



## Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood



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### ABSTRACT

The present study experimentally investigated the effect of Facebook usage on women's mood and body image, whether these effects differ from an online fashion magazine, and whether appearance comparison tendency moderates any of these effects. Female participants ( $N = 112$ ) were randomly assigned to spend 10 min browsing their Facebook account, a magazine website, or an appearance-neutral control website before completing state measures of mood, body dissatisfaction, and appearance discrepancies (weight-related, and face, hair, and skin-related). Participants also completed a trait measure of appearance comparison tendency. Participants who spent time on Facebook reported being in a more negative mood than those who spent time on the control website. Furthermore, women high in appearance comparison tendency reported more facial, hair, and skin-related discrepancies after Facebook exposure than exposure to the control website. Given its popularity, more research is needed to better understand the impact that Facebook has on appearance concerns.

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### Introduction

The use of social media is pervasive and growing rapidly worldwide. Facebook is the most popular social media platform, currently with over 1.3 billion regular users (Facebook, 2014). Social media use is particularly popular among young women (Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012), a demographic for which body dissatisfaction (i.e., dissatisfaction with one's current physical self) is also particularly problematic (Bearman, Martinez, Stice, & Presnell, 2006; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Existing research has demonstrated a positive correlation between Facebook usage and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, 2014), but there is currently no theoretically-driven experimental research examining Facebook's impact on young women's body image concerns.

Social comparison theory proposes that people have a drive to evaluate their progress and standing on various aspects of their lives and, in the absence of objective standards, people compare themselves to others to know where they stand (Festinger,

1954). According to sociocultural models of body image and disordered eating, body dissatisfaction can develop when women repeatedly compare their own appearance to the appearance of others (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002; Vartanian & Dey, 2013). Indeed, research shows that women regularly evaluate their appearance by comparing themselves to others (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007), and that a greater tendency to engage in appearance comparisons is associated with a high level of body dissatisfaction (Keery et al., 2004; Myers & Crowther, 2009; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002; Vartanian & Dey, 2013).

Given that 10 million new photographs are uploaded to Facebook every hour (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), Facebook provides women with a medium for frequently engaging in appearance-related social comparisons, and can therefore potentially contribute to body image concerns among young women. Thus, the present study experimentally investigated the impact of exposure to Facebook on young adult women's body image and mood. We also tested whether women's tendency to make appearance-related social comparisons moderates any effects of exposure.

### Facebook Usage

The majority of experimental research in the body image and appearance-related social comparison literature has investigated

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the influence of exposure to idealized bodies in traditional forms of media, such as magazines, television, and music videos on young women's body dissatisfaction (Myers & Crowther, 2009). This research has found that exposure to the thin ideal is associated with more negative body image among girls and women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). However, more recent research suggests that the popularity of these media types is being overtaken by the popularity and availability of more interactive media such as the Internet, particularly among adolescents (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). In the Australian 2013 student census, social networking sites, such as Facebook, were the most common use of the Internet for female high school students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). In Australia, 87% of Internet users in the 15–24 years age group report engaging in social networking (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Similarly, 90% of 16–24 year olds in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics, 2013), and 90% of 18–29 year olds in the United States (Pew Research, 2013a), use social networking websites. Although there has been some suggestion that Facebook usage is declining among young people, there is no publically available data to support these assertions. Facebook continues to be the most popular social media platform with a growing membership (Pew Research, 2013b), and young women report spending around two hours per day on Facebook (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

Facebook allows users to create public or semi-public personal profiles, and to customize their pages with photos and information about themselves. Like magazine images which are edited and often “enhanced” before publication, Facebook users are also able to edit images before uploading them to Facebook and are able to closely monitor their self-presentation in order to present an idealized or “hoped for possible” version of the self (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Importantly, just as with exposure to idealized images in the media, viewing one's own or other people's idealized images and profiles on Facebook could have a negative impact on women's self-evaluations and overall well-being. Further contributing to this concern is the fact that women have reported viewing other people's Facebook profiles in order to make comparisons to those individuals (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012). Indeed, one study found that participants who spend more time on Facebook believe that others are happier and have better lives than themselves, especially when the participants had a greater number of Facebook “friends” that they do not know personally (Chou & Edge, 2012). Finally, Facebook contains additional elements that could impact people's body image concerns, such as comments posted by other people.

### Impact of Media Exposure

Several correlational studies have investigated the association between Facebook usage and young women's body image concerns. Pre-teenage girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014) and female high school students (Meier & Gray, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013) who were Facebook users reported more body image concerns than did non-users. In addition, more time spent on Facebook was associated with greater body image concerns among pre-teenage girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014), female high school students (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), and female university students (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Furthermore, in a longitudinal study of female university students, maladaptive Facebook usage (which included seeking negative social evaluations and making general social comparisons) was associated with increased body dissatisfaction four weeks later, and body dissatisfaction was found to mediate the relationship between maladaptive Facebook usage and increases in overeating (Smith, Hames, & Joiner,

2013). These studies provide some initial evidence linking Facebook usage with body dissatisfaction in young women. However, because these studies are all correlational, the causal association between Facebook and body dissatisfaction is still unknown. Experimental research is therefore needed to determine the direction of the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns.

Only one previous study has experimentally investigated the impact of Facebook on one aspect of women's body image (Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014). In this study, weight and shape preoccupation decreased among women who were exposed to Facebook; however, it also decreased among those who were exposed to a neutral website. Because the decrease in weight and shape preoccupation was greater for participants exposed to a control website than for participants exposed to Facebook, the authors concluded that Facebook usage maintains women's preoccupation with their weight and shape compared to other Internet activity (Mabe et al., 2014). Further theoretically-driven experimental research is still needed to establish the causal impact of exposure to Facebook on evaluative aspects of body image, including body dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with particular aspects of appearance.

Previous experimental research has found that exposure to more traditional types of media, such as magazines, can increase body image concerns in young women (Groesz et al., 2002; Halliwell, Malson, & Tischner, 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick & Crane, 2012; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Most previous research on magazine exposure has presented participants with a static image or advertisement of a thin-ideal model or celebrity before asking them to rate their state body dissatisfaction (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Given that young women are now turning to Internet sources rather than print media (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010), and given that people are able to be more selective with the content viewed online, it is also important to examine the effect that this medium is having on women's body image.

In addition to its impact on body dissatisfaction, exposure to thin-ideal media (e.g., magazines) also leads to more negative mood (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Similarly, one study found that spending 20 min on Facebook lead to more negative mood than did browsing the Internet in general (not including social networking sites) or spending no time online (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014). Facebook itself, quite controversially, manipulated users' newsfeeds and found that reducing the percentage of positive content posted by others resulted in users themselves posting less positive content (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014), perhaps because they were also in a more negative mood. Taken together, these studies suggest that exposure to Facebook can potentially influence people's mood as well as their body image concerns.

### Comparison Targets

One difference between images on Facebook and images in magazines is the type of comparison targets they contain. Magazines generally feature images of models and celebrities whereas Facebook mainly features images of one's peers (Hew, 2011). Similar to the effect of exposure to images of thin-ideal models and celebrities (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Halliwell et al., 2011; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004), exposure to peers who closely match the thin ideal has been found to increase women's body dissatisfaction (Krones, Stice, Batres, & Orjada, 2005). Some research examining the impact of appearance comparisons to these different target groups has shown that comparisons to peers and models can lead to different outcomes in regard to women's body image concerns, perhaps because the appearance of peers is seen to be more personally attainable than the appearance of models or celebrities due to the similar resources and lifestyle that peers often have

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