Comparing Ourselves to Friends on Social Media: The Role of Perfectionism and Body Esteem

Dr. Pavica Sheldon, Alexandra Wiegand, UAH Communication Arts

Introduction

Social media has evolved into one of the main mediums of recent generations for media exposure. Though the uses of social network systems vary, the most popular ones are photo/visual-based. Instagram was established in 2010 and has developed quicker than any other social media. Media continually reflects society’s values, including the ‘thin-ideal’ (the idea that being thin increases and proves attractiveness). The purpose of this study was to address the gap in literature by exploring how female college students’ use of social media to compare themselves to other female friends, as well as their levels of perfectionism, influences their body esteem.

Research Questions

H1: Low body esteem and perfectionism will be positively related to women’s comparison to friends on social media.

RQ1: How does a comparison to friends on social media and body esteem relate to women’s Instagram use (both in terms of hours spent on Instagram and the gratifications present)?

Method

- Participants were 163 undergraduate students (all women)
- Surveys were utilized in order to capture a large enough sample and still gather the data needed to perform the study
- The measures focused on body-esteem, perfectionism, comparison, and Instagram uses and gratifications

Results

H1: This was fully supported through results; those who compare themselves online to others (via social media) scored higher on perfectionism and tended to have a lower body esteem baseline. Results also showed that perfectionism is a directly influential comparison to other female friends in terms of physical appearance, muscle tone, and body weight. Physical appearance and body weight are also strongly influenced by body esteem. Participants that consisted of a low body esteem baseline showed comparisons towards female friends online in every category regardless (not just muscle tone, physical appearance, and body weight). Perfectionism was found not to correlate towards body esteem.

RQ1: Comparison did not show correlation towards the intensity of Instagram (how many hours), but was related to all five motives of Instagram: social interaction, diversion, documentation, self-promotion, and creativity.

- Those who used Instagram to document their lives are more likely to compare online self-presentations to their friends in terms of all items for comparison.
- Documentation and comparisons via popularity revealed the strongest correlation.
- Participants who use Instagram to socially interact are subject to comparisons of physical appearance, popularity, body weight, and muscle tone.
- Comparing exercise habits, happiness, intelligence, physical appearance, and body weight use Instagram for diversion.
- Those who use it to self-promote compare everything, and finally, those who use it for creativity compare intelligence.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the RCEU Program – Dr. Bernhard Vogler and David Cook - for funding and accepting this research for the summer of 2017.

We would also like to thank UAH Office of the Provost, UAH Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development and the Alabama Space Grant Consortium.