disorders and is correlated with low self-esteem and depression (Meier & Gray, 2014; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Therefore, it is important for researchers to understand the causal effects that social media and self-presentation strategies have on young women by using experimental research methods.

1.2. Self-presentation and impression management

Past research on the psychological effects of social media has mainly focused on the implications of social media use for body satisfaction in general. However, there is a lack of empirical research that evaluates the effects of the specific self-presentation strategies that social media users rely on. According to Toma and Hancock (2010), self-presentation involves “adjusting and editing the self during social interactions to create a desired impression on the audience.” The motivation to selectively self-present also relates to impression management, whereby individuals carefully present themselves in order to make specific impressions on their viewers (Pounders, Kowalczyk, & Stowers, 2016). As a result, social media users are driven to present the most attractive versions of themselves to others in order to make a favorable impression (Toma & Hancock, 2010). These photos, however, often do not portray an accurate depiction of one’s true physical appearance (Toma & Hancock, 2010). The most common way that users selectively self-present on social media is through the taking and uploading of “selfies” (photos taken by and of oneself). Users tend to capture selfies from flattering angles and using bright lighting, and may also edit their photos using colour correction, skin-retouching, and even photo-shopping to make body parts appear thinner (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012). In this way, social media users are able to manage the impressions they have on others by presenting only the most flattering images of themselves and minimizing perceived flaws or imperfections (Anderson et al., 2012; Bell, Cassarly, & Dunbar, 2018; Pounders et al., 2016). It has also been found that individuals who desire to boost their self-esteem upload selfies more frequently, and that women of 16–25 years of age spend up to 5 h per week taking selfies and sharing them on social media (Pounders et al., 2016). Research on

gender differences in Internet activities has found that, compared to men, women tend to be more motivated to create a positive self-presentation on their social media profiles, and as a result, they engage in more photo-enhancement behaviours (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Toma & Hancock, 2010). Overall, research has suggested that the taking and retouching of selfies may be a particularly risky behaviour in terms of its potential to negatively impact the body image and self-esteem of young girls and women.

1.3. The current study

In summary, previous research demonstrates that social media use is positively correlated with appearance concern. Furthermore, the literature suggests that selfie-taking and photo-retouching, which are very common social media behaviours, are associated with poorer self-esteem and body image among young women. It has been suggested that editing and uploading selfies may worsen appearance concerns (de Vries et al., 2014), but it is not yet known whether a causal relationship exists.

To fill this gap in the literature, the current study tested the effects of selfie taking on body image and mood in women. It was hypothesized that updating one’s social media profile with a selfie photo would result in lowered mood and increased body concerns as compared to a control group. To answer a secondary research question, we also tested the effects of having control over self-presentation on social media, by retaking and retouching a selfie photo, on women’s body image and mood. It was hypothesized that participants who were allowed to retake and retouch their selfie would experience better mood and body image compared to women who were not allowed to modify their selfie before posting it on social media. This is because women typically react to seeing a photo of themselves by feeling dissatisfied with their appearance (Mills, Shikatani, Tiggemann, & Hollitt, 2014) and photo modification allows a person to present an idealized version of themselves to others (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 113 psychology undergraduate students recruited through an online experiment management system at York University in Toronto, Canada. Inclusion criteria included being female, being between 16 and 29 years old ($M = 19.00$, $SD = 1.66$), and having an active account on Facebook or Instagram. In exchange for their participation in a single, hour-long lab session, participants received partial course credit toward their Introduction to Psychology course. The self-reported ethnic distribution of the sample was 24.8% South Asian, 20.2% European/Caucasian, 12.8% Black/African-American, 10.1% Middle Eastern, 9.2% Caribbean, 6.4% Pacific Islands American, 5.5% East Asian, 2.8% Latino/Hispanic, and 8.2% other ethnic identification. Body mass index ($BMI = kg/m^2$) scores ranged from 15.84 to 36.23 ($M = 23.71$, $SD = 4.03$) across the sample, with the mode, median, and mean all falling within the “normal” weight range ($18.5 < BMI < 24.9$) (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2015). One participant who mistakenly signed up for the study was excluded because he self-identified as male. Two participants declined to participate after reading the informed consent form because they were uncomfortable taking a photo of themselves for religious reasons.

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