COLLEGE OF ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IN HUNTSVILLE

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 with comparisons 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

Table 1
Factor Matrix

	Self-Promotion	Social Interaction	Diversion	Documenting	Creativity
To become popular	.80				
To self-promote myself	.83				
To show off	.66				
To see what other people share		.76			
To follow my friends		.73			
To "creep" through other people's posts		.64			
To see "visual status updates" of my friends		.73			
To escape from reality			.74		
To avoid loneliness			.65		
To relax			.77		
To remember special events				.88	
To remember something important				.87	
To commemorate an event				.73	
To depict my life through photos				.65	
To create art					.81
To show off my photography skills					.85
Alpha	.76	.75	.74	.89	.72
Mean	1.94	**3.73**	2.51	3.39	2.09
SD	.90	.80	.98	1.02	1.06

Pattern Matrix; Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis, Rotation Method: Varimax. Overall variance explained: 66.18% Values <.3 are suppressed.

Table 2

Correlations between Perfectionism, Body Mass Index, Body Esteem, and Comparison to Friends on Social Media Items

Comparison to Friends on Social Media	Perfectionism	BMI	Body Esteem
In general	.24**	.09	-.44**
In terms of school success	.14*	.11	-.20**
In terms of eating habits	-.10	.04	-.31**
In terms of exercise habits	.04	.08	-.33**
In terms of happiness	.10	-.03	-.26**
In terms of intelligence	.12	-.11	-.26**
In terms of physical appearance	.21**	.16*	-.52**
In terms of popularity	.08	-.03	-.27**
In terms of body weight	.16*	.27**	-.52**
In terms of muscle tone	.22**	-.01	-.23**

Note: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Conclusion

This study joins many other on the topic of social media in searching for relationships between perfectionism, self-esteem, motives, and comparison. Overall, the study explains and supports the facts that:

- The more one is a perfectionist, the lower is her self-esteem, and the more likely she is to compare herself with peers online.
- Perfectionism directly correlates with comparisons of muscle tone, physical appearance, and body weight
- All motives relate to general online comparison

As girls continue to grow up in this technologically-evolving culture, they will turn to their peers on social media as reference points to 'perfect' or improve themselves. No matter the reason one uses a photo-based SNS like Instagram, she will be subject to compare herself to what is online. If she happens to be more of a perfectionist when self-evaluating, this need to compare will become more intense and often. Social media usage is something that females should monitor and understand more so that negative psychological outcomes that are associated with body and self-dissatisfaction don't proceed to spread.