The Effect of Social Media on Women’s Body Satisfaction

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Instagram is a form of social media that allows users to engage in and share photos to the world, and today Instagram has over one billion users worldwide. Past research by Sherlock and Wagstaff (2018) suggests that Instagram use may add to negative psychological outcomes such as worse self-perception and increased self-objectification.

PURPOSE OF OUR RESEARCH

The goal of this research is to better understand how Instagram affects young women’s (age 18-26) body image and satisfaction through the use of the “fitspiration” hashtag. Many people—young people in particular—are heavily influenced by social media, and users should be made more aware of social media’s potentially negative influence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

DIFFERENT KINDS OF EXPOSURE TO IMAGES

One hundred and ninety female participants viewed images either associated with fitness (either via the #fitspiration or #thinspiration hashtags) or neutral images (e.g., of animals, home decorations, and travel). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. Each condition contained 30 images. Those in condition one viewed only fitness images; those in condition two viewed 50% fitness images and 50% neutral images; those in condition three viewed only neutral images. The participants were asked to rate how much they enjoyed viewing the image on a scale of 1 to 10. Every participant completed a post-test after exposure. The post-tests consisted of a modified version of Tylka and Wood-Barcalow’s (2015) Body Appreciation Scale-2 and was used to measure self-esteem related to body image.

RESULTS

Women exposed to 100% fitness images had a lower body image self-esteem score compared to the women who viewed either 50% fitness images or neutral images, F(2, 145) = 3.16, p = .045, ηp² = .04 (see below). We also found that women who viewed 50% fitness images scored similarly in terms of body image self-esteem compared to those who viewed only neutral images. Additionally, many more women in the “No Exposure” condition expressed high body image self-esteem compared to those in the “100% Exposure” condition, who were considerably more likely to instead express low body image self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

As we can conclude from not only our study, but also from previous studies, social media is impacting the way young women perceive their own bodies and their level of self-esteem. Instagram is, or may become, a problem for many young women due to the idolization of many accounts that promote a (sometimes) unattainable thinness and body shape. Our results are important because they highlight that even a brief period of exposure to such images can have a measurably negative impact on one’s self-perception.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is important to note that the results of this study could be used for educational purposes in order to inform young women of the mental health risks associated with exposure to what might otherwise be considered harmless pictures on Instagram. Our results could be paired with other resources (e.g., regarding the availability of counseling services) to help people both recognize the dangers of social media use and also recover from any damage that might have already been done.

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REFERENCES


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