#fitspo or #loveyourself? The impact of fitspiration and self-compassion Instagram images on women’s body image, self-compassion, and mood

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ABSTRACT

This study experimentally examined the impact of exposure to fitspiration images and self-compassion quotes on social media on young women’s body satisfaction, body appreciation, self-compassion, and negative mood. Female undergraduate students (N = 160) were randomly assigned to view either Instagram images of fitspiration, self-compassion quotes, a combination of both, or appearance-neutral images. Results showed no differences between viewing fitspiration images compared to viewing neutral images, except for poorer self-compassion among those who viewed fitspiration images. However, women who viewed self-compassion quotes showed greater body satisfaction, body appreciation, self-compassion, and reduced negative mood compared to women who viewed neutral images. Further, viewing a combination of fitspiration images and self-compassion quotes led to positive outcomes compared to viewing only fitspiration images. Trait levels of thin-ideal internalisation moderated some effects. The findings suggest that self-compassion might offer a novel avenue for attenuating the negative impact of social media on women’s body satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

A substantial body of literature has demonstrated that the mass media are a powerful and influential contributor to women’s body dissatisfaction (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Meta-analyses of correlational and experimental studies have confirmed that exposure to ‘thin-ideal’ images portrayed in magazines and on television is associated with body dissatisfaction among women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Want, 2009). More recently, research has found similar effects related to exposure to ‘newer’ forms of media, in particular the Internet and social media. Time spent on the Internet, and particularly on social networking sites such as Facebook, has been related to poorer body image outcomes for both adult women and adolescent girls (Fardoul, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015a; Fardoul & Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Engagement in particular activities within the social media environment (e.g., ‘appearance-related’ activities, photo sharing) may be especially influential on body image (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014). Given these findings, recent research has begun to examine the impact of one particular social networking service, Instagram, due to its sole focus on photo sharing and imagery. The current study investigates the impact of viewing two specific types of images found on Instagram (fitspiration and images containing self-compassion quotes) on women’s body image, self-compassion, and mood.

1.1. Social media and body image

Social networking services, such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram, are Internet-based sites that allow users to create public or private profiles, form a network of ‘friends’ or ‘followers’, and share, view, and comment on user-generated content (Perloff, 2014). Social networking services are now more popular than conventional media formats among young women (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012), with 90% of 18–29 year old women reported to be active users of social media (Perrin et al., 2015).

A number of correlational studies have reported associations between exposure to Facebook and poorer body image in adult women (Fardoul & Vartanian, 2015) and adolescent girls (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, 2014). These studies have used ‘time spent on Facebook’ as an indicator of social media engagement, and found relationships...
between this measure and self-objectification, weight dissatisfaction, thin-ideal internalisation, appearance comparison, and drive for thinness. Experimental studies (e.g., Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015b) have also found brief exposure to Facebook to be associated with poorer outcomes on mood and body image among women high in the tendency to make appearance comparisons. More recently, it has been proposed that rather than overall social media usage driving the association with poorer body image outcomes, a more nuanced approach, which considers specific components of the social media environment, may be required. Specifically, photo-based activities, such as sharing, viewing, and commenting on images of oneself and others, have been highlighted as playing an important role (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). This suggestion has been supported in a study with American adolescent girls, whereby engagement in photo-based activities on Facebook was correlated with internalisation of the thin-ideal, self-objectification, and drive for thinness (Meier & Gray, 2014). Similarly, McLean et al. (2015) found that Australian adolescent girls who regularly share ‘selfies’ and who are more invested in, and more likely to manipulate (edit) their self-images, reported poorer body image.

Recently, Instagram (a social networking service solely for photo and video sharing) has risen in popularity, with over 600 million active users sharing over 95 million photos per day (Instagram, 2016). It is the second most used social networking site in the U.S. after Facebook, with 32% of US Internet users accessing Instagram weekly (Stein, 2017). Instagram is particularly popular with young women, with 59% of women aged 18–29 years using this service (Perrin et al., 2015).

A popular trend that has emerged on the Internet in recent years, and in particular on Instagram, is ‘fitspiration.’ Fitspiration (a blending of the words ‘fitness’ and ‘inspiration’) arose as an antidote to the trend of ‘thinspiration’ (a blending of ‘thinness’ and ‘inspiration’), which glamorises thinness and promotes unhealthy eating habits (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Fitspiration consists of images and messages that purport to motivate people to exercise and pursue a healthier lifestyle (Abena, 2013), and aims to encourage strength and female empowerment (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). However, content analyses have demonstrated that just like thinspiration, fitspiration also promotes a homogenous body shape (tall, lean, toned, and ‘perfectly proportioned’), and often contains guilt-inducing messages, stigmatises weight and body fat, and emphasises dieting and restrictive eating (Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). In terms of body image, the ideal body upheld in ‘fitspiration’ shares many features with the ‘traditional’ thin-ideal body (tall and extremely thin), but adds the further dimensions of fitness and (moderate) muscularity (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). As such, it is likely to be just as unattainable for most women (Kra, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001; Kra, Waldron, Stiles-Shipley, & Michalenok, 2001). Thus, despite its purported aim of empowerment and inspiration, it appears that fitspiration is likely to communicate messages that are potentially harmful to women’s body image.

Indeed, a recent experimental study supported the claim that exposure to fitspiration images is detrimental to body satisfaction (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Australian undergraduate women who were exposed to fitspiration images were found to have increased body dissatisfaction and negative mood, and reduced state self-esteem compared to women who were exposed to appearance-neutral (travel) images. Trait appearance comparison tendency was found to mediate the effect of image type on mood, body dissatisfaction, and self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

To date, there has been very little empirical consideration of potentially positive aspects of the social media environment. One potentially positive feature of social media is that its user-generated nature allows for the possibility of a wider variety of images and content than has been customarily transmitted via traditional media channels. For example, YouTube video bloggers (vloggers) are increasingly popular, suggested to be in part due to their perceived authenticity (Morris & Anderson, 2015; Tolson, 2010). Individuals who do not fit the dominant thin-ideal standard of beauty (e.g., ‘plus-sized’ women, who have very rarely featured in traditional media imagery), have also increased in visibility in the social media environment, for example through ‘plus-sized’ fashion blogs and Instagram accounts (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Studies also document that consumer demand for greater appearance diversity in media images is present among young adult consumers (e.g., Diedrichs, Lee, & Kelly, 2011).

1.2. Self-compassion

In recent years, research in the field of body image has made an important shift from a primary focus on body image disturbance to consideration of positive body image (Halliwell, 2015). Positive body image is a multi-faceted construct that incorporates an overarching love and respect for the body, appreciating the uniqueness of and feeling gratitude toward the body, and emphasising one’s body’s assets rather than dwelling on imperfection (Tykla & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). A related, but somewhat broader concept, is self-compassion, which can be defined as engaging in self-kindness, rather than self-criticism, and learning to accept your own ‘humanness’ by understanding that having flaws and making mistakes are a part of human nature (Neff, 2003). Recently, Kelly, Vimalakanthan, and Miller, (2014) argued that self-compassion may play a protective role in women’s body image concerns by promoting de-personalisation of disappointment and encouraging self-acceptance. Correlational research has demonstrated that women high in self-compassion experience less body shame and body surveillance, engage in fewer body comparisons, and place less emphasis on appearance as an indicator of self-worth (Daye, Webb, & Jafari, 2014; Kelly et al., 2014; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Wasyliw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). Further, self-compassion has been found to buffer the relationship between media thinness-related pressure and both disordered eating and thin-ideal internalisation (Tykla, Russell, & Neal, 2015). A recent systematic review of 28 studies concluded that self-compassion was consistently linked to lower levels of eating pathology, and was implicated as a protective factor against poor body image and eating pathology (Braun, Park, & Gorin, 2016).

These findings suggest that self-compassion might usefully be employed in intervention efforts aiming to reduce body dissatisfaction and/or increase positive body image. A recent study examined the impact of a self-compassion based meditation intervention on women’s self-compassion, body appreciation, body shame, and body dissatisfaction. Women in the intervention condition listened to a podcast that focused on body sensations, affectionate breathing, and loving-kindness meditation for 20 min each day for 3 weeks. Compared to a waitlist control group, women who received the intervention were more self-compassionate, appreciative of their bodies, and experienced less body shame and dissatisfaction (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015).

Representations of self-compassion are present on social media. On Instagram, the hashtag #selfcompassion yields over 60,000 images (June, 2017). Many of these images feature quotes such as “Cut yourself some slack. You’re doing better than you think,” “Be gentle with yourself,” and “Do things with kindness,” which embody the key features of self-compassion. A related hashtag, #selflove, yields over 8 million returns (June, 2017) and contains many similar quotes. Generally, these quotes are displayed on
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